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SAN DIEGO VOICE & ACCENT

A CASE STUDY

Miguel’s Story

When Miguel García moved to California from Tijuana, Mexico, he was very self-conscious about his ability to communicate in English. He had been studying the language since he was 13 years old but felt that he hadn’t been given the tools to communicate clearly with other people.

His lack of confidence in his new language led to a growing sense of disconnection from those around him. “I always isolated myself from people because I thought, oh, people don’t understand me. I’m just going to stay away from people.”

Miguel’s work in restaurants made avoiding interaction impossible in the long run. He decided he needed to put more effort into improving his English fluency. It was around this time that he came across the San Diego Voice and Accent channel on YouTube.

Video Lessons

The first video he found was “Master the American Accent: The Rule of Three.” In that video, Julie Cunningham explains situations in which the middle letter of a three-consonant combination will become silent. A light bulb went off in his head. In all of his years of studying and speaking English, he had been completely unaware of this simple tool for sounding more natural while speaking.

PROBLEM

A lack of confidence in his accent and fluency when speaking English and a resulting feeling of isolation.

SOLUTION

One-on-one sessions focusing on pronunciation, intonation, stress, and pitch.

OUTCOME

Increased confidence and ability to communicate in English effectively and fluently, allowing him to connect with people in his second language.

Julie Cunningham

San Diego Voice and Accent

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After watching several other videos within the channel, Miguel had learned a lot, but he still felt like he needed more. One part of speech he especially struggled with was following the contraction 'I'd' (short for 'I would' or 'I had') with a word that starts with a consonant, as in 'I'd like' or 'I'd do.' He reached out to Julie and asked her about it. In response, Julie created a new video for her channel that discusses that combination, which is difficult for many non-native speakers.

That was when Miguel decided he needed to have some one-on-one sessions with Julie to really level-up his skills.

Personalized Support

Over the course of a series of sessions, Miguel and Julie worked together on intonation, stress, pitch, and volume, which he says is “a part of the language that I was not aware of. I was just saying the words as they came out.”

For example, in Miguel's native Spanish, the rules of which syllables within a word are stressed are simple and consistent. When there is an exception to the rule, an accent mark is used to show where the stress should be. English doesn't have that kind of consistency or indicators, so he realized that he was often stressing the wrong syllable, which could affect other people's perception of his fluency.

Another tool that Miguel was given during his sessions was vocal placement exercises that helped him form speech in the right part of his mouth.

Spanish is generally formed near the front of a person's mouth. English is formed more toward the back of the mouth, a transition he was able to make through the exercises he was given.

Throughout the sessions, Miguel felt that Julie was supportive and helpful. He appreciated that she was open to working with his specific needs instead of just following a lesson plan. “She was always willing to accept any questions that I would have, whatever it was. She was very, very open about it. That really made a big difference.”

Outcome

Since completing his one-on-one sessions, Miguel feels a new-found confidence in his English-speaking skills. He still has a mild accent, but the cadence and intonation of his speech are more natural and fluent than ever before.

“Sometimes when I speak and I see people's reaction to what I'm saying or the things I'm describing,” Miguel says, “if people get to nod and agree with me, I know I'm doing the right thing. I'm able to express myself clearly and people understand, and that's a wonderful thing.”

The tools, exercises, and information he received has led him to a new place in his communication in English. “I'm doing much better today, thanks to her.”