



Gaining freedom through speech MU accent classes empower students.

By ABRAHAM MAHSHIE of the Tribune's staff

Published Tuesday, March 18, 2008

In the 2006 comedy "Pink Panther," actor Steve Martin, playing French Inspector Jacques Clouseau, seeks out the aid of the world's best accent coach to improve his English. After two minutes of trying to repeat "I would like to buy a hamburger" with an ever-stronger and less intelligible French accent, he shouts, "I would like to buy a *damburger!*" in frustration, and his accent coach gives up.



Don Shrubshell photos

Above, Robyn Kim talks with fellow student Chong Dae Won after an English as a Second Language class at Douglass High School. Kim says her accent modification classes at MU have given her more confidence and changed her life. Below, Corey Hale, left, a graduate student at the University of Missouri, demonstrates a vowel sound to Jinho Choi, a visiting scholar at the MU Asian Affairs Center.

Although the struggles are sometimes just as frustrating, at the University of Missouri's accent modification program, nurturing teachers and dedicated students work through words vowel by vowel, learning and practicing the stress, intonation and melody of the English language.



"They're people who feel nervous when somebody says, 'I'm sorry, what did you say?' and they want to be understood the first time around," explained Dana Fritz, clinical assistant professor in the department of communication science and disorders at MU's School of Health Professions. "So many times, what we work on is just showing where's the stress."

Fritz said 22 of the program's 24 students this semester are working professionals from the South Korean government who are attending a one- or two-year Global Leadership Program through MU's Asian Affairs Center.

Corey Hale, a graduate teaching assistant in the program, is pursuing his master's degree in health sciences and is one of two students sponsored by the Asian Affairs Center to be clinicians at the accent modification program.

"It's not that we're trying to alter their accent or alter any element of their identity or any element of their personality but rather help them improve their intelligibility," said Hale, who is in his sixth week as a clinician and is now considering career opportunities in the fields of medicine and education. He said the classes he gives are meant to "help them in terms of producing more accurately articulated speech sounds, helping them blend speech sounds more in the manner that a native English speaker would do."

"Just a little tweak helps a lot," said Sang Kim, director of MU's Asian Affairs Center and the person primarily responsible for recruiting and overseeing the 40 South Korean government officials now in degree and non-degree programs at MU. "In general it's been very helpful because that program helps them to understand where they need to change their pronunciation."

Kim said MU's history of educating Koreans started soon after the Korean War, when President Harry Truman saw a country ravaged by war and appointed MU to receive South Koreans tuition-free. Nowadays, the university receives many paying students and boasts the highest number of foreign government officials at any American university. MU's largest foreign alumni group is in Seoul, South Korea, with more than 1,000 Mizzou alums.

"The visibility of MU and Missouri in Korea is pretty high," Kim said. "We have great networking and just supporters of Missouri."

How accent modification works

Fritz, the head of MU's accent program, said accent coaches and programs in real life are often found in cities such as New York and Los Angeles, where non-native speakers are charged \$60 to \$100 an hour for business and professional needs. MU's program was developed two years ago mainly to train foreign scholars or graduate students who want to be eligible for teaching assistant positions.

With mouths wide open, students mimic and repeat sounds, learning how to say the 18 vowel sounds of the English language. They learn the flow and melody of American English. Fritz said this is a big challenge for Asians because Chinese is monotonal and Korean only has seven vowel sounds.

Students meet with a clinician for 50 minutes a week to practice sounds and read poems to practice the rhythm and intonation of English.

Fritz explained that the melody and intonation of language are the sound "inside the womb," where specific words cannot be distinguished, but the murmur and stress of speech can be heard.

From behind a two-way mirror, Fritz explained what Hale was trying to do as he coached a South Korean student.

"What he's trying to press him on is, 'Try this, feel it out, try to see if you can say it.' They are all those vowels that are not part of his first language," Fritz said. Speaking about the clinicians, she said, "They get kind of geeky about, 'What is the difference? What is the difference about those sounds?' ... They have a very good ear for those details."

Fritz said accent modification differs from classes in English as a Second Language, or ESL, which focus on semantics, vocabulary and syntax. Accent modification focuses on phonology - the science of speech sounds.

"I feel I can pronounce better. ... Other people say to me, 'You pronounce very well,' " said Jinho Choi (pronounced Chuh), Hale's student who will return to his job with the Seoul city government in May. "In Korea, I have contact with many foreigners who don't speak Korean; each time, I can't call an interpreter. I have to speak English."

"I think the University of Missouri made a very good program," Choi said. "I never skip this class."

For Robyn Kim, a South Korean living in Columbia as her husband pursues a doctorate at MU, accent modification classes have been a life-changing experience.

"I learned these things, and I found that it's more than language. It's more about my confidence. It's more about my empowerment," said Kim, who was a translator in South Korea but quit partly out of frustration. "I got more power, and I began to speak up" after taking the accent classes twice last year. "And I just felt all the people understood me."



Jinho Choi mouths vowel sounds during instruction at the University of Missouri. Choi is taking an accent modification class to improve the way he speaks English.

Now an avid fan of the "West Wing" TV show, she is proud that she understands the cultural references in the show that she would not have understood before venturing into the community.

She became so dedicated to learning English language patterns that she would wake up at 3 or 4 a.m. to practice exercises given to her by her instructors. "You have better relations with your friends, your family, and you see all the things happening in the community," she said.

Sang Kim of the Asian Affairs Center agreed that English skills are integral for his scholars doing comparative studies in the community.

Fritz said that although the strictest measurement test only records an average improvement of 10 percent by the end of the class, it's important that students in accent modification gain confidence in their language skills.

For Robyn Kim, who is no longer afraid to speak up in her ESL classes at Douglass High School, she believes she has more freedom to embrace American culture.

"This is a new Robyn," she said. "You're seeing a very happy woman now."

Reach Abraham Mahshie at (573) 815-1733 or amahshie@tribmail.com.
