

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

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MEET RICH & TRICIA PARK - DEDICATED PROFESSIONALS

Rich and Tricia have been clients of *English by the Hour* for the last six months, and they are a pleasure to work with. Both are very committed and always looking for ways to apply what they learn to their professional and personal lives.

Rich has been a Real Estate Broker for over 16 years. He is also enrolled to practice before the IRS. He has both the Series 7 and 63 licenses required of a stock broker, and he is a Juris Doctor. These achievements and qualifications help Rich serve his clients better.

"I can provide higher professional services including Real Estate and Tax. I can protect my clients better legally after having graduated from law school, and I can communicate with my clients better after having improved my accent, intonation, and breathing."



Rich is an example of a truly dedicated and determined professional who will do whatever it takes to improve himself and his ability to serve his clients.

His wife, Tricia, is very supportive of him. She is a software engineer for Northrop Grumman, and she accompanies Rich to all of the sessions.

After completing the initial series of 10 sessions, Rich and Tricia opted to take additional sessions to explore more advanced topics including intonation, transferring the theories and techniques to their every day life, and continuing their progress.

It is so rewarding to work with Tricia and Rich because they always apply what they learn to take their knowledge to the next level.

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HOW & WHY RUBBERBANDS WORK

“How do you transfer the skill of holding one syllable longer than others to someone who doesn’t currently do this?”

“Learners need to first know which syllable to hold and then somehow force themselves to hold it longer. This ‘forcing’ is where the rubber band technique comes in.”

Whether you call them “rubber bands” or “elastics”, they are exceptionally helpful in accent reduction.

I came upon using them for this purpose completely by chance in an effort to help students hold syllables longer.

One of the greatest challenges in accent reduction is that students may not be auditory learners, and just hearing a word pronounced correctly does not transfer directly to the student being able to implement the change in his or her speech. Especially in the case of a multi-syllabic word like “beneficiary” or “delivery” with an “l” and an “r” in the word, it can be a challenge both to focus on the “segmental” issues, that is the individual sounds, and the “suprasegmental” issues, one of which is word stress. [How do you transfer the skill of holding one syllable longer than others to someone who doesn’t currently do this?](#)

Another perplexing issue in accent reduction, especially for individuals who have spoken English for most of their lives with an accent other than an American one, is how do you make yourself slow down? Or should you even try to do so?

If you think about it, speaking very slowly and holding each syllable the same length of time makes for a boring monologue. Yet the problem remains that some speakers send

information at a rapid pace — so rapid, in fact, that we have difficulty understanding and processing it at the rate it is being delivered.



One part of the solution is focusing on word stress. If fast talkers correctly emphasize the right syllables in their content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), they can make themselves much more easily understood without slowing down in general. After all, many native speakers talk very quickly, yet everyone understands them.

[To achieve this, learners need to first know which syllable to hold and then somehow force themselves to hold it longer. This “forcing” is where the rubber band technique comes in.](#)

By holding the band and following the instructor to learn the relative differences in length between a stressed and an unstressed syllable, the learner begins to get a feeling for how long to hold the syllable. The interesting part is that once the person gets that sense, using the band to force the voice to

actually hold the syllable longer works. It works for everyone, regardless of whether the person is primarily a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learner.

Highly auditory learners may feel the rubber band is unnecessary, just as those who are not visual learners may be less inclined to use a mirror to look at their own mouth or the mouth of a native speaker to see how a word is pronounced. The idea is that different methods work for different people.

Although not all learning styles rely on the method, the rubber band technique works for all learning styles and is particularly effective in helping speakers slow down through an awareness of syllable length. It can also be used for troublesome words that are difficult for almost all non-native speakers to pronounce, such as “world”, “girl”, “scowl”, and “pool”.

The mind-body connection that is created by rubber band usage expedites the process of using stress-timing, and it is so simple to do. In fact, many learners simulate the rubber band effect by using their hands in the air to send the message to the brain (automatically, without prompting from the instructor)!

Although I stumbled on it purely by chance, the rubber band technique has been extremely helpful to my clients.

HOW FAST CAN WE REALLY CHANGE HOW WE SPEAK?

Tony Robbins is famous for teaching his followers that change doesn't have to happen slowly and methodically. He purports to use methods that can change people's behaviors overnight. Everything from overeating to underachieving; according to Tony, you can radically transform yourself if you are willing to accept change. So why not accent reduction?

Last month I discussed neuro-linguistic programming or NLP; that is, finding ways to create changes at a deeper level that allow transformation to occur more rapidly. How might this apply to accent reduction?

Getting past the "filters" that each of us has to define who we believe we are and what we are capable of can be challenging. Many people who pursue accent reduction state that they don't speak clearly and effectively in their primary languages, let alone a second language! How can we change that?

A first step to changing the self-perception is to alter the way our speech sounds; that is, the underlying messages we send. Traditionally in accent reduction, this has been done by teaching intonation patterns: jumps and glides, rises and falls, and pitch changes: the ebb and flow or "music" of the language. More fundamental to the process, however, is how we breathe. If we change the quality of our voice, the sound and perception it creates, people will react to us differently. They may respond more favorably or let us talk longer or simply ask us to



repeat less often. This can be motivational to someone struggling to be understood. Even though the accent is still there, these changes can transform our self-perceptions and create a motivation that allows us to continue making more fundamental and traditional changes to our speech more quickly, if only by motivating us to expect more "pleasure" than "pain".

Another area of interest is how to make the connection at a deeper level. Much of accent reduction relies on auditory and visual methods: listening and repeating and correcting, using minimal pairs, and looking at lips and mouth of the speaker and yourself in a mirror. Some people find it helpful to do visualizations as simple as closing their eyes and focusing on the sounds. What are the kinesthetic options?

Even for a person who is not primarily a kinesthetic learner, doing something physically directly affects our speech.

If a student wants to rise in pitch but isn't able to achieve it, try standing up. If the student wants to hold a syllable longer, try using a rubber band or tapping the sound. We are only limited by our imaginations. The direct connection we have, body to mind, enables us to find ways of automatically and directly creating a change versus attempting to change it slowly over time via repetition and correction. If we can feel it, we can do it.

Back to Tony's techniques of creating a "trigger" for a specific sensation you want to "come rushing back to you", he suggests creating something, such as finger snap or a pinch that you do to evoke a certain state of mind. This could easily be incorporated with one's speech - think of doing this to evoke the more calm and comfortable feel of a coaching session versus the tense and competitive feel of a speaking engagement. What if a "trigger" could recreate accent-free speech at any time or place simply by evoking the desired "state of mind" that was achieved during a personal coaching session?

Although there is much room for speculation and exploration, there is clearly something to be gained by considering the expansion of these concepts. Why make things more difficult than they have to be? If there are direct connections to create immediate changes in the accent reduction process, we should find and employ them to the fullest extent possible.

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Q. What role does age play in accent reduction?

We all know that children learn languages more easily than adults, often without having to study grammar and structure. Adults, on the other hand, have to learn to apply rules.

The good news is that accent reduction is rule-driven. There are rules for pronunciation, word stress, and intonation. Learning and applying these rules can lead to dramatic changes in how a person speaks. In addition, many people do not breathe in a way that supports their speech, and changing their breathing habits can create noticeable changes at any age.

One factor that does predict one's likelihood of being successful in reducing an accent is education. If a person can speak and write well in his or her first language, those skills are often transferable. People who have advanced degrees in any subject tend to see results more quickly than those who do not.

Q. How about age in second language acquisition in general?

Research shows that up until roughly age 9, children can learn a language phonologically without much trouble. The teenage years tend to be the best years for syntax and structural learning. Again, that is if we refer to learning automatically using the individual's inborn abilities. If we talk about learning and applying rules, adults can learn another language at any time. In fact, adult learners are often more motivated to learn than children for many reasons, including an understanding of why it is important to know a language well, and sometimes older adults finally find the time to dedicate to the task.

Q. What advantages do adults have?

Adults are task-oriented and have a life full of experiences they can relate and skills they can transfer to the learning process from facing challenges in other areas. Adults are focused and tend to know themselves better than children do. This includes their specific learning styles. They can generally communicate more effectively with their coach than a child might be able to with a tutor. With specific goals in mind, adults can be very successful second language learners and can dramatically increase their speaking effectiveness.