

Developmental Continuum of Accent Reduction

Losing an accent—or modifying your pronunciation—is not an overnight undertaking, and if you believe claims that it is, you’ll be disappointed. There are phases of improvement, and understanding these steps will help you gain a realistic expectation of the process and what it takes to achieve success.

Continuum

A continuum is a useful tool to help visualize an abstract concept such as the stages of improving pronunciation. The following chart shows the developmental continuum of accent reduction:

Understand It	Pronounce It	Hear It	Practice It	Own It
Intellectual understanding	Physical replication	Aural confirmation	Regular repetition	Internalization

The time individuals devote to modifying an accent differs, as do their strategies and aptitudes. These all have an impact on individual results. This continuum is meant to help you gauge your progress. A look at the five stages will shed light on the phases of changing one’s pronunciation and why such a change takes time.

Understand It

The Understand It phase is the beginning stage. You may have been told that there’s a difference between the sound, stress, or intonation that you produce and that of a native speaker, but you may not yet hear the difference. You are being taught where to put your tongue, how to shape your lips, how to stress a word or phrase, or about the rhythm of the sentence. You understand intellectually that there’s a difference; however, you have not yet properly pronounced the target sound.

Pronounce It

In the Pronounce It phase you take what you know intellectually and produce it. You must pronounce the sound correctly to step beyond intellectual understanding. It’s like the difference between reading the instructions on a new software program, and actually using it.

Hear It

You may pronounce the target sound, word, or phrase correctly, but you need to *hear* the difference between your pronunciation and that of a native speaker before you are likely to make the effort needed for a lasting change. Perhaps the best way to achieve this is to record yourself adjacent to the pronunciation of a native speaker. Then play back the recording, listening to how the native speaker pronounces the sound or phrase, and then how you pronounce it. You may have to replay it a number of times. You may be surprised at the difference.



Practice It

Repeated practice is what it takes to change a habit. Regular sessions are necessary for the new pronunciation to feel less awkward. The more you repeat the new sound or pattern, the more natural it will feel. Set aside a special time a few days a week. Put it on your calendar. Treat it as important as any other regular commitment.

Own It

There may be no “a-ha” moment. There will be no trumpets. And no one may compliment you on it. When it becomes natural, when you’ve internalized that one sound or stress pattern you’ve been practicing so it’s natural for you, no one noticing may be the utmost compliment. And that means it’s time to move on to the next sound.

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