

Accent Modification Program helps students with speaking skills

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- Oct 12, 2009
- [Columbia](#) Missourian



MU international students participate in Accent Modification Program
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COLUMBIA — While he is a visiting scholar at MU, Chuljin Ko is working to improve his English communication skills for when he returns to his job with the Busan City government in South Korea. It's been a challenge, Ko said.

“We have an opposite grammar structure compared to English structure,” he said. “You say ‘I love you,’ but we Koreans say ‘I you love.’”

Ko is participating in MU's 12-week [Accent Modification Program](#), whose director recently won a [national diversity award](#) from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

The award went to the program's clinical supervisor Dana Fritz, for her work with the Accent Modification Program.

“That organization has many things that they like to focus on and promote, but one of them is trying to make sure that we're doing a good job in diversity, and that we're training our students to be able to respond to people of various cultures,” said Fritz.

Fritz and the [MU Asian Affairs Center](#) partnered together to develop the program four years ago. It allows visiting foreign scholars, particularly those from Asian countries, to improve their English speaking skills.

Mary Jo Herde, senior coordinator of the Asian Affairs Center said the center receives many Korean government officials who speak English well. “They really knew the structure and the grammar of the language, but they hadn't had much experience speaking it,” said Herde.

The center provides a global leadership program to the visiting scholars, but the Accent Modification Program is offered as an optional component through the MU Speech and Hearing Clinic. The current session has 28 clients, the most the program has ever had.

Herde said the greater demand is a surprise. “They're not required to take it in any way, shape or form, and for it to be that popular is really unheard of,” she said. “It speaks to the quality of the program.”

Participants are tested at the beginning of the program to determine which areas of communication they need the most improvement in.

Graduate students Sara Sieker and Lauren Keller have taught in the program since spring and meet with their clients once a week for an hour. Both clinicians help the participants with pronunciation of vowel and consonant sounds, intonation and learning concepts such as figurative language and idioms.

"I think most of them just come in wanting to be able to communicate with American English speakers as well as they can," Sieker said. "They really feel the need to improve their pronunciation to the point that they feel like they can really effectively communicate."

Keller said the pronunciation of vowel sounds is a key factor in communicating.

"I try and teach the vowel differentiations for them — that's what they always say is most difficult for them in English," Keller said. "The main goal of this is for them to be able to speak English better."

Fritz said her clients' motivation keeps her going.

"The people we work with work so hard, and they absolutely give you everything they've got and so you feel like you want to give that back to them," Fritz said. "They don't need any cheerleading... They really want to do it, so it's easy to give your energy back and say, 'Oh, let's try this.'"

Often, Fritz said, finding one key word can help with a certain area of pronunciation.

Many clients are in the program to improve their English proficiency for jobs back home. "Many times, the job that they're doing, it's something that's a great benefit for them to be better at speaking English or understanding English more," Fritz said.

While winning the award came as a surprise to Fritz, she said she thinks it showcases the program's biggest strength. "It's really talking about the training of the students and that's the key

to why we won that award," Fritz said. Graduate students in speech-language pathology work with the program.

In her letter of support for the award, Herde stressed the staff's high level of commitment to participants.

"They really go the distance," Herde said. "They really work to individualize their sessions for the needs of the particular person."