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Why is Accent Modification Not Provided in Schools?

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Accents are differences in speech production within the same language. These differences could include the way certain sounds are produced, the rate of speech (how quickly someone speaks), and more. Accents are all rule-governed, meaning that they are all grammatically correct in their own way. No one accent is “better” than another, and they are a wonderful part of cultural diversity that shapes communities.



There are variations in speech from region to region, such as the way a person speaks English in New Jersey and the way a person speaks English in Texas. National origin accents are produced by people who are learning a new language. Often, the rules from the speaker’s native language are applied to the new language, hence a non-native speaker will sound different than a native speaker. For example, in Mandarin, the /v/ sound does not exist. Native Mandarin speakers learning English will often substitute in the /f/ sound for /v/, so “van” might sound like the word “fan.”



Since accents follow a logical, predictable set of rules and are a natural part of language, accents are not a disorder. However, many adults elect to pursue accent modification with a speech-language pathologist (SLP) for a number of reasons, such as being more easily understood over the phone or in work settings. An SLP works with a client, based on his or her personal goals, to coach them on how to sound more like the native speaker and to be more easily understood.



Our schools are full of students speaking in different and diverse ways. Many parents of English language learners are concerned about how well their child is acquiring a new language and how the child’s accent is perceived. But can children qualify to receive speech-language services for accent modification?



In short, no they would not. As previously mentioned, accents are not a speech or language disorder; accents are a difference. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), school-based SLPs evaluate and treat speech and language disorders impacting education, not differences. Fortunately, children are sponges when it comes to acquiring the sound patterns of a new language. Children will sound more like native speakers over time without intervention (e.g. speech therapy).

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However, if the child is producing an error on the same sound in both the native and new languages, it could be a sign of an articulation or phonological disorder. For example, the /k/ sound occurs in both Mandarin and English and should be mastered by approximately 3½ years old. If a 5 year-old native Mandarin speaker is substituting /t/ for /k/ at school in English and at home in Mandarin, he or she could possibly have an articulation or phonological disorder. A bilingual Mandarin/English evaluation conducted by an SLP would be used to determine if the child was presenting with a speech-language difference or disorder. Concerns regarding speech-sound errors occurring in both languages should be brought to the attention of the intervention and referral team in the school, as well as the school's SLP.



In addition to sounds, typically developing children acquire the words and grammar of a new language without overtly being taught the new rules. However, to assist new language learners in the classroom, school districts often provide extra support and interventions to students who qualify. These services have different names in different districts, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), among others. Since ESL is an intervention within general education and not special education, services are provided by a specialized teacher, not an SLP. Contact the school's guidance counselor or ESL coordinator regarding these services.



Resources:

American Speech and Hearing Association. (n.d.). Accent Modification. Retrieved from <https://www.asha.org/Practice-Portal/Professional-Issues/Accent-Modification/>

American Speech and Hearing Association. (n.d.). Mandarin Phonemic Inventory. Retrieved from <https://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/practice/multicultural/MandarinPhonemicInventory.pdf>

Columbia West College. (2015, April 19). English as a Second Language Terminology. Retrieved from <https://www.columbiawestcollege.edu/2015/04/19/english-as-a-second-language-terminology/>

Li, Xin Xin, & To, K. S. (2017) A Review of Phonological Development in Mandarin Speaking Children. American Journal of Speech Language Pathology, Vol. 26, pp. 1262-1278. https://pubs.asha.org/doi/pdf/10.1044/2017_AJSLP-16-0061

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