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Interpreting ESL Dictation
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Even if you have a "good ear," have studied or speak a foreign language, or have years and years of experience, there will always be one or two accents that give you trouble. All of us have encountered those dictations we would like to throw back into the queue and let someone else do them. Even where it's still possible to reject a dictation because you don't like the dictator, that's hardly a best practice. It makes others angry, and you fail to acquire key skills that will make you indispensable, ultimately improve your production, and reduce your frustration when you have no choice but to transcribe a foreign dictator.

Speaking of frustration, attitude is the first line of attack, or defense in this case, against problematic dictation. It helps to have a little empathy for the dictator. I'm sure you've seen the verse on the Internet that illustrates how difficult English is for speakers of other languages. It includes lines like these:

> The bandage was *wound* around the *wound*.
> After a *number* of injections, my jaw got *number*.
> I had to *subject* the *subject* to a series of tests.

ESL dictators may sound like babel to you; think what English sounds like to them. It's no wonder ESL dictators have problems with English! English has a larger vocabulary than any other language and is the only language with so many synonyms for the same concept. English has thousands of expressions and words that carry nonliteral meanings, subtle innuendoes, double entendres, puns, and irony. Even the emphasis we place on expressions changes the meaning. Richard Lederer, a frequent author for Health Professions Institute and AHDI publications, derives much of his humor from these characteristics of our language and has made a living writing about them.

Idioms are a huge problem for ESL speakers because meaning is not transparent. There's a cute scene in a Star Trek Next Generation episode where Data has just come on board and overhears O'Brien telling Jean Luc that they will have to "burn the midnight oil" to get some repairs done. Data informs O'Brien that to do so would be inadvisable because of fire and that a portion of the ship would be sealed off. O'Brien tries to explain, "It's an expression." Data says "an expression of what?" "A figure of speech," says O'Brien and explains that it means they would be working late. Jean Luc interrupts to save a befuddled O'Brien when

Data asks, “What is the etymology of that idiom . . . how did it come to be used in contemporary language?” After Jean Luc shows Data another problem that needs fixing, Data replies, “It appears that we will need to ignite the midnight petroleum, Sir.”

It may seem sometimes that we’re transcribing for people from outer space, but it’s a fact that our world is shrinking, or maybe it’s expanding. Either way, we need to adjust. The reality is that we are going to be working all our lives with people who have accents and don’t go through accent reduction training. There have long been programs to teach English to foreign speakers, but it is doubtful that many, if any, focused on reducing the speaker’s native accent. As a business concept, accent reduction training for non–English-speaking people other than actors is relatively new. In the last few years, a couple of accent-reduction specialists have spoken at our national meetings. I provide information on their organizations at the end of this article. However, it’s unlikely that many of our dictators even know about such companies much less take advantage of them, so we have to figure out what we can do to understand these dictators better.

Unfortunately, experts predict that as speech recognition gains ground, MTs will be transcribing more and more difficult dictation. We may as well get ready for that now. Hopefully, as the work gets more difficult, we will be able to command better compensation!

Before we can even begin to train our ears and minds for foreign accents, we need to get rid of that initial feeling of panic when we hear that first word of dictation. And, of course, it helps to have a little empathy. Being able to understand accented dictation is 90% attitude and 10% persistence. With practice, you’ll be able to recognize sound substitutions the dictator is making and plug in the correct sound to make it right. So, let’s look at some of the components of an accent and what we can do to “plug in the correct sound.”

Components of an Accent

Accents are a combination of pronunciation and speech patterns. Components of an accent are vowels, consonants, rhythm, stress, and intonation.

Vowels. There are five vowels in the English alphabet (*a, e, i, o, u*) and sometimes *y*. In pronunciation, there are 15—each vowel has a long sound (the alphabet sound) and a short sound, plus *ih*, *oo*, *er*, *ouw*, and schwa—that indistinct, barely pronounced vowel sound represented by the upside down, backward *e* in dictionary pronunciations. Adding an *r* after the short *a* sound (*ah*) gives us are, ear, etc, so if you don’t have an *r* in your language, you don’t have those sounds either. Then we have diphthongs, *ae*, *oe*, *ou*. The vowel sound *aw* (daughter, coffee, cost) doesn’t appear in any other language. And don’t forget that every vowel can sound like a different vowel. Foreign speakers learning English are taught that *o* is pronounced *oh*, but *o* is *ah* in hot, *aw* in cost, *oh* in coal, *uh* in some, *ow* in sought, and *ih* in women.

Consonants. The English alphabet has 26 letters, 21 of them consonants, but 24 consonant sounds. Combining letters creates additional consonant sounds, but many of those sounds don't even exist in some other languages. We have different spelling patterns that make the same sound—*ph* and *gh* can both sound like *f*. Then there are the silent letters, both vowels and consonants, so we have sounds that don't exist in other languages and characters in our spelling that make no sound! All this compounds the problem for foreign nationals for whom English is a second language. Is it any wonder the problems they have with our language?

Rhythm. Rhythm is the rate of speech—it changes from language to language and region to region in the U.S. When we listen to a foreign language, we often think they're speaking too fast. Guess what? They think *we* speak too fast. But what happens with some of our dictators is that they speak fast to obscure their lack of facility with our language when, if they would just slow down, we could understand them better, even if they're heavily accented.

Stress. While we may feel stressed out when we get a foreign dictator, that's not the kind of stress we're talking about here. We're talking about the part of a word that is said harder and longer—the difference between PRO-duce and pro-DUCE, OB-ject and ob-JECT. Generally speaking, English nouns have stress on the first syllable, verbs on the second. Stress patterns differ in other languages (as evidenced by some borrowed words in English), and ESL speakers often impose their native stress patterns on English. Have you ever wanted to tell a dictator that you could understand him better if he would just put the correct emPHAsis on right sylLABle? Putting the stress on the wrong syllable is pervasive in the sub-Indian continent, really everywhere, so learn to tune your ear for inappropriate stresses.

Intonation. Intonation is the melody of language, how the voice goes up and down as one speaks. In English, every time we come to the end of a sentence, we signal it by dropping our voice. In many other languages, the voice goes up at the end of a sentence, so it's hard for us to tell what's coming next. In some melodious languages, such as those from the Asian Pacific Rim, there is no rise or fall in intonation. Some languages are monotone; they don't place stress on any syllable and their intonation neither rises nor falls!

Additional Aspects of Interpretation

Components of an accent are not the only factors affecting our ability to better interpret ESL dictators. Other factors may come into play as well.

Language Acquisition. As babies, once we teethe, we can all make the same sounds. There are no language barriers! The *th* sound, retained only in English and Greek; the trilled *r* in Hispanic languages, that clearing-throat sound "kchch" in some Semitic and Slavic words—we could all make those sounds when we were babies. But as we assimilate our native languages, we lose our ability to make sounds that are not a part of that language. That's why languages are different.

Culture. As strange as it may sound, personalities, what is perceived as good manners, and gender relationships may play a role in how well ESL clinicians dictate. Some ethnic groups are, by nature, quiet, soft-spoken, deferential. Speaking in a loud or assertive voice, which is how we might wish all our dictators to speak, may be considered by some foreign speakers to be an affront. Others may simply be embarrassed by their lack of facility with English and try to hide it by speaking softly. Their voice trails off as they're dictating the more uncertain they become of what they need to say.

Word Endings. In English, we end our words with a consonant sound. In some other languages, such as the Asian languages, their words end in an open sound so these speakers may drop the consonants at the end of English words, so *find* becomes *fine*. This feature is particularly obvious with English plurals and singular verbs ending in *s*, so what we sometimes interpret as a subject-verb error is merely an error in pronunciation of the verb. So, suspect a missing *s* or *es* at the end of a noun or verb, then *d* or *ed*. If that doesn't work, try other consonant sounds. Entire syllables may be dropped as well, especially at the end of a word, with "after" being pronounced "aft."

Extra Syllables. Some speakers pronounce the *ed* at the end of some words as a separate syllable, and you may hear "wired" as "wir-ed" or "weer-ed." Additionally, in an attempt to emphasize a final consonant, a final syllable may be added, with "chest" sounding like "chest-ah." If you say your ABCs aloud, you'll notice that some of our consonants sound like they start with a vowel—*f, h, l, m, n, s*. Spanish speakers will add a vowel sound to the beginning of a word starting with *s* or *s* blends (*sp*, *sl*, etc.), so that "spine" becomes "eh-spine," for example. Finally, some ESL speakers simply do more hemming and hawing than native speakers, so be wary of extraneous "ah," "eh," or "er" sounds equivalent to "uhs" and "uhms."

Specific Problem Sounds. The following sounds are particularly difficult for non-native speakers.

In English, we have voiced and unvoiced consonants, often the source of the disconnect for foreign speakers. With your fingers over your voice box, pronounce the *th* in *thin*, then *th* as in *then*. Feel the difference? Foreign speakers may pronounce *th* like an *s* and "think" sounds like "sink," or like a *z* so that "this one" sounds like "zis one." Add a vowel mispronunciation to that mix, and you may get "zees one." Sometimes, *th* may be pronounced as a *t* or *d*, as in "dis one" or "dat one," "I taught . . ." for "I thought . . . or "tyroid" for "thyroid." " Chinese speakers may substitute *j* for *s*, and you'll hear something like "pojition" for "position." Other unvoiced and voiced pairs, like *p* and *b*, may also be exchanged.

Some foreign speakers may reverse the consonants *v* and *w*, so you may hear "werry" for "very" and "wiral" for "viral" or "vater" for "water." Chinese speakers may substitute *f* for *v*, with "values" becoming "falue" (dropping the *s* as well as substituting consonants).

Chinese speakers may have trouble with blended sounds like *bl* and *br*, pronouncing these as a single letter rather than a blend. “Blood” may sound like “bud” or “breathe” like “bleathe,” “present history” like “pleasant history,” for example.

In English, we have two sounds for *l*. Try this: Say “love”; feel the position of your tongue. Your tongue is at the front of your mouth and hits the back of your upper teeth. Now, say “full.” Your tongue moves back a little farther and curls on the gum ridge because the center of it goes down. Not every language has this, so ESL speakers may substitute the sound of soft *oh*, and “terrible” becomes “terriboh,” “typical” “typicoh.”

Some words, like “chloride,” are especially tricky because of the combination of problem sounds: *ch*, *l*, and *r*, thus *krolide.* The letter *l* may also be substituted for *n*: *leoplas* for *neoplasm* (note the dropping of the final consonant sound as well). In other cases *l* may be substituted for the sound of *r* (“le-leef” for “relief”).

Some languages don’t have an *r* sound, so it may simply be dropped, sometimes resulting in loss of an entire syllable rather than just a word. “Ear” may sound like “eh,” or “they’re” and “their” like “theh.”

Spanish provides a number of letter substitutions, particularly in words containing *j* or *g* (or *ge*). “Jell-O” may sound like “yellow,” “John” like “whuan” (Juan), Jaime like “hi-may” (the Spanish e is pronounced as a long *a*), “La Jolla” like “La Hoya,” George (Jorge) as “hor-hay.” La Jolla also shows another Spanish pronunciation with a double *l* sounding like a *y*. The *qu* in English is pronounced simply as *k* by Spanish speakers and the word ending *-tion* as *“see-un*.” The trilled *r* in Spanish may also interfere with interpretation of some words. Spanish speakers pronounce every vowel, so *ia* in the middle or end of a word may be pronounced “ee-ah.”

Abbreviations. Sometimes what you’re hearing may not be a word at all; it may be an abbreviation. Keep in mind that the speaker may be imposing his native language pronunciations on our alphabet (“yell” for *l* or “zed” for *z*) or some of the specific language problems noted above might come into play. What sounds like “wee-es-dee” may be VSD, or “wee-wi-plasty” VY-plasty. We expect English-speaking physicians to pronounce certain acronyms as words, but when an ESL physician says “bun” instead of B-U-N, we’re caught off guard.

Other Issues. Syntax (word order) can be an editing issue, if not an interpretation issue. When an ESL dictator says “No tender to the uterus,” we understand what he means; do we edit it? (I hope so!) Do we reorder the sentence when the dictator says, “The patient tolerated well the procedure”? ESL speakers confuse male and female pronouns and make frequent verb tense and agreement errors. In addition, ESL speakers often confuse similar words and fail to take in nuances of meaning, such as confusing “instilled” and “inhaled.” An occasional problem is the misuse of slang, colloquialisms, and idioms. As with all dictators,

not just ESL, mumbling, coughing, self-correcting, speaking too softly or too fast are factors in our being able to interpret ESL dictation.

Tips for Improving Interpretation

- Don't deliberately avoid transcribing ESL dictation. Becoming skilled at interpreting any difficult dictation will open doors to advancement and often better pay.
- Listen through the dictation once or twice to get the concept of what's going on. Listening without transcribing may not seem productive and you may think, "I can't afford to NOT transcribe," but during the learning process, this is an excellent technique for building auditory discrimination and phonetic awareness.
- Make interpreting ESL dictation a game. This constitutes an attitude change. If you think you're having fun and have a positive mental outlook, mental blocks will disappear.
- Repeat what you hear out loud. Try pronouncing what you hear with emphasis on different syllables. Change the pronunciation of the vowels. Listen for those specific consonants that cause problems.
- Break the sounds into syllables, write them down, analyze for possible breaks not evident by sound. Are you hearing several words as a single word or a single word as several words? Analyzing the sounds syllable-by-syllable will help clarify this.
- Pretend the speaker is an actor or a character like Sean Connery, Helen Mirren, Liam Neeson, Sacha Baron Cohen, Javier Bardem, Russell Crowe, Steve Irwin, Craig Ferguson, O'Brien or Sulu on Star Trek, Richard Harris, Gérard Depardieu, Benicio del Toro, Jean Claude Van Dam, Antonio Banderas, Lin Chi-ling, Yun-Fat Chow, Borat, Deepak Chopra, Sanjay Gupta.
- Practice speaking with an accent. Pretend you are a foreign actor. Watch movies, listen to songs in other languages.
- Keep a journal! Once you've interpreted a word or phrase, write the word phonetically, the way you heard it, and then correctly. If you know the nationality of the speaker, make a note of that as well so that you can better anticipate other speakers of the same nationality.
- Language learning is a visual thing as well. Every night, using your notes, read a paragraph out loud. In that paragraph, circle each sound that foreign speakers might pronounce differently and read it aloud incorrectly. You'll be training your ear without losing production time!

To quote Marlene Schoenberg in "Decoding International Accents," *Success in decoding accents requires a solid understanding about the sound systems of international physicians' languages, a positive attitude directing you toward problem solving, and a creative approach to listening to what you are hearing from different angles*. If accents are a problem for you, I hope this article and the additional resources listed below will start you on your journey to becoming an expert in deciphering ESL medical dictation.

Resources for Further Study. The better you understand English rules of pronunciation added to understanding foreign pronunciation of sounds, the easier it will be for you to interpret ESL mispronunciations.

Interpreting ESL Medical Dictation, a SUM Program Career Development Series unit, Health Professions Institute, Modesto, CA. (http://www.hpisum.com/product/13.aspx?page_id=6)

"Decoding International Accents," Marlene C. Schoenberg, Ed.M., JAAMT 25:5, October 2006, pp. 241-243 (also included in *Interpreting ESL Medical Dictation*).

"Interpreting Foreign Accents," Susan Dooley, CMT, AHDI-F, and Ellen Drake, CMT, AHDI-F (included in *Interpreting ESL Medical Dictation*).

"Dictation and Transcription: Adventures in Thought Transference," John H. Dirckx, M.D. (available as a free download at http://www.hpisum.com; also included in *Interpreting ESL Medical Dictation*).

"Pronounced Differences," John H. Dirckx, M.D. (available as a free download at http://www.hpisum.com; also included in *Interpreting ESL Medical Dictation*).

The American Heritage Book of English Usage. Pronunciation Challenges http://www.bartleby.com/64/7.html

Phonics, Syllable & Accent Rules http://english.glendale.cc.ca.us/phonics.rules.html

"On Vowel Sounds in Speech," John H. Dirckx, M.D. *JAAMT* 22:4, July-Aug. 2003.

Progress in Understanding Foreign Accent Syndrome. This entry is pretty theoretical. It probably won't interest you that much unless you're really obsessed with this subject. www.psych.usyd.edu.au/staff/karenc/FASaphasiadayhandout.pdf

YouTube.com (search for accents)

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