



Rhiannon ELT

Welcome to DEEP TALK, the podcast for Advanced English learners who are looking to explore something a little bit deeper.

My name's Rhiannon and I'm an English teacher and coach. Each week, I invite a different guest onto the show, and they choose a text or video they've really loved recently. Together, we talk about the ideas, and we invite YOU to join in on social media.

You'll find the link to the texts we discuss in the description to this podcast, along with a link for the transcript, which will help you follow the twists and turns of our conversations.

We'd always love to know what you think about a specific episode, topic, or text so please send me a message either via Instagram @rhiannonelt or by email at info@rhiannonelt.com. You'll find the links to both of those in the description.

Rhiannon ELT

Today's conversation took place towards the end of February 2022 and was absolutely fascinating. I've known my guest, Deepika, for a year or two now through social media teaching circles - I think the first time we "met", face-to-face (online!) was at a wonderful virtual staffroom event in 2020.

The texts that she chose to talk about are all about so-called "accent reduction", a term she has lots of issues with, as you will hear! This is the training that some folk choose to take in an attempt to minimise the impact of their first language on their spoken English. It's kind of like an extreme form of pronunciation training, if not in their methodology, then at least in their goals. Practitioners of accent reduction often claim they can 'make you sound like a native speaker' or 'help you lose your accent.' You can listen

on to hear why Deepika and I disagree with these claims!

Remember, as always here on DEEP TALK, that this conversation is sparked by a text or video so make sure you check out the description to this episode for the relevant links. You can also join in the conversation by heading to the relevant episode post on my Instagram page and leaving a comment. I would love to know what you have to say about this conversation.

Anyway, without further ado, may I present to you the very first Deep Talk with Deepika.

Rhiannon ELT

My guest today is Deepika. Deepika is an English coach and ELT consultant, and you can find her @acquireng on Instagram. She helps people acquire the best version of their English and encourages them to become independent learners.

Originally from Chennai in India, she now lives and teaches in the US. In her spare time, she loves reading, learning languages - she's currently studying Spanish - and planning what to bake next.

She has chosen 2 texts for us today, both on a topic she is super passionate about - the phenomenon of accent reduction, or rather whether such a thing does or even should exist. The first is entitled 'Why some people try to chip away at their accent', and the second 'Accent bias is an unchecked signal of racism in the workplace'.

So, Deepika can you start us off by giving us a quick summary of what this topic is all about?

Deepika

Yes, absolutely thanks for having me Rhiannon. Um I think that this is a topic that's close to my heart because it's something that I not only have seen people experience, but I

may have experienced it myself. Definitely not accent-based discrimination but definitely an accent-based identity crisis.

Rhiannon ELT

Right.

Deepika

I Have a problem with the term accent reduction, I think, because an accent is, a) not absolute. You can't have one accent for life.

Rhiannon ELT

Right.

Deepika

Um, you don't have one accent for life. And there is no way you can reduce an accent because it's not something that diminishes. If you want to change it, you change it and by changing it you add another one if anything. You can't physically reduce an accent. And so the word 'reduction' also has a lot of um discriminatory connotations that affect people's self-esteem and those are some of the reasons why I freaking hate the term 'accent reduction.' I don't even know if there was a summary but...!

Rhiannon ELT

There was passion in it - I liked it! Yeah, because the, the term accent reduction is often used - and it's kind of explained in the, in the texts - that it's used as a kind of marketing tool. That they say, "we can reduce your accent" or "we can help you reduce your accent" and this is, in the context that we're discussing it, often sold to non-native English speakers who want to have an accent that sounds more British or more American. Which, in itself, to reduce your accent to British kind of implies that British or American is this kind of zero accent position which is obviously false. Um, but I have seen that it's also sold to people with strong - and I say that with inverted commas - "strong" regional accents. So native speakers who have strong regional accents, and, yeah, the, I agree completely



with you that the whole premise behind it, especially the term, is so problematic.

Deepika

It really is. I think by saying that, first of all - like you said in inverted commas "strong" - a "strong accent"! In comparison to what!? To whose ears!? I think all of those questions nobody asks.

We just assume, um, because we just assume that there is some sort of a standard, and the standard is often British or American, although British and American could mean a number of things. So, by assuming the standard you assign a sort of negative value to the, the accent that you're calling "strong" or "thick" or "foreign" or - foreign to whom!?

Rhiannon ELT

It's not foreign to me!

Deepika

Right!

Rhiannon ELT

So, in one of the articles - and I can't remember now which one it was - but we're speaking to, um, a woman who works in the field, like, she works within Accent Reductionism and it seems to be having a kind of identity crisis about whether or not she should be working in the field. This woman is really kind of hovering between the tension of offering a service of Accent Reductionism that people seem to want and recognizing, as, you know, an expert in the field, that this is something that is perhaps unattainable and I think that's something that, as English teachers, we also kind of have to hover.

Because while in an ideal world, you and I will happily say "what is a thick accent?" "What is a foreign accent?" we both practically understand that there are some accents which do put a lot more strain on the listener. Whether that listener is a native

speaker or perhaps a speaker from another country speaking a different first language, than other accents. And how do you - and I'll, I'll speak to you personally as an English teacher - How do you toe that line between recognizing that there is a legitimate aim of clarity that isn't tied up with this whole, like, "my accent's better than yours" thing.

Deepika

Yeah, yes, yes, and I think that line is very clear

Rhiannon ELT

Okay.

Deepika

As, as, an English teacher I think it's easy not to toe that line. It's easy not to cross that line. It's easy to toe that line by calling it pronunciation.

Rhiannon ELT

Okay.

Deepika

Because there is a very obvious difference between what pronunciation is and what accent is and pronunciation can usually be presented in terms of pronunciation that you have and pronunciation that they will receive. And the 'they' is always changing, so you can change your pronunciation based on the person you're speaking to. I'm speaking to you like this, I'm speaking to the audience like this at this moment because I don't know what nationality they are and I'm trying to be as I like to say "international" but any of the words I choose feel wrong to me at different points in time. I used to say neutral, but I hate that now...

Rhiannon ELT

Yep, that was the word that came to mind and immediately another part of my brain went "Nope That's not right."

Deepika

...Exactly, exactly - which is why I stick to "international" now. But I'm

pretty sure I'll find something wrong with it in a couple of weeks

But I speak to you now like this, but I don't speak like this to my sister, to my parents, to folks at home. Um, I speak in what I might call an 'Indian accent.' I, more often than not, mix in Tamil words, Tamil being my first language. Um, a lot of the time I mix in Hindi words - I also speak Hindi, but not as fluently as my first or second - my first languages which are Tamil and English, but sometimes they just slip in these Hindi words because that's - for some reason they're in the front of my mind. Anyway -

Rhiannon ELT

Yeah.

Deepika

So, you change your pronunciation, and your choice of words for that matter, as well as, um, your tone and intonation and all of that stuff, based on the person you're speaking to and I think all of the other things we have normalized. In the English teaching industry. We often say you have to change the way you speak based on who you're speaking to. You can't speak the same way to the car mechanic as you do to a professor as you do to your dad as you do to your little sister, right? We say that. We talk about intonation. We talk about choice of words. But I don't think we talk about changing your pronunciation often enough, which we do all the time, I think!

Rhiannon ELT

Absolutely.

Deepika

I absolutely love this one clip, I think it's a recent one, um, where Trevor Noah - I'm in love with that man - um talks, he talks about how he's - he's really, really - if anyone listening doesn't - isn't familiar with his work. He is really, really, really good at putting on accents for his stand-up, um, and I think someone in the audience asks him, "How do you do it?" like "how can you switch



between accents so seamlessly?" and he says - it doesn't feel like switching between accents because I've been doing it all my life, uh, growing up in South Africa, um, and then studying in an international school in South Africa, growing up biracial all of that stuff. I speak differently to my mom's mom. I speak, speak differently to my dad's mom. I speak differently to my cousins. I speak differently, I spoke differently to my classmates growing up in school and then, um, he, obviously, he's way more eloquent than I just made him sound.

Um, but yeah, I think, I think this idea of changing your pronunciation and, I'm going to say it - it is changing your accent - has been sort of demonized and sort of taken to a certain extreme by, by looking at "standard" - again quote unquote - "standard" accents,

Rhiannon ELT

Neutral quote unquote.

Deepika

... "neutral", "natural sounding", "native sounding", "near native". All such problematic words. Because we do it all the time otherwise!

Rhiannon ELT

Absolutely and I think it's interesting you brought up Trevor Noah. Because of all the reasons, you know, he said that he was growing up in, being biracial, going to an international school so many really perhaps more explicit than most people have contexts.

Um, I think that - so that's called code switching, jumping between different ways of speaking different accents, different vocabularies etc. It is something that I'm going to go out on a limb and say that we all do.

Deepika

Yep yep.

Yeah, and everybody does it.

Rhiannon ELT

I don't know the statistics but I'm guessing we all do it and yet I think that for the kind of average observer, people who don't do what you and I do and spend our lives thinking about language, um, they maybe don't notice that they do it. And so. And it is also the not noticing it comes I think from a place of privilege. It comes from perhaps having an accent by birth - from birth - that is often considered the "standard" or the "neutral" within your, kind of, language community.

Deepika

Yes.

Rhiannon ELT

Um, yeah. I often think about a scene from the book *Trainspotting* which I've never read in totality, but I've, I've read this scene and in it they're on a train and the main character, who is played by Ewan McGregor in the film, he switches from his, kind of, Edinburgh Leith accent which is a very, sort of, working class, very "local" - quote unquote - accent. He switches to, kind of, a posh Edinburgh accent to talk to the train guard. Through doing that, he is able then to kind of persuade the train guard that - no, they do have tickets but they lost them and blah blah blah. And the narrator of that chapter is his friend who marvels at this wonderful skill that this, his friend has because he can't do that. He doesn't have the skill to code switch into posh Edinburgh and I think that really emphasizes the fact that, while code switching is natural and everybody does it to some extent, being able to do it in a way that really benefits you - and I'm kind of, I don't necessarily like what I'm saying now - is a skill that can be learned and, that, so often when it comes to our learners, the people that we're working with, often pronunciation work is offering them this other option...

Deepika

Exactly!

Rhiannon ELT

...of accents. Like, you've got your accent that works perfectly well with your pals, with your friends, with your, like, mates at work. But you want a different accent for a presentation because I have a different accent. You, before we started recording, I was rehearsing the introduction, and you said "Oh you have a lovely podcast voice" which is slightly different to my normal just chatting voice. So, we want to be able to equip learners with these multiple pronunciations.

Deepika

Exactly. And, and I don't see any harm in calling it "changing your pronunciation to benefit you" and I think - it seemed to me like you had a problem with the word benefit there,...

Rhiannon ELT

Yeah!

Deepika

...but you know that's exactly what you do. Why wouldn't you make your life easier? Right?

Rhiannon ELT

Right, yeah.

Deepika

But that's the line again. You don't have to make your life so easy - and, and it's an illusion that you're making a life easier by trying to sound like a native, because the process to get to a point where you sound like um, an American or, uh, standard American or a standard British speaker. Um, the process is a pain in the neck.

Rhiannon ELT

To say the least.

Deepika

...to say the least.. The destination is also not somewhere that you can stay comfortably and proudly and confidently throughout your life. You are losing so much to gain something that is, at the end of the day, serving the people who are going to look down on you anyway, if they're the



kind of person who would look down on you for something else, right?

If they're going to say that you have a strong accent and therefore you speak bad English, even if you spoke impeccably, exactly like them. They're going to find another reason to hate on you.

Rhiannon ELT

Right. Absolutely.

Deepika

And those are the people you're serving when you say you want to sound like a native.

So why would you do that?

Rhiannon ELT

I'll let you get back to the conversation in just a sec but I wanted to interrupt to let you know that you don't have to just listen to these chats! If you want to join conversations on topics just like this one, I run discussion courses - also called DEEP TALK. They're for Advanced and Proficient users who are looking for a space to learn about and discuss interesting topics. Sign up to my mailing list to find out when the doors open. Back to the show!

Rhiannon ELT

Going back to the point you made about me, not liking the word benefit. It is exactly that - it's that question of "Am I, through, you know, changing my accent - let's imagine I'm a learner - through changing my accent or adding new accents to my repertoire, am I serving a system that intrinsically, kind of, works against me?" And that's something that the, the, um, I've completely forgotten her name but one of the people interviewed in the text is saying she's like, "I justify my business on - well I can't change the system so I'll change you" and, and that to her feels a little bit uncomfortable and that's maybe

where my discomfort comes from as well.

Deepika

Yeah yeah, yes, yes I totally get that and and the thing about that is, while we all want to change the system, it's not changing anytime soon. It's not changing because of just us and what we're trying to do instead is highlighting the fact to our learners, highlighting the fact that they don't necessarily have to completely succumb to the pressures of the system. They can still be themselves. They can still find comfort and confidence and, um, and a sense of ownership of the language while speaking in a way that benefits them, right? And I think, I think, yes I think the line is very, very thin, um between "am I helping you serve the oppressors, or please the oppressors?" or "am I helping you get what you want and move about in your daily life with ease?"

Because at the end of the day language is about access, language is about connection. And language has to be - it's not often, but it has to be - about ease. So, like for example, the, the Russian actress in one of the articles she says um within the first few sentences she gets, uh, commented on her accent. Someone says something about um Russian food. Someone says something about something - well essentially something Russian - and she has to correct them and say, "well I'm not Russian I'm Ukrainian" and that gets brushed aside so essentially they're... Um, what's the word I'm looking for? They're um... flying out of my brain. Anyway, they're, they're, Um, nevermind, I'm not gonna look for the word anymore. It's not nice. What they're doing to her. Ah yeah.

Listeners If you're listening to this, this is this is something that happens to everyone, all proficient speakers, no matter how proficient you are, you forget words. That happens.

Rhiannon ELT

Ah, yeah, yeah, oh it's so frustrating when you can, like, feel the shape of the word. You're like "I know it! I Definitely know it!" and it's gone.

Absolutely I think that's really interesting as well because something you sort of briefly mentioned earlier was that idea of losing things when you - quote unquote - "lose an accent", you lose aspects of your identity and yet what that actress um, is sort of showing is that your accent can sometimes come *with* bits of identity that actually aren't your identity So your accent can bring this extra baggage that you're, like, "I am nothing to do with Russia! I'm Ukrainian!" for example, um. So it's interesting that we talk about accent being part of an identity. And I often say this to my students, I'm like, "you are Spanish! if you speak with a kind of, clear cut RP British accent, then you're going to be hiding this whole part of you!" That, that feels weird to me. Um, and I feel the same about my Spanish, I don't want to sound like a Spanish person, I want to sound like me communicating clearly in Spanish. Um.

Deepika

Exactly yeah.

Rhiannon ELT

And yet the identity that you genuinely bring with an accent is kind of also, kind of, tagged along by. Um.

Deepika

It's baggage, definitely. And I, and I, having said all of this, of course I understand when people say that I want to but that they want to get rid of their accent. It's sad. It breaks my heart. But honestly, unfortunately I get it, and I think in the past couple of years I have sort of made it my mission to try and - I want to say help them understand - but I can't help anyone understand anything until they're willing, so at least highlight, um, this idea that you lose a part of yourself when you want to get rid - 'get rid' is such a strong phrasal verb



– like, get rid of your accent. It's like murder and like bury it in your backyard and...

Sorry too graphic! Sorry! I take it back! No, but, but do you see what I mean? It's so, it's so strong this sentiment that they want, but I get it. Um, yeah for me. So personally, I'm Indian - you already said that um - I don't speak like this when I speak to other Indian friends. Um, and so when they *do* hear me speak like this, say on Instagram or when I'm speaking to someone else and they're around, and they hear me speak like this, they, they do a double take usually and they're like "Wait, where did that come from?"

And in those situations where I have to switch back and forth immediately like when I'm speaking with my mom on the phone but I'm also with a non-Indian friend, um, I feel like I'm leading a double life and I have to convince myself that this is something that people do all the time. I'm helping my - I can't speak like this to my mom and expect her to... so to think that I'm okay in the head, right? She needs to know I'm okay! She needs to understand what I'm saying, and we need to have a real connection and so I speak to her the way I've spoken to her all my life.

Rhiannon ELT
Absolutely.

Deepika
Um, so again I think what both of us essentially are trying to emphasize is that it's a normal process in speaking and - dare I say - owning a language for you to flit back and forth between multiple sets of pronunciations. So, if you want to call it accents, by all means, go ahead.

But at the end of the day. It's like um, Hadar Shemesh, um, another teacher if anyone who doesn't know who that is, she's another teacher and pronunciation coach. She usually uses the metaphor of wearing jackets. Like, you can wear a jacket

and take it off. Um and you can wear another jacket because that suits the mood or the situation better.

Rhiannon ELT
Oh I like that.

Rhiannon ELT
So Deepika, before we kind of draw this conversation to a close, there will be listeners to this podcast, the majority of whom I assume are non-native speakers. They're learning English and maybe they *do* want to work on their pronunciation. What advice do you have for them?

Deepika
I think one of the most important ones that I share with almost everyone who asks this question is to realize that there exist multiple, multiple ways of speaking English, right?

Rhiannon ELT
Right.

Deepika
To have that realization means that to actively seek, um, content with people who speak English in a variety of different accents. Um, and by doing that, you're not only, um, improving your, well, global understanding, you're also training your ear to perceive a variety of different accents so that when, in the, in the wild, in the real world, you encounter someone with an accent that you've never heard before, it's unfamiliar to you, you might even categorize it as - quote unquote – "thick" or "strong", you have the tools to decode it within the first few seconds.

Um and sort of go from there, right, and going from there also involves the skill of, um, having a real conversation, and what I mean by that is having a conversation usually, when English learners or language learners in general think about having a conversation, they think of a clean back and forth: Hi. How are

you? I'm good, thank you. How about you? That sort of stuff. Um. I think the other realization we need to have as language learners, is that conversations are never clean. Like, if you go back and listen to this very episode, you'll see how many times Rhiannon and I overlapped, finished each other's sentences, responded halfway through a sentence, um, went back and corrected our own sentences, forgot words, I forgot a word, right? It's never coming back to me! So, I think it's important to realize what conversation can look like and, um, I think it's cliched, but an important cliché, to say that mistakes will happen, um, and we need to learn how to - such a cliché wow! - embrace your mistakes. But it's so true! You have to do it! You have to learn how to do it! Um, but in the process of conversation, recognize - another piece of recognition - recognize that there's two people having this conversation.

Rhiannon ELT
Yes.

Deepika
A conversation is a two-way street. Not only do you need to make yourself understood which is usually the pressure that language learners face. They're always like "people need to understand me", "I need to sound better", "I need to sound like a native", but the other person, typically, should also be making the effort to understand you.

Rhiannon ELT
Absolutely.

Deepika
And you can help them, kind of, you can guide them to that point where they're making an effort to understand you. You can help them. You can ask questions like "did you understand that?", "do you want me to rephrase?" Um, or read their face and say like "oh it sounds like maybe I wasn't 100% clear, let me try and rephrase that". Uh, you know, things like that. They're important skills to have in having a successful



conversation in English without feeling like your pronunciation is getting in the way.

Rhiannon ELT

Absolutely, and that ties into a piece of advice that one of the interview-interviewees says in the article which is, if you're on the receiving end of - quote unquote - a thick accent.

Deepika

Right.

Rhiannon ELT

When you're asking for a repetition make it about *you* because it is your responsibility as a listener to parse or decode what the other person is saying and it's not only on them. So, say things like "I just want to check I understood, could you repeat that?" instead of "I don't understand you" which makes it all about them.

So yeah, thank you so much for that that final piece of advice and for the rest of the conversation Deepika. It has been super interesting. The texts that you've chosen are great. Um, and thank you very much for coming on the show.

Deepika

Absolutely, thank you so much for having me. I could totally do like part 2, 3, and 4 of this. But I guess we won't and that's okay, but I hope, um, just another word to the listeners, I hope you go back and read the articles again, having listened to this, because there's so much we didn't touch on...

Rhiannon ELT

Absolutely.

Deepika

...especially about how accent bias is racism and that's definitely something that will, um, feed into your perception of accents and accent discrimination and accent modification.

Rhiannon ELT

Oh my gosh I think I, I think I'm inviting you on for season 2 Deepika! We can talk about that!

Deepika

Oh brilliant! Amazing!

Rhiannon ELT

Alright, it's been a pleasure. Bye!

Deepika

As always, bye!

Rhiannon ELT

Thank you so much for listening to this, our very first DEEP TALK conversation - it means so much to me that you have clicked on the episode and that you have stuck around all the way to the end! I hope you found this conversation interesting. I would absolutely love it if you liked and subscribed - but no pressure!

Today's chat was all about language - thanks again to Deepika for choosing such great texts - but future episodes will be about a whole range of topics. This season alone, I'll be talking to a couple more language teachers - to one about history and another about violence against women. I've got another episode coming up about regret and imagination and the human experience of, of wondering "what if...?" I speak as well to a minister in the Church of Scotland about how Coronavirus has impacted the way we interact with death. And those are just the ones I can remember off the top of my head!

If these kinds of topics fascinate you as much as they do me, come along for the ride - I'll be posting an episode every week for season 1. If you fancy getting involved in these kinds of conversations yourself - check out the discussion courses - also called Deep Talk - that I run a couple of times a year. The next one as I record this will be opening towards the end of April 2022. They're for Advanced and Proficient

users of English who want a space to read, watch, learn and talk about a whole host of deep, interesting topics. Sign up for my mailing list, and I'll be sure to let you know when doors open.

That's it for today! Thanks once again to Deepika and to you for listening. Follow @rhiannonelt on Instagram to share your thoughts on accent reduction and to catch all the next episodes.

I've been Rhiannon, this has been Deep Talk. Have a wonderful day!