

Cheryl Hall: 'Yada, yada, yada,' just like an American

11:34 PM CDT on Tuesday, June 13, 2006

Who'da thunk it? Turns out, *Seinfeld* is really educational programming.

Dallas linguistics expert Karen Yates uses episodes of the long-reigning TV comedy to teach non-native English speakers how to talk like an American. By that, she means cadence, use of idioms, body and facial language, and thinned-down accents.

"Americans are not trained to hear foreign accents, so the speaker has the responsibility to fix the problem for co-workers, bosses, clients and patients," says the 51-year-old president and owner of Farmers Branch-based Global English Training, who has been teaching the art of Americanized English for more than a decade.

"We nod our heads, give facial expressions and stress words. Asians don't. They're very still and plain-faced. So as listeners, we have to translate without those clues.

"We speak in short phrases. But when you get people from India on the phone, their phrasing is three times as long. We cannot hear in that long of a block. And we can't see their lips move."

Simply put, failure to adopt such language skills impedes careers.

And Americans seem to be getting more intolerant, perhaps the result of frustration with foreign call centers.

That's made Ms. Yates' business blossom.

This year, Ms. Yates will teach people individually or in small groups, charging \$1,300 for seven weeks or \$1,800 for 13 weeks.

Many companies will pick up the tab. Her corporate clients include Frito-Lay Inc., AMI Semiconductor Inc., Johnson & Johnson and J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.

She's currently honing the interviewing skills of Dallas Mavericks center D.J. Mbenga, a French speaker from the Congo.

Ms. Yates also teaches pronunciation to students in Southern Methodist University's English as a second language program and to post-doctorate researchers at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas.

By her measure, there's no teaching tool more instructive than Jerry Seinfeld's chubby, balding best friend, George Costanza or his often-angry ex-girlfriend Elaine Benes.

Both speak fast, use exaggerated gestures and condense words like "hafta," "wouldja," "couldja" and "whaddaya," Ms. Yates says.

"George is always on the verge of a nervous breakdown. 'Birthdays! Christmas! It's enough gifts already,' " she parrots, flailing her arms.

Female students become Elaine.

"In one clip, she's trying to get Newman to do something for her, so she says: 'Can you do me this one lit-tle fa- vor, New-mie?' " Ms. Yates says, drawing out the last three words, leaning forward and making a kissy-face.

"I videotape them as they exactly match everything that the actor does. This way they can feel from the body what it's like to speak English."

She learned firsthand that there is more to language than mastering words.

In 1986, she was teaching English at a Ford Motor Co. assembly plant in Mexico, when an engineer pulled her aside and said, "Karen, when you speak Spanish, you sound like *una gringa*."

"Until that moment, I assumed I had good pronunciation," she recalls.

"In my state of panic, I started listening to the TV, radio and imitating the announcers."

In the mid-90s, she switched from ESL to pronunciation – but there wasn't anything particularly scientific to her approach.

So she went to back to school for her master's degree in linguistics from the University of North Texas.

As part of her thesis, she developed what she calls "linguistic mimicry," picked *Seinfeld* as her modus operandi and tested it at Brookhaven Community College. *Seinfeld* beat out the repeat-after-me language lab hands down.

Today, her clients are predominantly Asian male engineers, physicians and dentists.

Neil Barman, a 35-year-old petroleum engineer at Matador Resources Co., found that speaking English with a Bengali accent had him constantly repeating and spelling words.

He was grateful when management offered Ms. Yates' help.

"I didn't know how to connect words and change the rhythm up and down," says Mr. Barman, who admits that imitating George often had him tongue-tied.

But with success has come confidence, he says, especially when he's asked to give presentations to his company's board of directors.

Erick Menegazzo, a 33-year-old endodontist, spoke fluent English but with a Guatemalan Spanish flavor. For example, so he'd ask patients to take "a deep breat," leaving off the final "h."

"My assistant always made fun of *scissors* because I was saying it like *Caesar's*," Dr. Menegazzo says. "I don't have to repeat myself as much, especially over the phone. It also helps me with my presentations to other doctors at study clubs."

Ms. Yates has students practice with mirrors to see how those unfamiliar sounds are formed.

"I'm like a tennis coach. I help them with their muscles," she says. "Students get really sore from sticking out their tongues for 'th.' They complain that their tongues are less long than ours.

"I assure them theirs are long enough."

E-mail chall@dallasnews.com
