Why Adults Keep Their Accents

Hearing, Habit and Identity | Level C1 | EnglishBridges.com

Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. Which English sounds or words are hardest for you to pronounce? Why do you think that is?
2. When you hear someone speak your first language with a foreign accent, what do you notice first?
3. How might attitudes toward accents differ between countries, workplaces, or generations?

Reading: Why Adults Keep Their Accents

Many adults use English every day for years. They write **flawless** emails, but they still have a **telltale** accent. They may say "tree" when they mean "three" at a meeting. Why can adults master grammar but not the sound of a new language?

For a long time, people blamed a biological deadline at puberty. That idea is **contested**. A huge online quiz suggested that grammar learning stays strong until about 17 or 18. But accent tells a different story. Rarely does someone who starts a language as an adult manage to **pass for** a native speaker when listeners pay close attention. The few who come close are **outliers**.

Part of the problem is in the ear. Babies can hear the sounds of any language, but within a year they become **attuned** to the sounds of home. At six to eight months, American and Japanese babies could both tell "r" from "l" apart. A few months later, the American babies had improved and the Japanese babies had declined. In adults, these sound categories are **entrenched**. Not only does this make some contrasts hard to hear, but it also makes them hard to say. It is difficult to produce a difference you cannot **discern**.

Adults also reach a **plateau**. Once people understand them, they stop adjusting. Still, the ear can be retrained. Japanese adults who heard "r" and "l" words in many different voices got better at hearing them. A strong accent is not the same as being hard to understand. A speaker can sound foreign and still be completely **intelligible**. Listeners often adjust to a new accent in less than a minute.

Sadly, listeners are not always fair. In one experiment, facts read with a foreign accent were rated as less likely to be true. The researchers thought the effort of listening was hurting the speaker's **credibility**. Later studies have had mixed results. In another study, job applicants with a Japanese accent were rated lower than applicants with a French accent. Bias like this can **penalize** skilled people. In Britain, lawyers and recruiters judging real interview answers mostly managed to **set aside** their bias. Many adults also keep their accents with pride. An accent can show a hometown and a sense of **allegiance**. Many people build careers with their accents **intact**. Everyone, linguists say, has an accent. A better goal than sounding native may be simply being easy to understand.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

flawless **intact** **plateau** **contested** **allegiance** **pass for** **set aside** **intelligible** **entrenched** **outliers** **penalize** **credibility** **telltale** **discern**

1. The pianist gave a _____ performance without a single wrong note.
2. A red face and a quiet voice were _____ signs that he was nervous.
3. The election result was _____ by the losing party, which went to court.
4. With her perfect French and stylish clothes, she could easily _____ a Parisian.
5. Most players were about the same height, with two very tall _____.
6. Old prejudices can become deeply _____ in a society.
7. From the top of the hill, we could just _____ the shape of a ship.
8. After a year of fast progress, my running speed hit a _____.
9. Although the recording was old, every word was _____.
10. The scandal damaged the newspaper's _____ with its readers.
11. Some airlines _____ passengers who change their tickets by charging high fees.
12. Let's _____ our disagreement for now and focus on the deadline.
13. The soldiers swore _____ to their new country.
14. The ancient vase was found _____ after two thousand years under the sea.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. a flawless	_____	**a.** sign
2. a telltale	_____	**b.** election
3. a hotly contested	_____	**c.** entrenched
4. deeply	_____	**d.** intact
5. reach a	_____	**e.** allegiance
6. damage your	_____	**f.** plateau
7. pledge	_____	**g.** performance
8. come through	_____	**h.** credibility

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. The difference between the two vowels is barely _____ to untrained ears. (*discern*)
2. Researchers measured the _____ of each speaker, not just the strength of the accent. (*intelligible*)
3. The witness did not seem _____, so the jury ignored her story. (*credibility*)
4. The referee gave the team a _____ for wasting time. (*penalize*)
5. She switched between the two languages _____, without a single error. (*flawless*)
6. The _____ of old habits makes any change slow and difficult. (*entrenched*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. What part of English still gives many experienced adult speakers away?

2. What did the huge online quiz suggest about learning grammar, and why does it not settle the question of accent?
3. How easy is it for someone who starts a language as an adult to pass for a native speaker?
4. What happens to babies' hearing during their first year of life?
5. How did American and Japanese babies differ in telling "r" from "l"?
6. Why is it hard to pronounce a sound contrast that your first language does not use?
7. What is the difference between having a strong accent and being hard to understand?
8. What did the experiment with trivia facts find, and how sure can we be about it?
9. Why might an adult choose to keep an accent? Do you find these reasons convincing?
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"At six to eight months, Japanese babies could not tell 'r' from 'l'."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that adult learners should aim to sound exactly like native speakers."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer mention lawyers and recruiters in Britain? Is it (a) to show that bias can be set aside in some situations, (b) to prove that British accents are the easiest to understand, or (c) to show that recruiters hire only native speakers?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. The online quiz suggested that the ability to learn grammar stays strong until about 17 or 18. **T / F**
2. Most people who start a language as adults can pass for native speakers under close listening. **T / F**
3. Young babies can hear differences between speech sounds from any language. **T / F**
4. By the later age tested, Japanese babies had become better at telling "r" from "l". **T / F**
5. Training can improve how well Japanese adults hear "r" and "l". **T / F**
6. A speaker with a strong accent is always hard to understand. **T / F**
7. Listeners can sometimes adjust to an unfamiliar accent in less than a minute. **T / F**
8. Every later study has confirmed the result of the trivia experiment. **T / F**
9. In one study, applicants with a Japanese accent were rated less favorably than applicants with a French accent. **T / F**
10. Linguists say that some people speak with no accent at all. **T / F**

Language Focus: Inversion after Negative Adverbials

After a **negative or limiting adverbial** at the start of a sentence, put the **auxiliary before the subject**, as in a question.

Pattern: *Never / Rarely / Seldom / Little* + auxiliary + subject + verb. *Never have I seen such a crowd.*

No auxiliary? Add *do / does / did*. *She rarely calls.* → *Rarely does she call.*

Not only + auxiliary + subject …, **but** … also … **Only when** + clause + auxiliary + subject … *Only when I left did I understand.*

From the reading:

"**Rarely does** someone who starts a language as an adult manage to pass for a native speaker when listeners pay close attention."

"**Not only does** this make some contrasts hard to hear, but it also makes them hard to say."

Tip: Inversion sounds formal. In everyday speech, *I have never seen* is more natural than *Never have I seen*.

Part A. Rewrite the sentences

Rewrite each sentence so that it begins with the word or words in italics. *Keep the meaning the same.*

1. I have never heard such a strong accent. (*Never*) _____

2. She rarely speaks her first language at work. (*Rarely*)

   _____

3. He improved his listening, and he improved his speaking too. (*Not only*)

   _____

4. We understood the joke only when she repeated it slowly. (*Only when*)

   _____

5. I didn't know that the interview would be recorded. (*Little*)

   _____

Part B. Finish the sentences

Finish each sentence so that it is true for you. Keep the inverted word order. Then read your sentences to a partner.

6. Never have I …
7. Rarely do I …
8. Not only can I …, but I can also …
9. Only when I am really tired do I …
10. Little did I know, when I started learning English, that …

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. Is there an English accent you especially enjoy listening to? What do you like about it?
2. Has anyone ever guessed where you are from because of the way you speak? How did you feel about it?
3. Do you want to sound like a native speaker of English, or is being clearly understood enough for you? Why?
4. In your country, are some regional accents considered more prestigious than others? Why might that be?
5. What have you done, or what could you do, to improve your pronunciation? Which methods work best for you?
6. Have you ever struggled to understand an accent at first and then got used to it? How long did it take?
7. Why do you think many adults stop adjusting their pronunciation once people can understand them?
8. In a job interview, which matters more: what a candidate says or how they sound? Should it be that way?
9. Should English classes in your country model one accent, such as American or British, or many accents? Why?
10. The trivia experiment has been hard to repeat. Why might results about bias be difficult to confirm?
11. Can keeping an accent be a way of showing loyalty to a community? Can losing one be seen as disloyal?
12. Should accent bias be treated like other kinds of discrimination at work? What would that look like in practice?
13. As more people use English as a second language, will native-speaker accents matter less in the future?
14. Is it fair to judge how intelligent or trustworthy someone is from the way they speak? Why do people still do it?

Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/why-adults-keep-accents** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.