

Reverse Accent Mimicry: An Accent Reduction Technique for Second Language Learners

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Introduction

Humans possess an innate biological capacity to hear, differentiate and mimic fundamental prosodic and phonological characteristics of any language (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, & Fogassi, 1996; Skoyles, 1998). My purpose is to describe a mimicry based foreign accent reduction method developed from my own personal experience. I first will present myself as a case study, detailing how using a reverse accent mimicry method rapidly and substantially minimized my own L2 accent. I then will share suggestions for implementing the technique in the classroom or clinic. I have employed it with good success with people from diverse language backgrounds over several decades of clinical experience.

Background and Personal Case Study

I am a speech-language pathologist and university professor with career-long experience providing and supervising foreign accent reduction therapy for speakers of English as a second language at various levels of emergent second language ability.

Reverse accent mimicry was the initial catalyst for a rapid second language learning evolution for me. The striking before-and-after differences are clear in my memory over thirty years later. American English is my first language. Reverse accent mimicry had its genesis in two personal experiences when initially learning French as my second language as a young adult residing in France and Belgium. I enjoyed the language immersion advantages of constantly hearing and communicating with native French speakers over several years. Paradoxically, despite much effort, my carry-over English foreign accent somehow stalled and failed to improve. Though I spoke good basic French in terms of vocabulary and grammar, my listeners often misunderstood me or asked me to repeat.

The first experience happened as a companion and I were walking along a street in Reims, France. Deep into an animated conversation in English, we became aware of being followed by a group of young neighborhood children. These girls and boys were gleefully mimicking our speech and mocking us, loudly voicing quite remarkable but senseless imitations of our conversational English. They sounded very English-like as they cried out jargon sentences resembling: "Tacka-waka-sacka-dee-kee?" Little actors and actresses, they put on an impressive improvisational comedy performance. Some of them clearly had implicitly captured and were spontaneously mimicking some very salient phonological and prosodic aspects of our spoken English. I often related this event to friends and would always mimic the children's jargon.

The second and key experience occurred about eighteen months later. Now living in Brussels, I attended a re-run of the movie *Gigi* starring French actor Maurice Chevalier. It was shown in the English original version with French subtitles. When I left the cinema, to impress my friends, I began sarcastically impersonating Chevalier, mimicking his animated facial expressions and both speaking and singing in his very noticeably French accented English. As I was doing this, I realized that just like those children in France, I was spontaneously and effortlessly mimicking French prosodic melody and stress patterns. I also heard and felt myself speaking with the exaggerated, more tense French speech articulations and oral muscularity characteristic of Chevalier's speech. Mimicking the actor's accented English, I was somehow using a whole cluster of salient spoken French intonation and pronunciation qualities that had been among my most elusive second language learning challenges.

Suddenly it occurred to me: what if I were to speak French this way, in reverse accent mimicry? Then and there I tried it out

on my friends. I stopped doing my mimicry of Chevalier in English and switched into French. Reverse accent mimicry worked. It was spontaneous and immediately effective. Once activated and fixed in my mind, Chevalier's model accent became an easily evoked, holistic vocal characterization reference that I somehow could feel in my mind and mouth.

In the days that followed, I learned to first vividly imagine myself speaking with the reverse accent and would then just 'let go' and engage the mimicry at a reflexive, automatic level. I felt my tongue, throat, jaw and lips shift into new beginning placements and shapes and tensions before I began to speak. Multiple dimensions of French pronunciation, resonance, intonation, timing and stress at the vowel, consonant, syllable, word, and sentence levels were being activated all at once by some innate brain mechanisms and implicit learning that I obviously possessed but didn't understand.

Although I still spoke with some accent, I now was clearly understood. People stopped asking me to repeat myself. Dozens of my familiar francophone listeners offered immediate comments and compliments on my noticeably improved spoken French. Although this dramatic change was a gateway to further refinements, it was fully operational suddenly. Successful reverse accent mimicry is not a gradual gradient of improvement.

Suggestions for Classroom or Clinic

The following suggestions have emerged from my own work with English as a second language learners, most of them international university students studying in the United States who approached our campus speech clinic with a request for accent reduction therapy. Hopefully, some suggestions may prove useful across many second language teaching settings in our global village.

Step 1: Identify or Provide a Desirable Reverse Accent Model for Each Speaker

The student must be able to evoke a vivid mental representation of the model speaker's L2 accented L1 speech to elicit true mimicry. Select a very heavily accented but fluent accent mimicry model. It is best if there is someone the person knows well or has experienced repeatedly in the past, but other model speakers can be used effectively. As I did with Maurice Chevalier, some have selected familiar model speakers from movies, television, or other entertainment media. Many have purchased or rented movies and replayed parts again and again to fix a speaker's accented speech patterns in their minds. Some have chosen a model speaker from educational experiences, such as a foreign exchange student from high school, a fellow student or a teacher. Friends, spouses, roommates, neighbors, and spouses of relatives have been successful choices.

Step 2: Triggering the Holistic Mimicry Effect in L1

The key beginning strategy requires the person to speak their own L1 with the exaggerated holistic mimicry of the model's accented speech. In my experience this step is necessary in triggering the speaker's innate mimicry mechanisms at a holistic level. Perhaps because the student formulates his own first language effortlessly, mimicry of the accent is facilitated. This is direct mimicry (the reverse mimicry comes later). Doing accented L1 mimicry is much like assuming a "voice" of a character when reading a story aloud to children. It is fun and often quite amusing. You know immediately when the person has triggered the effect. Have them do it again and again. Some people like to say a key phrase or sentence over and over as they first successfully mimic the accent in their own L1. Others ask questions and have a conversation, using the time between speaking turns to get into character and try again. A few sing. I don't discourage anything that is proving effective for that speaker. Using decontextualized language such as isolated words or lists of words has proven counterproductive in my experience. Whole phrases and sentences best evoke the spontaneous mimicry effect.

Some people refuse to try for various reasons. Others give a good effort but just can't seem to make it happen on the first day. Many of these speakers come back on another day and have experienced success mimicking the accented speech during vocal play alone, with children, or with family or friends. When the mimicry response is forthcoming, I have them practice doing the accented L1 for several days, encouraging them to let go and have fun with the experience.

Step 3: Transitioning to L2 Reverse Accent Mimicry

The next step is the transition to reverse accent mimicry. This consists of speaking the L2 with the same animated, holistically

triggered characteristics that emerged doing direct accent mimicry in the first language. The student is simply asked to again start directly mimicking the model speaker in their first language; then, while continuing to speak, to code-shift into the L2 while maintaining their new accent.

As with step two, initial success using reverse accent mimicry in the second language is encouraged and practiced aloud. Use speaking tasks most comfortable for the individual for this initial practice. I have used conversation, descriptive narrative speech, and reading aloud to anchor and fix the reverse mimicry until it is quite easily maintained.

Step 4: Guided Use and Generalization

For repeated practice and guided use of the new accent, I have stressed one-on-one interaction. I actually prefer using personally relevant scripted written conversations rather than spontaneous discourse as the continuing lesson plan, because scripts afford the opportunity for exact repetition over the course of many days. Also, scripted conversations allow the teacher or clinician to interrupt in order to provide feedback, model, teach, or revise the script as needed to make it more appropriate or less awkward. Ample opportunities for spontaneous L2 discourse occur during these teaching moments in my experience. Using scripts is especially helpful for those with limited, emerging L2 abilities, for whom spontaneous discourse is challenging.

If needed, helpful out-of-class assignments include setting given time intervals during the day during which all of the student's L2 speech must be in the new reverse mimicry accent. These periods are progressively lengthened or multiplied. Assignments to use reverse mimicry when speaking with selected individuals, groups, or family members also are effective. Both of these approaches may be mixed and systematically increased until spontaneous use of the new way of speaking is generalized to all L2 speaking situations.

References

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