

PRONUNCIATION FOR PROFESSIONALS: Accentuate the positive

Firm teaches clearer English sounds

BY MARGARITA BAUZA

FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

May 22, 2006

When Xiaoyun Shen's boss asked her to take an accent reduction class, she was a little flustered.

"I didn't know I had a problem," said Shen, a 43-year-old senior scientist at the biotech company **Asterand Inc.**

Shen's arsenal of degrees includes an MD and a master's degree from Chinese universities, a PhD from a British university, and three post-doctorates from universities in Britain, Canada and the United States.

But when it came to communicating, the degrees lost some of their luster.

Colleagues and supervisors asked her to repeat repeatedly and strained to understand her.

At the conclusion of her first week of a 10-week course with the Ann Arbor-based company **Accent Reduction Institute**, Shen realized she had a problem.

"I couldn't do an R or an L -- at all," said Shen, who currently supervises three scientists who do research on human tissue. Before she took the course, the word "heart" sounded like "hat" and "carpool" like "cah-poo."

Asterand Inc. runs a human tissue bank for research on the genetic causes of diseases like cancer and operates a 55-person lab in Detroit and one in Britain, and has 100 employees worldwide. It paid \$1,800 for the 10-week course to teach Shen and her colleague Philip Saywayne Jr., an accountant from Liberia, to soften their accents.

Asterand CEO Randal Charlton, said he heard about the course and didn't hesitate to offer it even though initially he was concerned about hurting his employees' feelings.

"I was a bit worried," Charlton said. "There could be an implied criticism. Good diction is critical. Both of these individuals are very talented and this will help them advance their careers."



Accent Reduction Institute has developed a program that produces results in 28 days. Clients include General Motors and DaimlerChrysler. (ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press)

Improving pronunciation

The Accent Reduction Institute provides on-site language instruction, using the company president and author Judy Ravin's book and software "Lose Your Accent in 28 Days."

Ravin and her team specialize in teaching English pronunciation, comprehension, speaking and presentation skills.

The class is a step beyond courses that teach English as a second language and focuses on teaching tongues, lips and teeth how to form the closest thing to an American sound.

In a recent class, company president and instructor Judy Ravin helped students pronounce the letter R by mimicking the sounds of an angry dog. "ARRR!!!" she yelled and they both growled back.

Ravin's company, which she created in 1999 after leaving her job teaching accent reduction at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, grew slowly in the early years. She made \$8,000 her first year.

But in 2005, with four part-time employees, earnings of \$70,000, 10 corporate clients and 50 individual clients, Ravin sold her company to Ann Arbor-based software developer Menlo Associates for an undisclosed sum.

Nine months later, the reformed company has 12 full and part-time employees, projected earnings of \$500,000, 27 corporate clients and 75 individual clients.

Since the purchase, Accent Reduction Institute has developed a program that promises to get rid of accents in 28 days. The program now has a line of software that has been adopted by more than 30 companies and universities across the country including **General Motors Corp., DaimlerChrysler, Daewoo Heavy Industries America Corporation, Cisco Systems and Federal Mogul.**

Ravin also has contracts with dozens of universities including Michigan State University, the University of Michigan and Wayne State University to certify instructors in teaching accent reduction.

The institute charges \$1,500 to certify teachers using the Ravin method. To enroll in her course, candidates must be a licensed language teacher or a certified speech pathologist.

"It's not about removing the accent," said Ravin. "It's about eliminating a language barrier."

An accent that is too hard to understand often presents a real hurdle in a person's career; holding back a person from promotions, projects or opportunities to lead, Ravin said.

"If people have to keep telling you 'what?,' 'excuse me?,' forget it. You won't get the job or promotion," Ravin said.

Saywayne says the course has helped his job performance.

Like Shen, he has trouble pronouncing the R sound.

"It's improved my confidence," Saywayne said. "People are not asking me 'what?' all the time. I just have to put my point out once."

Contact **MARGARITA BAUZA** at 313-222-6823 or mbauza@freepress.com.

To learn more, visit the Accent Reduction Institute LLC at www.lessaccent.com, call Judy Ravin at 734-665-2915 or email her at judy@lessaccent.com.

Costs vary according to the number of students in the class, student needs and whether the company needs to customize software for use in classes. Costs start at \$200 for a half-day seminar.

- MARGARITA BAUZA



Judy Ravin, president of Ann Arbor-based Accent Reduction Institute, works with Asterand Inc. employees Xiaoyun Shen of Troy, a molecular biology senior scientist from China, and Philip Saywayne of Southfield, a staff accountant from Liberia. (Photos by ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press)

[CLOSE WINDOW](#)

Copyright © 2006 Detroit Free Press Inc.



Philip Saywayne, 31, has to work on his R's, too.

[CLOSE WINDOW](#)

Copyright © 2006 Detroit Free Press Inc.



Xiaoyun Shen, 43, finds R's and L's troublesome.

[CLOSE WINDOW](#)