

Business has never been better for English accent trainers in the US.  
Steven Knipp meets one of the teachers on the frontline

## Mind our language

WHILE UNDER BRITISH rule, Hong Kong had the dubious distinction of being one of the few places in the world where not speaking a foreign language fluently was considered a serious social stigma: that language was English.

Ironically, even when Chinese migrate to the west, not speaking English perfectly can seriously affect their careers.

Washington DC has attracted thousands of such immigrants, drawn by the high-paying hi-tech jobs in government and private industry in the nation's capital. Some hail from Hong Kong, others from Taiwan or the mainland. While such newcomers have the technical skills to succeed, their English is rarely perfect and often heavily accented.

That's where American Sharon Heffley comes in. Heffley, who holds a masters degree in speech pathology, had been director of speech and language services for a county health department in Maryland. In 1987, she founded her company, the Accent Modification Centre, which helps people polish their speaking skills.

"This field probably developed with an influx of Asians to the US beginning in the 1970s," she says. Indeed, according to government figures, more than 2.5 million Asian immigrants entered the US in 1980, a five-fold increase since 1960. In 1990, there were nearly 5 million. Heffley says that during the past two decades many well-educated professionals arriving in the US were unable to secure jobs they were technically qualified for due to poor communication skills.

"They often read and wrote English

well when they arrived, but had little opportunity to speak the language," she says. "Or they spoke it with a very different English dialect."

Today, 80 per cent of Heffley's clients hail from Asia, and probably half of those are Chinese, she says. Her clientele are a combination of private individuals and companies which send their staff.

Apart from Asians, Heffley says Latinos make up nearly 15 per cent of her clients, and she's begun to see larger numbers of Russians and Ukrainians. She has even worked with some tongue-tied Americans from Brooklyn, New York, the deep south and the midwest.

But with the opportunities being created by China's entry into the World Trade Organisation and its hosting of the 2008 Olympics, an increasing number of Chinese expatriates could ask for her expertise.

"No one at work said anything about my English," notes Sih Lee, a Guangzhou-born computer executive who attends one of Heffley's classes. But when his technology firm offered to send him to the classes, he thought he had nothing to lose.

"Most of us are in the IT field," says Taiwanese Geider Chen, who is in the same class. "And a lot of time we are talking to each other, to other Chinese, in our native language. But the problem comes when we need to talk to our customers, who are all Americans."

Her softly spoken instructor is highly selective in whom she accepts for her classes. "I do not teach English, so they must have a good foundation in English and must be conversational," Heffley says.

In fact, judging by today's trio of students, their English is excellent. Yet even at their level, American-accented English can be a veritable verbal minefield for non-native speakers. Apart from the confusing words, where cars are parked in "driveways" but are driven on "parkways", there are many bizarre spellings, and then there is the unfamiliar rhythm of speech.

"Visually, English words can often look one way, but actually sound another way," Heffley says. "Sometimes the same word will sound completely different when used for a different meaning. For example, we take a senior citizen to the blood mobile, but first ask them, are they mobile? And many English words have sounds you can't see on the written page,

ers, but to themselves, by taping their conversations on the phone.

She also introduces them to "jazz chants", which by listening to the rising and falling intonations, they can learn the pace of English and how to emphasise word meanings through pitch and tone. Other techniques, used by actors, show them how to project their voices.

Heffley's students are of various ages, both sexes (although there are more men than women), and all are keen to learn. "When a corporate representative calls to discuss enrolling an employee, I always ask if they have discussed this with the employee, and how the employee feels about taking a communication-skills improvement programme," she says.

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which are verbally stretched out longer than they appear on printed pages."

Chinese immigrants are often proficient with English grammar rules, says Heffley, but they frequently fail to add the final consonant endings, such as t, d, s, and z that occur, and this can burden them with heavily accented English.

"Those who attended college here and interact socially with American-born students and those who've had children living here usually have the best skills," she says.

Heffley uses a combination of verbal instructions, using detailed teaching materials which she developed and published herself, along with physiological techniques to guide her students to use the correct tone and pitch when speaking.

"The tongue has hundreds of muscles which are very flexible," Heffley says. "The lips and jaws are not nearly as flexible, so only using them slows the speaker down."

Passing a hand mirror around, Heffley shows each student how words can come out differently when different parts of the tongue or lips are used. Curl your tongue one way, she says, and you sound like the American cartoon duck hunter Elmer Fudd saying: "Be wavy wavy quiet!" which will not impress new clients at a presentation.

Once her students know what needs to be done to change their flawed speech patterns, Heffley reminds them of the importance of listening, not only to oth-



Sharon Heffley instructs students Sin Lee Gi of Guangzhou (left), Scott Chung and Geider Chen, both from Taiwan, on their English pronunciation. PHOTO: STEVEN KNIPP

## PEOPLE

PHOTOS: REUTERS/AFP

### Brando hideaway to be luxury resort

An island in French Polynesia owned by late actor Marlon Brando is due to become a luxury US\$40 million resort. Brando bought the atoll Tetiaroa in 1965 after filming *Mutiny on the Bounty* nearby, BBCi reported.

A 30-bungalow resort called The Brando is due to be opened on the island in 2008 by developer Tahiti Beachcomber.

Brando's ex-business manager Jo Ann Corrales has challenged the plan, saying the actor left part of the island to embattled singer Michael Jackson.

The island's only current inhabitant is Brando's son, Teihotu, one of his children with ex-wife Tarita Teriipia (right with Brando).

Brando "wanted a place where his friends could escape the paparazzi and find some inner peace", said Richard Bailey, chief executive of Tahiti Beachcomber.

"Marlon always felt that the Polynesians, more than anyone else in the world, had found an unhurried and humorous way to go through life," said Bailey, who worked with Brando before his death.

"He always hoped his life could be so uncomplicated, but unfortunately that was not the case."



### Caan files for fourth divorce



Actor James Caan has filed for divorce from his wife of more than nine years.

"I love and respect my wife as a friend and as a mother," Caan

said. "Our goal in life is to continue to be great parents and great friends. Our children are our entire lives and they will remain as such."

Caan (left) and his fourth wife, Linda Stokes, were married on October 7, 1995.

The couple have two children - Jacob, six, and James Jr, nine, according to court documents.

Caan is best known for his role as Sonny Wortzik in 1972's *The Godfather*, which earned him an Academy Award nomination. AP

### Back to school for Sting

British rock singer Sting went back to the classroom this week, assuming the role of a musical mentor for a group of college students.

The one-time school teacher surprised students in a music composition class at the University of Illinois at Chicago, barging in with MTV cameras in tow to speak and jam with them.

The students, who had been told that their regular class was going to be filmed for a promotional video for the university, erupted in cheers as Sting (left) and his band entered through a side door.

He started by playing *Message in a Bottle*, a hit with The Police, the rock trio that he led to fame during the 1970s and 80s. Sting (real name Gordon Sumner) played an electric bass, accompanied by two acoustic guitars and a shaker. He later took questions from the audience, discussing unusual time signatures, his music influences and his composition techniques.

"A blank page terrifies me, that's why I tour so much," Sting said of his own songwriting experience. "The more I figure out about music, the more I realise I haven't a clue." Reuters



### Bollywood royalties put right

French national Achille Forler has purchased the rights to 25,200 Bollywood songs and movies for US\$3 million to ensure the original composers and lyricists get royalties.

"Bollywood doesn't know that such rights exist in the world," Forler said. "There has never been anyone in Bollywood who could monitor the rights of the composers and the lyricists."

His company, Deep Emotions Publishing, now owns some of the biggest hits and critically acclaimed songs and movie titles of Bollywood. Forler gets a portion of the commission he manages to secure for composers and lyricists.

He's already earned top classical singer and composer Shubha Mudgal her due when songs composed by her for the film *Kama Sutra* were played by Canadian composer Michael Danna in *Monsoon Wedding*. Forler went to court and Mudgal was paid royalties of US\$8,000.

"I just didn't know what to do when this case happened," said Mudgal. "After I met Achille I feel I got justice and the money that was due to me."

Forler says Bollywood composers who prefer to take a one-off fee from producers and then fail to track the future use of their material are to blame for the situation. AFP

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