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Loud and Clear

by Lindsey Bryant



Twenty years ago, when Karen Yates was hired to teach English as a Second Language to Ford Motor Company employees in Mexico, she had every reason to be as confident as she was. After all, she had received a bachelor's degree in Spanish from Texas Tech (and later earned a master's in linguistics from UNT). She had even studied abroad in Colombia for a time in college. But upon arriving in Mexico City, her students teased her for her American accent. "You sound like a *gringa*," they told her.

"I never thought about it," says the Dallas native, who began emulating Spanish television as a means of practicing her pronunciation. If it worked for her, she realized, it could work for others as well.

Yates' experience inspired her to found Global English Training, a Dallas-based accent-reduction and ESL company. GET implements a technique called linguistic mimicry, in which clients ape native English-speakers, concentrating on intonation and rhythm—the hardest elements to master, as Yates herself can attest. The company has even used *Seinfeld* episodes as an aid, having students memorize and perform scripts simultaneously with Jerry and Elaine to practice speech and body language.

"You can never make [someone] sound like a native," Yates says, "but you can help them to be better understood."

After just one year, GET has 70 private clients, including Dallas Maverick DJ Mbenga, and puts on eight corporate classes for companies such as Frito-Lay, American Airlines, Celanese, and Johnson & Johnson. Most recently, James O'Malley, a Richardson Catholic church parishioner, formed and funded GET's Jane O'Malley Accent Reduction Program in memory of his late wife after reading about foreign priests struggling with their accents. The program has been a blessing for the Catholic Diocese of Dallas, which has had 12 priests complete the 13-week course thus far. And with her revolutionary program, Yates looks forward to helping even more non-natives—all 313,000 of them living in Dallas, according to census results—understand the benefits to being better understood.