



Understanding “fossilized” pronunciation: What to do when accent problems are hard to correct

Some students find that despite years of language study and experience with English, pronunciation continues to hinder their ability to communicate effectively as students or as TAs. Pronunciation errors can make nonnative English speakers seem less fluent than they are, and could be a professional liability in the future.

Fossilized pronunciation refers to pronunciation problems that linger despite focused pronunciation training and practice. Just as a fossil of an ancient plant is preserved in a hardened state, fossilized pronunciation errors have become fixed in a speaker’s language. This handout will offer guidance on how second language learners can reduce pronunciation problems and improve the clarity of their speech.

Pronunciation is a language skill that often cannot be changed simply due to “hard work” or conscious effort. A number of factors are involved in determining if a speaker can develop clear pronunciation in a new language:

- **Age:** both age at which the new language was first learned (before the teen years is best) and current age of the speaker (the older the speaker, the harder accent is to modify)
- **Native language:** i.e., is the native language compatible with English or are there significant differences in phonemes, placement of tongue, lips, teeth, etc., and stress patterns?
- **Length of time using English:** while practice is generally useful, sometimes using English for a long period of time without feedback and/or language training can be part of the problem (i.e., pronunciation errors might become even more “fossilized”)
- **Social pressure** (conscious or unconscious) from friends not to sound too much like US speakers
- **Innate ability** to hear and copy sounds (as with singing or playing music, not everyone has the same ability to recognize subtle differences in sounds and then reproduce those sounds)

Two analogies to illustrate key issues involved in improving pronunciation in a second language

1. “Playing a musical instrument”: gradual progress through repeated practice over time

Learning to play a musical instrument takes training as well as years of on-going frequent practice. This skill requires both an intellectual understanding and physical skill (control of fingers, hands, posture, etc.). Pronunciation is also largely a physical skill and requires lengthy practice. While a person can begin music lessons at any age, training must begin at a young age to develop a high level of performance; a 30-year-old novice will never develop the skill to play violin with a symphony orchestra. Similarly, age makes a significant difference on the ability to master the pronunciation system of another language.

2. “Wearing eye-glasses”: sometimes *compensation* is the best way

Eyeglasses compensate for vision problems; wearing them is not a sign of weakness but is simply the most effective strategy for dealing with the problem. Analogously, some speakers who have fossilized pronunciation need to compensate rather than expecting that language training will eliminate the problem (especially if they have done a lot of language work but still have the problem). Compensation strategies include improving fluency, learning to reword, using clear organizing language, developing strong presentation techniques, etc. (strategies covered in ICC language training).

Common concerns from students with fossilized pronunciation

I'm discouraged because my accent does not sound like a native speaker. How important is it to acquire a "native" sounding accent?

Acquiring a native-like accent is not the goal of ICC language training, and should not be your goal. Above all, this is not realistic for most graduate students whose primary focus is their academic work, who have limited time to work on English, and who are often past the age when a native accent can be acquired. Having an "accent" is not a detriment in the academic world (think of the many successful faculty members at CMU who have accents). Focus on developing clear and comprehensible pronunciation.

I'm puzzled why my advisor says he understands me, but accent hurt my score on the ITA test.

With frequent exposure, people can get used to a speaker's accent. This does not necessarily mean that your pronunciation is clear; it might mean that your advisor (or friend/ office mate) is good at deciphering your accent or that he/she knows the topic well and can "fill in" mispronounced words. The feedback you get from instructors at ICC will give you the most realistic idea about your accent.

I've watched one of the ICC pronunciation DVDs several times, so why do I still have accent problems?

Remember our music analogy: repeated practice over time. Watching the various pronunciation videos at ICC will not "fix" your accent. Rather, this will make you more aware of the features you need to practice (over and over), and help you notice these same features in the language of the many fluent speakers you hear everyday (thus giving you constant feedback and practice). Many students who have made significant changes by using these videos report that they have watched and actively practiced the videos numerous times.

When I get feedback from my instructors at ICC, they always say that pronunciation is my main problem. However, my ICC tutor wants me to also work on fluency, rewording, presentation techniques. Shouldn't I spend most of my tutoring time working on my accent?

No – you also need to develop strong compensation strategies (remember the eye-glasses analogy). Also, there is a limit to how much adult language learners can change their accent. Once you have done all of the available ICC pronunciation work, the most effective training is to strengthen other skills while also getting regular feedback about pronunciation.

How can I improve the intelligibility of my language?

The first step is to become aware of your particular pronunciation errors, and then to learn and practice effective strategies for dealing with these errors. You can get appropriate feedback and training from language specialists at the ICC.

- **ICC Workshops & Seminars:** Get training on pronunciation (to improve accent as much as possible) and on communication techniques (to develop compensation techniques to improve the intelligibility of your speech).
- **Self-paced Work:**
 - **Make frequent use of the various pronunciation videos/DVDs available at ICC.** Remember the music analogy: improving pronunciation requires repeated, frequent, on-going practice.
- **Outside of ICC:**
 - Pay attention to the pronunciation of native speakers on TV, radio, in videos, etc.; try to copy their pronunciation (you can even speak aloud).
 - Make an effort to master key terms in your field (note that on-line dictionaries can provide spoken models of correct stress).