Classes putting an emphasis on reducing foreign accents

By Johnny Diaz, Sun Sentinel

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Excuse me, can you repeat that?

It's a question many non-native English speakers with noticeable accents hear in everyday professional and social situations in South Florida.

So they've turned to accent-reduction classes, which have sprung up in recent years to help them speak English more clearly. Some local instructors say they've been seeing an increase in demand from people who simply want to be better understood.

Por que? In a down economy, clearer English gives non-native speakers an edge in the workplace.

"The main driver is the economy and there is more competition for the jobs that are there," said Victoria Navarrete, an administrator and instructor at the Intensive English Institute at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, where a weekly three-hour accent reduction class begins Jan. 26. Last year the course had more applicants than spots and instructors had to turn folks away.

"People want to make sure that they don't have any reason to be let go and they want to be at the peak of their abilities and be able to express their abilities," she added.

These accent-reduction seekers tend to have strong Spanish, Caribbean or European accents. They're also getting help from Florida International University, Broward College and private coaches. Accent reduction will be a key focus of Broward College's new global language center when it launches this June.

There's also a free monthly gathering called Accent Reduction Miami Meet-Up, which will have its next gathering Sunday at the Wolfsonian Museum in Miami Beach. In all, the group has 523 members from Palm Beach to Miami-Dade counties.

It's not that they are ashamed. They just want to be better understood.

"I am Mexican and I don't want to get rid of my accent," said Humberto Mendoza, a senior director at Deutsche Post DHL Group in Plantation. Although he can read and write well in English, he wanted to improve his English pronunciation for business purposes. "I wanted to pronounce the words properly."
Some students are business professionals who believe their accent may keep them from advancing in their careers. They say they don't want their accents to be distractions during conference calls or business meetings with native English speakers. One study from 2010 in Chicago found that Americans who speak with accents tend to be viewed as less credible than native speakers.

Students at FAU have been business professionals and blue-collar workers, including women who run their own cleaning businesses and Eastern Europeans preparing to work as nannies.

Other local students are Spanish-language TV broadcasters including Maria Celeste-Arraras of Telemundo Media and actors such as Southwest Ranches resident and telenovela heartthrob William Levy.

Some have learned English in their native countries where instructors spoke English with accents and may have mispronounced words.

The Oscar-winning movie "The King's Speech," which chronicled King George VI as he sought speech lessons to help him control his stammer, has also helped raise the awareness of the work of speech coaches.

"It's chic now, accent reduction classes," said Lisa Jeffery, who teaches at FIU and privately through her business, Speech and Accent Academy in Miami. Jeffery, whose clients are from Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade, coached three Israeli soldiers from the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces who were presenting speeches for a fundraiser in Boca Raton last week.

Jeffery said she has seen her business increase more than 10 percent in the past year.

"With the downturn of the economy, people get training when they don't have a job. They improve themselves to get a job."

But Jeffery doesn't like to call what she does accent reduction.

"I don't reduce accents. I teach people a new accent, which is standard American English," said Jeffery, as she sat in her office surrounded by some of her teaching tools. They include "Fred," a giant set of teeth with a rubber tongue, which she uses to show students how the tongue and jaw work for proper English speaking.

One of the more common issues among her students: pronouncing the "schwa" sound found in words such as Chicago. Spanish-speakers usually pronounce the windy city as "Chee-cago."

"In English, we don't touch the roof of the mouth. In English, the tongue goes back. We use the hinges of the jaw more. In Spanish, they don't open their mouth as much."

Her four key tips for students wanting to improve their English: Open your mouth when you speak English, stretch out your vowels, stress the consonants at the end of a word and slow down. "English is spoken slowly."
Although Mendoza, the Plantation executive, still has his Mexican accent, he speaks English more slowly, and emphasizes his vowels and consonants more.

"I am more confident to speak up. I not only speak better, but I understand other people better," he said.

Ligia Houbin, a grief counselor and author from Nicaragua, would delete the endings of words that ended in consonants or she pronounced the letter "n" as "m" in words such as homework.

Houbin met up with Jeffery each week for 90 minute sessions last year. Another issue: She was thinking in Spanish when speaking in English.

"Sometimes when we translate from Spanish to English, we may carry on the way we speak in Spanish."

Now Houbin catches herself when she mispronounces a word. Still, she doesn't want to be completely accentless.

"It's a work in progress. It's not that I want to let go of the accent. I want to improve it."