Alumni Course — Accent & Self-Perception

*In this alumni lesson we will talk about how you perceive your accent.*

In this course we’ve talked about how our thoughts are very powerful and how we need to shape our thoughts to be more positive. In this lesson we’ll be taking another mental shift that has to do with how you perceive your accent.

As I’ve worked with students I’ve picked up a few ideas that come along with accents—how they’re viewed and the motivation behind improving it. For example, I’ve noticed that many students with very strong accents don’t think they have strong accents. I’ve also noticed that many students with very minor accents believe they have a really strong accent. These perceptions are represented on the Y-axis of Figure 1. Meanwhile, the X-axis represents a student’s motivation (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1**

*Y-axis: Accent Level*  
*X-axis: Motivation Level*

- **Quadrant I:** Don’t Care  
  - Strong Accent  
  - Want to Sound Native
- **Quadrant II:** Don’t Care  
  - No Accent/Native Accent
- **Quadrant III:** Don’t Care  
  - No Accent/Native Accent
- **Quadrant IV:** Don’t Care  
  - No Accent/Native Accent
The majority of my students started in a quadrant somewhere in the shaded green areas. These are all great places to begin as they strive to improve their accent. Rarely do I find a student who is highly unmotivated who registers in my program, as is illustrated in the shaded red areas. However, sometimes a company might enroll an employee in the program and the employee doesn’t see a need to improve their accent. This scenario is usually because that employee isn’t aware of their accent, or doesn’t realize how big their communication problem is. In these rare cases, once they discover the issue they then shift their motivation to the right towards the shaded green areas, which also helps them begin to decrease their accent.

No matter where you first started, throughout the 12-week Pronunciation Pro program I have been trying to pull you towards Quadrant IV—decreasing your accent and increasing your motivation to keep practicing and keep improving. Getting to Quadrant IV takes a lot of work for most of my students. Getting into the sweet spot (i.e. Quadrant IV) not only means that you put a lot of consistent effort and focus, it also means maintaining those skills so that you don’t slip back into the other quadrants.

Now, there is a point where students who now have a minor accent reach a wall that gets in the way of reaching the native speaking level. It’s important to note that this “wall” is not really a wall, it’s more like a mountain. At this point (see red line in Figure 1) you have achieved reducing 90% of your accent, but there’s still that 5-10% that is still there. In order to get the last 5-10% it will require a significant amount of effort and time. I have found that students who are able to completely eliminate their accent have an extremely high level of motivation. The following will help you determine if it’s completely necessary for you to cross over the red line and completely eliminate your accent, or if it’s okay to be near that line and spend your time and efforts on other things.

3 Important Mind Shifts

Prejudices — real or perceived
A lot of my students have experienced prejudice associated with their accent. I understand that these prejudices are real and do happen, and I am sorry you have
experienced that in the past. Unfortunately we can’t change other people, or their prejudices, but we can change the perception we have of ourselves. I have noticed that my students, who are non-native English speakers, tend to be insecure about themselves, especially in the beginning of this program. This insecurity has an effect on how you carry yourself and how you perceive everyone is perceiving you.

For example, say I have a zit or pimple somewhere on my face and I’m very concerned and insecure because of it. As I go to school or work all I’m thinking of is “everyone can see my zit...”, or “everyone is noticing my pimple...”. However, in reality, that might not be the case—people may not have even noticed it. Thus sometimes, when we’re insecure about something, we project our perception on other people. We might tell people “you’re judging me because of this”, when really it might not be the case in all situations.

We need to check ourselves and our perceptions so that we’re not projecting our insecurities or our views on other people and accusing them of being judgmental of us. Think of it this way: if someone is judging you and/or have some sort of prejudice towards you because of your accent then that’s their problem, and not yours.

**Assimilation — country, culture**
As you come to the United States, or if you’re working in an English-speaking company, I find that many students think that they need to sound exactly like a native-speaker or else they won’t be able to be a part of this country or culture. I want you to change that thinking. You belong here. You have put in a lot of work to get to this country, or to learn English! I want you to feel like you’re a part of the American lifestyle and culture. I think many people forget about the history of the United States and how it came to be. Without people like you, who immigrated and came here, the United States wouldn’t be what it is today.

**Seen as different or “othered”**
Some students don’t want to be seen as different or “othered”; they don’t want to stand out, they want to be seen as everyone else. In this scenario, the mental shift to take here
is to be uniquely you. Don’t be afraid of being different. If we were all exactly the same then it would be boring. Being you comes with your background, your culture, what you love, and what you’re interested in. I want you to be confident in being you.

All three of these mind shifts takes being secure with who you are and not thinking so much about how others view you. I encourage you to think about these things. To students who let some of these three points creep into your attitude toward your accent, I encourage you to shift your perceptions in a more positive way as explained.

I have always believed that accents are a beautiful thing. It represents where you’re from, your culture, and who you are. My whole goal has been to help build your communication skills and to reduce your accent to a point that communication can be easy between you and native-English speakers so that it’s not a barrier anymore. I want others to understand you and for you to communicate freely. That’s what this program is all about.

As you work towards that goal I want you to ask yourself if you really need to cross that red line (see Figure 1) and completely eliminate your accent. If you see it as a need, go for it, don’t let me stop you! If not, that’s okay too! Through this program you have been equipped with advanced communication skills and have already significantly reduced your accent. You can spend more time on leadership skills, negotiation skills, or listening skills. Think about it. In this lesson I have also included a TED Talk on accents for you to watch.