Why Adults Keep Their Accents

Teacher's Key | Level C1 | EnglishBridges.com

Sections follow the student handout. Delete a section here when you delete it from the handout. The handout uses the short (quick) version of the reading.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

1. flawless
2. telltale / tell-tale
3. contested
4. pass for
5. outliers
6. entrenched
7. discern
8. plateau
9. intelligible
10. credibility
11. penalize / penalise
12. set aside / put aside
13. allegiance
14. intact

Word Partners

Part A. 1 g 2 a 3 b 4 c 5 f 6 h 7 e 8 d

Phrases: a flawless performance; a telltale sign; a hotly contested election; deeply entrenched; reach a plateau; damage your credibility; pledge allegiance; come through intact.

Part B. 1 discernible / discernable 2 intelligibility 3 credible 4 penalty 5 flawlessly 6 entrenchment

Comprehension Questions: Model Answers

1. *What part of English still gives many experienced adult speakers away?*
   The sound of their speech, their accent. Their grammar and writing can be flawless, but some sounds (for example "tree" for "three") still give them away.
2. *What did the huge online quiz suggest about learning grammar, and why does it not settle the question of accent?*
   It suggested that the ability to learn grammar stays strong until about 17 or 18. It does not settle the question of accent because it measured grammar, not pronunciation.
3. *How easy is it for someone who starts a language as an adult to pass for a native speaker?*
   It is rare. Very few adult starters pass for native speakers when listeners pay close attention, and those who come close are outliers.
4. *What happens to babies' hearing during their first year of life?*
   Babies start out able to hear differences between sounds from any language, but within a year they become attuned to the sounds of their home language and less sensitive to other contrasts.
5. *How did American and Japanese babies differ in telling "r" from "l"?*
   At six to eight months both groups could tell "r" from "l." A few months later, the American babies had improved and the Japanese babies had declined.
6. *Why is it hard to pronounce a sound contrast that your first language does not use?*
   The sound categories of the first language are entrenched, so the brain sorts new sounds into familiar boxes. If you cannot hear (discern) a difference, it is difficult to produce it.
7. *What is the difference between having a strong accent and being hard to understand?*
   An accent is about how foreign a speaker sounds; being hard to understand is about intelligibility. They are related but different: a speaker can sound clearly foreign and still be completely intelligible.
8. *What did the experiment with trivia facts find, and how sure can we be about it?*
   Listeners rated trivia facts as less likely to be true when they were read with a foreign accent; the

researchers thought the effort of listening was hurting credibility. We cannot be very sure, because later studies have had mixed results.

9. *Why might an adult choose to keep an accent? Do you find these reasons convincing?*
   Open answer. A strong answer mentions identity and pride (a hometown, a sense of allegiance), the fact that many people build careers with their accents intact, and that everyone has an accent, then gives a reasoned opinion.
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.*
    False. At six to eight months, American and Japanese babies could both tell "r" from "l." The Japanese babies declined only a few months later.
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.*
    No. The writer suggests that a better goal than sounding native may be simply being easy to understand.
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?*
    (a) To show that bias can be set aside in some situations. The recruiters, judging real answers, mostly managed to set aside their bias, which shows that accent bias is not unavoidable.

True or False

1. **T.** The quiz suggested that grammar learning stays strong until about the age of 17 or 18.
2. **F.** Rarely does someone who starts as an adult manage to pass for a native speaker.
3. **T.** Babies begin life able to hear differences between speech sounds from any language.
4. **F.** The American babies improved, and the Japanese babies declined.
5. **T.** Japanese adults who practiced with many different voices improved.
6. **F.** A speaker can sound clearly foreign and still be completely intelligible.
7. **T.** People adjust quickly, sometimes after less than a minute of listening.
8. **F.** Later attempts to repeat that result have been mixed.
9. **T.** The reading describes this result, especially for jobs that demand a lot of communication.
10. **F.** Linguists point out that everyone has an accent.

Language Focus: Inversion after Negative Adverbials

Model answers. Accept any answer that uses the form correctly and makes sense.

1. Never have I heard such a strong accent.
2. Rarely does she speak her first language at work.
3. Not only did he improve his listening, but he also improved his speaking.
4. Only when she repeated it slowly did we understand the joke.
5. Little did I know that the interview would be recorded.
6. Never have I eaten durian.
7. Rarely do I watch television in the evening.
8. Not only can I cook pasta, but I can also bake bread.
9. Only when I am really tired do I drink coffee after lunch.
10. Little did I know, when I started learning English, that I would use it at work every day.

Part A: accept seldom for rarely and other correct tense choices. Part B: accept any true completion that keeps the inverted word order.

Notes on the Evidence

Grammar quiz (paragraph 2): Hartshorne, Tenenbaum and Pinker, Cognition (2018). The paper title says 2/3 million participants; the Boston College release says nearly 700,000. Grammar-learning ability was estimated to decline from about 17.4 years (the release headline says 18 or 19); the reading says "about 17 or 18." The study did not test pronunciation. The claim that very few adult starters pass for native under close scrutiny reflects work such as Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (Language Learning, 2009) on Swedish; the age threshold reported for that study differs between secondary sources, so the reading gives no age. "Slope rather than cliff" summarizes a common view (for example Flege) and is a contested interpretation.

Infants (paragraph 3): Kuhl and colleagues compared American and Japanese infants on English /r/ and /l/: at 6 to 8 months both were above chance (about 64 and 65 percent); at 10 to 12 months Americans rose to about 74 percent and Japanese fell to about 60 percent (ASA 1997 abstract; full paper Developmental Science 2006, not opened). Adult training (paragraph 4): Logan, Lively and Pisoni (1991) and Lively et al. (1993, 1994) used many talkers; Bradlow et al. (1997) found perception training generally carried over to production, with wide individual differences. Even long-term residents may not reach native accuracy. The Spanish example of an added vowel is a standard textbook illustration of first-language transfer.

Accent and intelligibility (paragraph 5): Munro and Derwing (1995 and later) describe accentedness, comprehensibility and intelligibility as "related, but partially independent"; heavily accented speech can be highly intelligible. Rapid adaptation: Clarke and Garrett (2004), as summarized by Bradlow and Bent (Cognition, 2008), found that under a minute of exposure overcame the initial slowdown. The advice to prioritize features such as word stress is a mainstream view in pronunciation teaching, not a single finding.

Bias (paragraph 6): Lev-Ari and Keysar (Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 2010): native 7.5, mild accent 6.95, heavy accent 6.84 on their truth scale; when told the study was about accents, the mild-accent gap disappeared but the heavy-accent gap remained. Replications are mixed: Souza and Markman (2013) and Stocker (2017) found no effect; Boduch-Grabka and Lev-Ari (2021) replicated it; Barlow et al. (2024) did not replicate their exposure result. Hiring: Hosoda and Stone-Romero (Journal of Managerial Psychology, 2010); accent was confounded with applicant names. Britain: Accent Bias Britain project (Levon, Sharma and others, report 2020; QMUL release 2019); the study used rated mock interviews, not real hiring outcomes.

Identity (paragraph 7): the claim that a very native-like accent can be seen by one's own community as distancing is based on Gatbonton, Trofimovich and Magid (TESOL Quarterly, 2005), a study of learners in Quebec; the abstract was not opened, so the claim is hedged as "some research suggests." "Everyone has an accent" is the standard position in linguistics. All links checked on 26 October 2026.