

Topic	Technology, Accent, Identity, Accent discrimination, Bias, Employment	Duration	100 minutes
Type	Lesson plan		
CEFR level	B2		

GOALS/PURPOSE/AIMS

- Develop reading comprehension and critical thinking by analyzing key themes.
- Activate students' prior knowledge and encourage discussion on accent bias.
- Expand vocabulary related to language and discrimination.
- Explore how language influences treatment in professional situations.
- Encourage critical thinking and persuasive speaking skills.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES USED

Chan, Wilfred (2022, August 24). "The AI startup erasing call center worker accents: is it fighting bias – or perpetuating it?". *The Guardian*.

Text available at:

https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/23/voice-accent-technology-call-center-white-american?CMP=share_btn_tw

PROCEDURES (STRUCTURE)

Pre-Reading activity (30 minutes)

1. Discussion questions with whole class:

- Have you ever spoken to a call center agent with a strong accent? How did you feel about it?
- Do you think some accents are more “acceptable” than others in professional settings? Why or why not?
- Should employees be asked to change their accents for their jobs?

2. Guessing the vocabulary:

- Select key words from the article (e.g., accent modification, bias, discrimination, neutrality, identity, artificial intelligence).
- Write them on the board and ask students to predict their meanings.
- Give students sentences from the article where these words appear and have them infer the meanings.
- Finally, students create their own sentences using the words.

Reading the text (15 minutes)

Break the text into sections and assign different parts to small groups or read with the whole class out loud.

In small groups:

- Identify the main idea of the text.
- Identify unknown or difficult vocabulary.

- Examples referring to call center employees, the use of this type of software, and its implications.

Comprehension questions and group discussion (20 minutes)

After reading, students answer the following questions in small groups and afterwards discuss with the whole class:

General Understanding:

- What is the purpose of the voice modification technology?
- Why do some companies want their employees to sound more “neutral”?
- What are some ethical concerns about this technology?
- How does this issue relate to discrimination in the workplace?
- To what thing is this software compared?
- If you worked in a call center, would you want to use this technology? Why or why not?

Suggested excerpts for analysis and discussion:

1. “Sharath Keshava Narayana, a Sanas co-founder, told me his motivation for the software dated back to 2003, when he started working at a call center in Bangalore, faced discrimination for his Indian accent and was forced to call himself ‘Nathan’”.
2. “User feedback has apparently been positive: Narayana claims agents have said they feel more confident on the phone when using the software”.

3. “Is AI technology helping marginalized people overcome bias, or just perpetuating the biases that make their lives hard in the first place?”
4. “The danger, Aneesh said, was that artificially neutralizing accents represented a kind of ‘indifference to difference’, which diminishes the humanity of the person on the other end of the phone”.
5. “Hearing it closely, I realized that there was a hint of emotion, politeness and sociality in the original caller’s voice,” he replied. That was gone in the digitally transformed version, “which sounds a bit robotic, flat and – ahem – neutral”.

Debate (35 minutes)

- Debate on the topic “Should Call Centers Use Accent Modification Technology?”
- Divide the class into “For” and “Against” groups.
 - Each group brainstorms arguments and examples.
 - Assign roles: opening statement, main arguments, rebuttals, and conclusion.
- The teacher moderates the discussion and, if necessary, adds important points the students may not have mentioned.
- At the end students vote on which arguments were the most persuasive (not necessarily which side they agree with).

Suggestions for further reading:

Aneesh, A. (2015) *Neutral Accent: How Language, Labor, and Life Become Global*.

Duke University Press Books. Book available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329075248_Neutral_Accent_How_Language_Labor_and_Life_Become_Global

Suggestions for further tasks:

YouTube video: clip from the film *Sorry to Bother You*, about an African-American telemarketer. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5X3cu1B87k&t=47s>

Discussion questions:

- What is a “white voice”?
- What kind of stereotypes are associated with this “white voice”?
- Do you think the only way to be successful in the telemarketing industry is to have this “white” accent?
- What is the difference between the “white voice” shown in the video and the “Will Smith’s white voice”?

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Students will activate prior knowledge and personal experiences related to language and identity.
- They will develop awareness of language bias and different perspectives on “correct” English.
- Students will demonstrate understanding the broader implications of language discrimination.
- They will analyze the professional and societal impact of language differences.
- They will engage in deeper reflection on their own language experiences and how language shapes identity.
- They will critically engage with real-world issues related to language and social opportunities.
- They will practice respectful discourse, active listening, and critical thinking.

ASSESSMENT/REFLECTION

Written reflection: develop students' writing skills and critical thinking.

Prompt: *“Do you think companies should encourage employees to change their accents? Why or why not?”*

Students write a short essay (200-250 words) expressing their opinions, using arguments from the article.