

# UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

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- Reducing your accent after sessions end ... and where can immigrants find affordable ESL classes in San Jose? (p.4)

## INTERNET ACCENT REDUCTION CLASSES IN INDIA

I just finished teaching a series of accent reduction classes to a group of teachers in India. The goal was to improve their speech so that they can offer phone coaching to clients in the United States. How often have you called a company's call center and not been able to communicate with the person who answers?



The results were interesting. At first it was difficult to give and receive feedback and to know how they were applying the concepts. Over time, we developed an understanding, and they were able to apply the same techniques I use in my face-to-face sessions here in the US.

While a class is a challenging situation, it's more about what you put into it. If you practice and focus on developing the new patterns, you will see results.

We did initial diagnostics, mid-way point evaluations,

and final evaluations. It's hard to believe the same person was talking in the initial ones and the final ones! Even breathing techniques, pausing, and control can be taught via the Internet. The time difference may be challenging in some situations, but I offered evening courses that were morning time for them, and they provided the software they use with their clients for this purpose. The most important part with accent reduction is clarity of speech, and they use the same materials to practice that my students here in the US have.

It's exciting to create these transformational changes, but there is still room for improvement. I look forward to embracing the right tools for speech analysis comparisons to native speakers of American English that will rate how each student compares. They already exist but do not currently focus on all of the necessary elements to be effective.

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*“Just because we learn to speak another language doesn’t mean we will necessarily begin to interpret the meaning the same way a native speaker would.”*

*“If the ‘sounds’ of the words convey meaning, speaking with a different accent could make all the difference in conveying our ideas to others (especially those with the same accent).”*

## HOW DOES OUR NATIVE LANGUAGE AFFECT HOW WE THINK?

Yesterday my friend Michael sent me a link to an article on English language acquisition that suggests you can tell whether or not a word is a “noun” or a “verb” by its “sound.” The idea that nouns have a different “flavor” than verbs, based, at least in part according to this article, on how the word sounds.

Later in the article, however, I was even more intrigued by the Christiansen comment “this affects how you interpret a sentence” — his conclusion being that this sound quality relationship could help a non-native speaker learn to read or perhaps even speak English more quickly.

**While this may be true, I took the statement in a slightly different direction. I began to ponder if our native language forms how we see the world and thus how we interpret a statement; therefore, just learning to speak a different language doesn’t necessarily change how we interpret it.**

Interestingly enough, about this time, I saw another article adjacent to the one I was reading called “*Chinese, English speakers use brains differently to tackle math.*”

While both groups exhibited similarities in processing basic math and both used complex

reasoning for more difficult problems, the interesting part was this: native English speakers used the “language-processing” area of their brains to resolve the problems, while Chinese speakers used the “visual information processing area”.



Now this makes sense from the standpoint that Chinese people are used to interpreting characters or pictures, while English speakers are used to letters, but you would think numbers would be processed the same way — or would they? And how does this affect how we think and how we see the world?

**Just because we learn to speak another language doesn’t mean we will necessarily begin to interpret the meaning the same way a native speaker would.**

Surely there are shared areas of “common sense” that a culture develops stemming from, among other things, their language. But how far do the roots go? To what degree can learning another language change how one sees the world?

This affects accent reduction because many people believe that speaking with an accent keeps them from being recognized for their achievements, getting promoted, or being successful in selling outside their ethnic group, for example. But is this really the case?

To some degree, yes. If your boss can’t understand you well, s/he is not likely to promote you regardless of your other areas of expertise. However, if you reduce your accent and still find you are not getting the results you want — what else could it be? Of course, there are numerous possibilities from your personality to social skills to the corporate environment you are in. Prejudices run deep, and everyone has them.

**What’s interesting about this concept is that it suggests that our ties to our native languages run so deep that it carries over into how we process information even in another language.**

In fact, it could stimulate new types of thinking that we would not have accessed or considered if it weren’t for learning the new language. For that matter, if the “sounds” of the words convey meaning, speaking with a different accent could make all the difference in conveying our ideas to others (especially those with the same accent).

Food for thought!  
Care to read the articles referred to? [Go there!](#)

## CHANGE THE BREATH, AND YOU CHANGE EVERYTHING!

I often ponder why the breath has been so forgotten in the field of accent reduction. It has certainly gained popularity in other areas of our lives, such as exercise. It is an integral part of training to reduce stress and certainly a key part of studying yoga, yet it has virtually dropped out of what is a standard part of language learning and ESL, including accent training.

Perhaps it's simply a sign of the times that we are so busy only the most pressing issues get addressed, and breath just isn't one of them. But if you think about it — what could be more important?

It has all the “side benefits” of relaxing you and helping you to focus on what really matters. In addition, it aids your speech in American English since native speakers “speak with the breath.”

Now, certainly, not all native speakers do this. Many people mumble. However, they are not considered to be good speakers.

The breath improves everything from making the endings on words more audible, to giving your presentations force and polish, to enabling you to persuade others of your point of view.



Most people would agree that this is the case, but for many people of diverse language backgrounds, the air flow is just not done this way. There are restrictions that inhibit the air flow, and just breathing and attempting to get the sounds out doesn't work.

The solution? Here are a couple of suggestions to change air flow and to begin speaking with the breath.

- **Take your breath from the abdomen and direct your speech from the diaphragm.** You will know you are doing this correctly if your volume goes up.
- **Create an awareness where you “check in” with yourself and monitor your breathing.** Notice if you are stressed and begin to breath in the clavicular or thoracic region rather than **deep, abdominal** breathing.
- Realize that you don't have **to be doing relaxation exercises to use the breath.** You can take a breath and redirect it through your mouth as

- You speak at any time, regardless of how stressful the situation. However, you need to practice. Fill up with air, and as you release it with your words don't wait to be completely depleted before you “refill.” It's less noticeable and takes less time. It's also habit forming. After about 20 days, you will do this naturally.

- **Practice breathing while speaking when you are not under pressure.** Joining an organization like Toastmasters International, or an information group you can find on Meetup.com can provide opportunities for practice. You want to be speaking with native speakers of American English to gain the most benefit from the practice, but you can do it anywhere at any time. The idea is for this new way of breathing and speaking to become so comfortable and effortless that you do not have to focus on it to make it happen, and it naturally becomes a part of your life.

Using the breath as you speak is the best way to improve your speaking voice and to create the impression you desire.

For non-native speakers, it can be the solution to having to repeat what you say again and again and having people understand you the first time.

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## Ask Rebecca

*Lose Your Accent &  
Change your Life*

Have a question for  
the Q&A section of  
**ASK REBECCA?**

We'd love to hear  
from you. Email your  
questions to:

*info@englishbythe  
hour.com*

### Q. After taking accent reduction sessions, what can I do to make sure I continue to make progress?

Many students are concerned about their ability to continue to make progress after completing accent reduction sessions, and there are a number of ways to do this.

- Join an organization like Toastmasters International or a group you can find online at Meetup.com. Some advantages include speaking in a group setting, getting regular feedback on your English for a minimal cost, meeting a lot of great people, and keeping your English learning goals separate from your work environment. It's an all-around win-win.
- Focus on one element each week. Instead of attempting to improve your accent all at once, select one area to focus on: maybe it's your breath, maybe it's your /r/'s, maybe it's syllable-length. Be conscious of your selected focus area during the week until you see some progress. Next week, select another area.
- Spend about 10 minutes a day reviewing the material. Most people try to "force" themselves to do things they can't stand. It doesn't work! Perhaps read an inspirational quote using the rubberband technique or listen to a CD and practice some of the word stress patterns.
- Look up words you are unfamiliar with in an International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) dictionary rather than guessing. You will increase your confidence when you know you are saying the words you use most correctly.

### Q. What about someone who wants to learn to speak English? Where can immigrants go in Silicon Valley to get free ESL classes?

Fortunately, there are great ESL programs for adults who are non-native speakers of English in speaking, reading, writing, and listening (all levels) at very reasonable prices through the Metropolitan Adult Education Program (MAEP). For details, visit [www.metroed.net](http://www.metroed.net). There is also the Central County Occupational Center (CCOC) that offers vocational training for adults age 16 and older. These schools can be extremely helpful to immigrants and those on limited budgets who are looking to improve their English communication skills or retrain to seek employment in the valley. CCOC is located at 760 Hillsdale Avenue, San Jose, CA 95136 and their phone number is (408) 723-6400. MAEP has several locations in San Jose and is the largest career-oriented educational organization in Santa Clara County comprised of high school and adult occupational, academic and community programs.