

## Setting the Stage

The way we communicate is linked closely to who we are. The language we learn as a child is at the very heart of our personalities. When we speak in a foreign language, we might sometimes feel that we are not our true selves. The goal of accent modification is to help you discover the world of American English pronunciation and make you feel at home there. Having an accent is natural, and it should never prevent you from achieving your goals. By mastering the sounds and patterns of American English, you will be able to express yourself in a clear and natural way.

## Accents

There are many misconceptions about accents, and it is important to clear up some misunderstandings before we continue on the path to effective communication. There are also many opinions, and it can be difficult to sort them out from the facts. The following are some ideas based on research and experience.

### 1. What is an accent? Why do people have them?

An accent is the way you sound when you speak. *Everybody* has one, even in their native language. A *native* accent is something a little bit different because most people have them in only the language they were born speaking (unless they are raised bilingually), and if they learn another language as an adult, they will have a *non-native* accent in that language. Although we don't know exactly why adults have non-native accents when they learn a foreign language, we understand that they occur when people learn languages after puberty.

### 2. Is it more important to try to sound *exactly* like a native speaker or to be an effective communicator?

If you learn a language after your teens, you will probably have a non-native accent, so trying to sound exactly like a native speaker might be unrealistic. If it happens, it is extremely rare and it is not the result of accent modification. That's why it's a better goal to focus on becoming an effective communicator. While it might not be possible to sound as if you were born in this country, it is certainly possible to be a *better* communicator than a native speaker. That may surprise you, but it is true.

### 3. How do you feel about your pronunciation? Have you had any problems because of it?

You probably feel that you need to change some aspects of your pronunciation, and that's why you're here. Accent differences can cause communication breakdowns, and that can lead to problems at work or in life. You should always be proud of yourself for learning another language, and you shouldn't have to worry about sounding different as long as you can communicate well.

**4. What areas of American English pronunciation are difficult for speakers of your native language? Do you have those problems too?**

This will depend on your native language, and you will usually find that speakers of the same language have similar differences when they speak in English. This is how we are often able to identify where people are from when they speak.

**5. How do you feel about other people correcting your pronunciation? Do Americans usually correct your pronunciation?**

Most people want to be corrected during accent modification – that is how they can become more aware. Some people would also like to be corrected at times by their friends, co-workers, or even strangers. Out in the real world, Americans will probably not correct your pronunciation unless they don't understand you, and this really seems to be true everywhere in the world. Native speakers usually don't have the time or training to help you with your pronunciation, although they can always serve as perfect models of how English pronunciation works.

**6. What are your goals?**

Everyone has different personal goals concerning their accent, but everyone should keep in mind two important general goals. Goal number one has to be intelligibility. This means that English speakers can understand everything you say. Goal number two should be naturalness. This means that when you speak, your accent will be similar enough to the way native speakers talk, that they will concentrate on *what* you are saying and not *how* you are saying it. To put it simply, your speech should be **clear** and **natural**.