Understanding Different English Accents



Goal: communicate confidently and accurately with speakers of many English varieties

Accent means pronunciation, not competence: separate it from dialect, grammar, and vocabulary

Accent familiarity cuts repetition and miscommunication in international teams

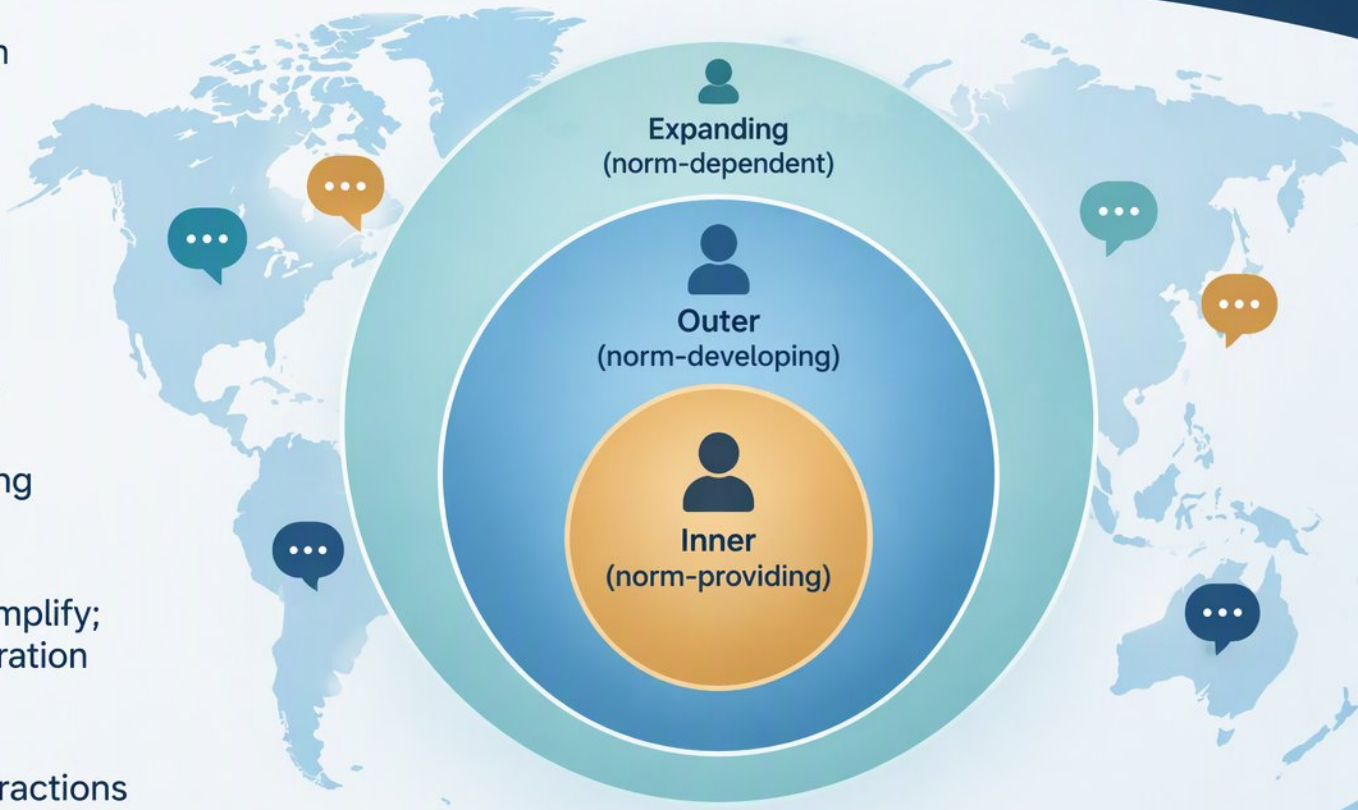
Approach: listen, analyze, adjust, practice — never imitate or erase an accent

Self-check: rate your listening confidence with three workplace English varieties

Why English Sounds Different Around the World

How history and globalization shaped English varieties — key context for understanding accents

- British colonization and North American influence spread English worldwide
- Global trade and digital communication created new Englishes
- Kachru's Three Circles: Inner (norm-providing), Outer (norm-developing), Expanding (norm-dependent)
- One limitation: circles oversimplify; boundaries blur through migration and policy
- Most workplace English interactions now involve non-native speakers (lingua franca)
- Five dimensions of variation: rhythm, vowel space, consonants, stress, intonation



English as a Business Lingua Franca at Work

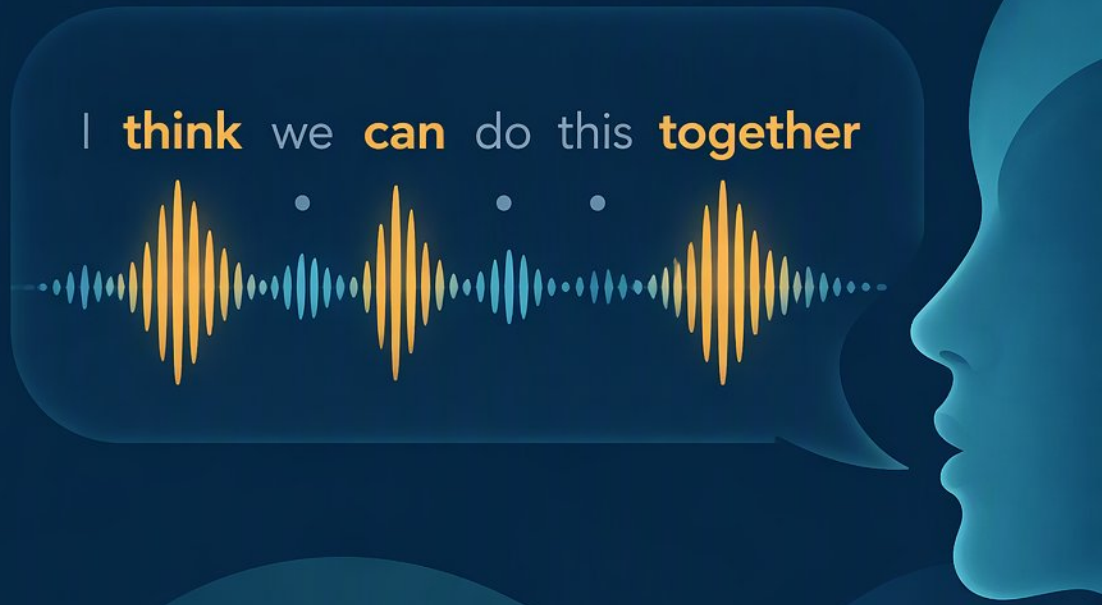
Different
People
Shared
Understanding

- **BELF:** a simplified, hybridized, dynamic code shaped by each speaker's repertoire
- Clarity of content matters more than linguistic correctness
- BELF competence: business vocabulary, genre conventions, relational orientation
- Repetition, paraphrasing, back-channelling are normal professional strategies
- Meetings build shared meaning through slides, diagrams, gestures, and documents
- Language advice networks boost social integration and knowledge sharing



Core Concepts: Stress, Rhythm, and Vowel Space

- Stress-timed vs. syllable-timed rhythm changes perceived speed
- Word stress shifts can hide familiar words
- Vowel mergers and splits: cot–caught, trap–bath, pin–pen
- Schwa and weak forms carry grammatical meaning
- Listen for stressed content words; let the rest blur



Consonants and Connected Speech: What Gets Dropped or Changed

SAME IDEAS REAL SPEECH

/r/ retention vs. dropping



Rhotic
(accents with /r/)

Non-rhotic
(/r/ dropped)

- Rhotic vs. non-rhotic: /r/ after vowels in US, Canadian, Scottish, Irish; dropped in most English, Welsh, Australian, New Zealand, Singaporean accents

Linking and intrusive /r/ in non-rhotic speech

'idea-r-of it'



- Linking /r/ and intrusive /r/ in non-rhotic speech ('idea-r-of it'), with compensatory vowel lengthening

/t/ variation



'water' → 'wadder'

- **/t/** variation: flapping ('water' → 'wadder') in North American, Australian, New Zealand; glottal replacement in British varieties

TH-fronting and TH-stopping



TH-fronting **TH-stopping**

- TH-fronting and TH-stopping in many urban and Outer Circle varieties — usually harmless for intelligibility

Listening tactic: use context, grammar, and collocations to fill in reduced or missing sounds

Major Accent Families: A Listening Map

Different voices. A more connected world.



More listening. A broader tomorrow.

British Isles

RP, London/Estuary, Scottish, Irish, Welsh — sharp internal diversity

North America

General American, New York, Southern US, Canadian — Mary–merry–marry and low-back mergers

Southern Hemisphere

Australian (broad/general/cultivated continuum), New Zealand, South African

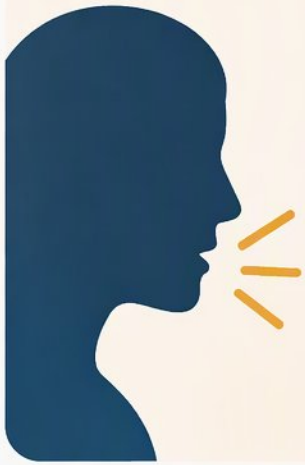
Outer Circle

Indian, Nigerian, Singaporean — syllable-based rhythm, monophthongal face/goat, less vowel reduction

Caution: no single 'British' or 'American' accent exists — use families as orientation, never stereotype

What Actually Breaks Down — and What Rarely Does

High-impact breakdown features



- Core priorities (Lingua Franca Core): most consonants, consonant clusters, vowel length, nuclear stress
- Common real breakdowns: deleted consonants in clusters ('strain' → 'train'), misplaced nuclear stress

Features that rarely cause breakdown

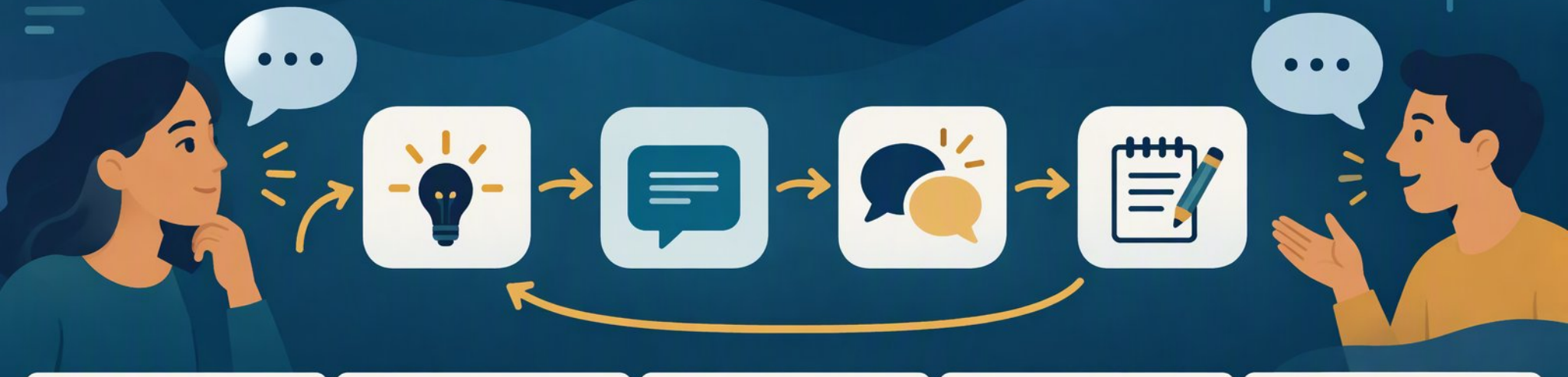


- Non-core features that rarely cause breakdown: exact vowel quality, word stress, dark /l/, 'th' sounds

- **Practical lesson:** fix what listeners actually need; ignore accent markers with no cost
- **Link to your own speech:** apply these same priorities when speaking

Listening Strategies for Unfamiliar Accents

LISTEN • UNDERSTAND • COMMUNICATE • CONNECT



Top-down listening: predict from context, topic, speaker role, and vocabulary

Focus on the key words you predicted, then confirm rather than decode every sound

Bottom-up repair: ask for repetition, slower speech, or paraphrasing without embarrassment

Note-taking while listening: capture who, what, when, and the next step

Manage cognitive load: short focused listens beat long exhausting ones

DIFFERENT ACCENTS.
BRIGHTER CONVERSATIONS.

SAME IDEAS.
A MORE INCLUSIVE WORLD.

Training Your Ear:
Evidence-Based Practice Techniques



- Script-assisted shadowing beats shadowing alone for unfamiliar accents
- Sentence-level practice (films, interviews) beats isolated word drills
- Three-pass routine: gist listen, transcript listen, listen again without transcript
- 30–60 second dictation clips build accuracy faster than passive listening
- Listeners share responsibility: familiarity training boosts comprehension and attitudes
- Short daily focused sessions beat long, exhausting listening marathons

Three-pass routine





Speaking Clearly
Without Changing Who You Are

Intelligibility beats native-likeness:
only ~25% of English speakers are native

Only core features matter:
most consonants, clusters, vowel length, nuclear stress

Pause in word groups; stress the key word;
adjust volume for listeners

Adapt to your listener — don't imitate
another accent

If misunderstood, ask what was unclear, then rephrase

Accent is part of professional identity;
confidence and identity are compatible



Accent Bias and Inclusive Communication



- Accents can distort judgments of credibility and competence — even with identical content
- Non-native accents damage perceived trust and ability, but not benevolence or integrity
- Accent status shapes how feedback is interpreted in global virtual teams
- Non-native accents affect trust and belonging, not just comprehension
- Perspective-taking and explicit reflection measurably reduce accent bias
- Team levers: bias-aware hiring criteria and language-inclusive meeting norms

DIFFERENT
VOICES
STRONGER TEAMS

LISTEN
UNDERSTAND
BELONG

Communication Strategies in Multilingual Teams

- Meeting norms: agendas, allocated speaking time, confirmed actions
- Clarification and paraphrase phrases that protect both sides' face
- Leaders: limit code-switching, repeat key points without patronizing
- Written follow-ups and chat complement fast spoken exchanges
- Watch for false understanding — teams act as if they understood



Practice Lab:
Listening and Responding Across Varieties





- **Clip identification:** four-plus varieties — note stress, key sounds, main message
- **Same text, two speakers:** compare to isolate systematic accent differences
- **Paired role-play:** clarification and paraphrase with an unfamiliar accent
- **Dictation and gap-fill:** flapping, elision, linking in connected speech
- **Debrief rubric:** score intelligibility and strategy use, not imitation

Action Plan and Resources

Listen. Learn.
Broaden Your World.

- Personal plan: three varieties, 10 minutes daily, rotating sources
- Curated audio: British Council, ESL-Lounge, 7ESL, IDEA, Speech Accent Archive
- Podcasts and quizzes: Accented, High Level Listening, Guess the English Accent
- On-the-job micro-practices: clarification phrases, meeting notes, follow-up summaries
- Closing task: pick one variety and one habit to start this week





SAME LANGUAGE.
BIGGER OPPORTUNITIES.

Different Accents.
A More Connected You.

PersonWise.

PersonWise • AI digital-human course platform

Scan the code or click anywhere to watch this course live, with voice Q&A

personwise.ai/t/f25d54ea/public