

Accentuating the positive

English Communications Services helps foreign-born shed accents

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Judy Ravin is breaking down barriers, one business person at a time.

Ravin, a former Eastern Michigan University speech instructor, started English Communications Services LLC three years ago, helping foreign-born workers speak English with little or no accent. The Ann Arbor company now has seven other certified pronunciation and accent reduction specialists working with companies such as Pfizer Inc., General Motors Corp. and Daewoo Heavy Industries America Corp.

"Foreign nationals get very frustrated by people always asking them to repeat themselves," Ravin says. "This lowers their confidence and can make them not want to contribute."

With 21,787 immigrants last year intending to call Michigan their new home — 71 percent more than in 1994 — and an increasingly global business environment, Ravin may have the company perfectly positioned.

Michigan is the 11th most popular state for immigrants, according to a U.S. Department of Homeland Security report issued in October.

Mahmut Akten, a native of Turkey and manager of financial planning and analysis at Holcim U.S. Inc. in Dundee, says English Communications Services quickly nailed down his pronunciation problems.

"It definitely helps your communication with upper management and your oral presentation skills," Akten says.

Akten referred a Brazilian co-worker to English Communications Services. "You can definitely see an improvement in his accent as well as mine," Akten says.

Of the more than 1.06 million people

admitted to the United States last year, 174,968 were for employment-based preferences. The latter figure represents more than a two-fold increase in employment-based immigration since 1995.

English as a Second Language (ESL) training typically takes 100-150 hours. But English Communications Services doesn't particularly focus on grammar and language rules, which most foreign-born professionals already know. Instead, it concentrates on pronunciation problems that vary from language to language.

The company's service — costing \$500 to \$5,000, depending on the size of a group — demands 20-30 hours of class work.

Akten has attended 15 or 16 classes since December 2002. He hasn't been able to attend on a regular weekly basis because of his busy schedule, but he says the program has been great at working around that.

English Communications Services will schedule one-on-one classes in the morning or during lunch for clients. Some classes are one-on-one and the company also offers group training for employers.

English Communications Services also is offering an interactive DVD/workbook that clients can use in conjunction with their personal training, Ravin says.

The training can help produce happier, less frustrated and more confident employees, Ravin says.

"As we break down language barriers, we break down a lot of other barriers as well," she says.



RAVIN

197,537
H-1B petition workers in 2002

174,968
immigrants admitted on the basis of
employment in 2002

29,277
immigrants admitted in 2002 as
executives or managers

33
percent of H-1B petitioners from India

16.4
percent of immigrants admitted
for employment-based preferences
in 2002

12.6
percent of immigrants admitted for
employment-based preferences in 2000

Home, sweet home

Number of immigrants admitted to the U.S. that intended to set up residence in Michigan.

2002 — 21,787
2001 — 21,528
2000 — 16,773
1999 — 13,650
1998 — 13,943
1997 — 14,727
1996 — 17,253
1995 — 14,135
1994 — 12,728

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security,
Office of Immigration Statistics

G.M. Pasfield is a freelance writer. ■