

# UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

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### Special points of interest:

- Why is word stress so important? (p.2)
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## BANGKOK TASTE IN LOS GATOS REFLECTS THE SAVORY AUTHENTIC FLAVORS OF THAI CUISINE

Chutima Thongpreecha, the owner of Bangkok Taste in Los Gatos, had a dream of having her own restaurant from the time she was a child. Her father, a master chef of Thai cuisine, shared his insights, extensive culinary talent, and love of cooking with Chutima throughout her formative years. Today she has an enchanting Thai restaurant on Blossom Hill Road in Los Gatos:

[www.bangkoktaste.com/main.php](http://www.bangkoktaste.com/main.php)

Chutima opened her restaurant in 1993 and has created a warm, family environment offering high quality, traditional Thai cuisine with exceptional service where you don't have to wait long.

*"My customers are often familiar with Thai food and have been to other Thai restaurants; they expect high quality. The prices are reasonable so people can afford to come as often as they like rather than just on special occasions."*



My husband and I are huge fans of Thai food and were very eager to try *Bangkok Taste*. One weekend in May we were able to slip away for dinner on a Saturday evening and were delighted to find that the soup was delicious. We like spicy food, so we got it hot, but Chutima is quick to point out that "dishes can be made at every level of spiciness from mild to very spicy". The Pad Thai was equally delicious - the peanuts are so crunchy and the noodles tender and light. We also tried the curry, and Charlie remarked that the quality of the meat was exceptional. We couldn't resist dessert and thoroughly enjoyed a scrumptious vanilla ice cream and fried banana creation.

I met Chutima when she came to talk to me about accent reduction. She speaks very fluently in English; her goal is to "communicate better with customers - speak more with them and let them know they are important." She already does this with her very presence. Chutima is charming and gracious, and her restaurant is extraordinary. *We'd eat there whether or not she was my client!* Pictured above is Chutima on the right and a coworker on her left. Reservations are generally a good idea if you plan to have dinner on the weekend. Enjoy the experience!

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*“If you’re not correctly identifying the stressed syllable of a word and holding that syllable long enough, you will always be difficult to understand.”*

## THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF WORD STRESS

Many people focus on pronunciation when learning to speak another language: how to pronounce vowels and consonants. If they take a course in speaking or accent reduction, they may also learn the importance of intonation; that is, the “music” or cadence of the language: when to go up and when to go down, and how to do it, including pitch changes.

The most critical area to focus on, however, is often never covered: not in formal education and not in communications courses. Most critical, that is, in terms of being understood the first time in American English. That area is word stress.

English is one of the few languages that is *stress-timed* rather than *syllable-timed*. Other stress-timed languages include German, Dutch, and Russian. This means that some syllables are held longer than others. Therefore, it is extremely important to know which syllable receives the primary, and when applicable, the secondary stress.

Learning to speak a stress-timed language presents challenges for those who speak only syllable-timed languages, such as Spanish or Japanese, which is actually “mora-

timed” since technically, Japanese does not have syllables.

**Timing is important** because if all syllables are held for the same length of time, it sounds as if the person is speaking too fast. The problem is, any speed sounds fast, if the long syllables aren’t being held long enough.



**So how long do you hold a stressed syllable?** That in and of itself is difficult because the length is relative to the other syllables and how long you are holding each of them. So if a person’s natural pace is slow, syllables don’t need to be held nearly as long as if their natural gait is faster. In addition, some vowels are held longer than others and some consonants as well. A good rule of thumb is that *voiced* consonants are held longer than *voiceless ones*. For example, /t/ is shorter than /d/ (its voiced equivalent). In a word like “sit”, note that the one-syllable word is very short, while a word like “sad” is much longer.

**If this sounds challenging, that’s because it is.** Most

native speakers are not aware that they are holding stressed syllables longer, let alone how much longer they are holding them. One thing non-native speakers can do is be aware of the concept. Once they start noticing how long they are holding their syllables, they will be able to control the length.

**This presupposes, of course, that the speaker knows which syllable is stressed.** In fact, that’s one of the most difficult tasks. Most of us never learned how to identify a stressed syllable in a word. This becomes complicated in English because many of our words come from old English, and others come from French and other languages. The rules for identifying a stressed syllable are not the same in these languages and must be learned.

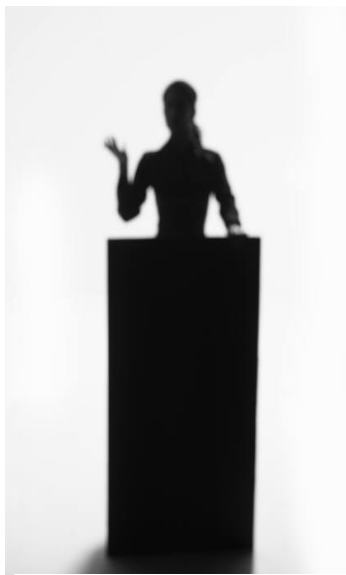
**The good news is there is an alternative.** For people who find this task difficult, simply consulting an International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) dictionary does the work for them. The stressed syllables (primary and secondary) are both clearly marked, and all the speaker has to do is hold them longer.

**It’s important for non-native speakers to know** that if you’re not correctly identifying the stressed syllable of a word and holding that syllable long enough, you will always be difficult to understand.

## DOES NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING (NLP) HAVE A ROLE IN ACCENT REDUCTION?

Neuro-Linguistic Programming, often referred to as NLP, is thought to have wide application in the fields of psychology, communication, sales, and beyond. Beginning as “a model of how we communicate to ourselves and others which was developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. [this concept] explains how we process the information that comes into us from the outside” (Advanced Neuro Dynamics)

[www.nlpcoaching.com/nlpcomm.html](http://www.nlpcoaching.com/nlpcomm.html)



The model refers to information we take in through our senses via visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory means (that is sight, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting). NLP suggests that this “raw data” is then processed by us into misrepresentations or distortions of reality through the “filters” we use; that is, our values, beliefs, memories, and decisions we have made in the past.

Applying NLP to Accent Reduction is an interesting topic. In some cases, people simply improve their own accents by mimicking what they hear. In other cases, speech therapists or pathologists focus on the medical issues preventing clear speech.

Some people take ESL courses that include a pronunciation component. Still others use tapes, CDs, and online resources to address the need. However, the way to dramatically reduce one’s foreign accent and begin to speak confidently and effectively in American English is often achieved only by working 1-1 with an Accent Reduction Specialist who acts as a personal coach. This approach requires someone with a linguistic background to first analyze the individual’s speech and then work to address the issues that will allow the person to speak more effectively.

NLP enables diverse modalities. Rather than simply speaking and having others repeat — how can we actively change the patterns

currently used to process and deliver information? If we think in terms of filters, it becomes clear that the limiting or distorted beliefs that non-native speakers of American English may hold about their own abilities could act as a deterrent to their progress. Since we can’t access their filters directly, NLP offers a way to address them indirectly. For instance, the idea of “anchoring” or linking positive sensations with certain behaviors neurologically could lead to immediate results.

In addition to auditory input, there are a number of ways to add both visual and kinesthetic components to accent reduction. Tapping out syllable length, standing up to increase pitch level, and drawing pictures to represent changes in sound can activate pathways that were not involved in the change process initially. Focusing on strategies to access the neuro-linguistic pathways has the potential to create transformational, lasting change in a fraction of the time it would take to learn by trial and error. These techniques create dramatic improvement in one’s speech in ways that traditional approaches do not address. Specific examples will be addressed in upcoming issues.

*“NLP enables diverse modalities. Rather than simply speaking and having others repeat - how can we actively change the patterns in the brain --- the pathways that non-native speakers currently use to process and deliver information?”*

*“Focusing on strategies to access the neuro-linguistic pathways has the potential to create transformational, lasting change in a fraction of the time it would take to learn by trial and error.”*



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## Q. What's the most effective way to reduce my accent?

A. If your goal is to significantly reduce your accent in a short period of time, the best approach is to work 1-1 with an Accent Reduction Coach who is a native speaker of the language with the accent you want to acquire. This person should analyze your speech linguistically and develop a plan of action. Classes are good for learning English (speaking, listening, reading and writing); however, there are several reasons they are not the best choice for accent reduction. In addition, tapes, CDs and online resources can be helpful, but unless you are working with a native speaker, they are not sufficient nor are they likely to create lasting change.

1. **Since classes have more than one participant**, and each person has different issues to work on, it will take you longer to reduce your accent because you are sharing the time with others and often not getting enough personalized feedback on your issues.
2. **Language background matters**. If you are in a class with people from many different language backgrounds, the sessions will not likely center around issues that will directly help those speaking your primary language.
3. **Each of us has an "idiolect"**; that is, a dialect that is unique to the individual. If you heard something incorrectly when you were first learning English, you may pronounce it incorrectly. In a group situation, you are not likely to get the issue resolved.
4. **The focus in a class is on the entire group's benefit**, which means a 10-20% individual improvement is likely to be the goal. In a 1-1 coaching situation, the goal is an 80-95% improvement. It is much easier to control the environment and work from a diagnostic of an individual's speech, isolating the variables that affect you.
5. **Changing an accent is personal**. If you work 1-1 with a coach, you don't have to be concerned with making mistakes or feeling embarrassed. You wouldn't go to the doctor in a group, would you? Why would you attempt to change your accent in a group?
6. **Tapes, CDs, and online resources can be very helpful as reinforcement**, but they are not likely to result in a lasting change by themselves. If you have an accent, it may be very difficult for you to "hear" the difference between your accent and the desired one. 1-1 coaching takes the guesswork out of it by reducing your accent quickly and effectively, giving you more time to focus on what really matters to you - like your family and your business.