

Episode 46: An Interview with an SLP Who Specializes in Accent Modification-Part 2 (SLP Spotlight)

Meet Robert (Bob) McKinney, an SLP who works primarily with bilingual clients and specializes in accent management. Bob has lived in six countries, learned six different languages, and worked with clients from more than 80 nations. He shares how his background in ESL and years spent traveling led him to the field of speech-language pathology. He also discusses his book, "Here's How to Do Accent Modification: A Manual for Speech-Language Pathologists," and a number of other resources SLPs interested in accent modification can take advantage of.

Discussion & Reflection Questions

1. Tell us about your background and how you discovered the field of speech-language pathology.
2. You wrote a book on the subject of accent modification, entitled "Here's How to Do Accent Modification: A Manual for Speech-Language Pathologists." Can you talk about that a bit?
3. How long did it take you to publish your book? And when did you publish it?
4. What is linguistic discrimination? And what is the SLP's role in effectively ameliorating this with accent-modification clients?
5. What advice do you have for the student or the new speech pathologist who's going to be working with an accent-modification client? Where do you start?
6. Tell us about CORSPAN and why it's such a great resource for SLPs.
7. Tell us about the Accent Modification Facebook group you're part of.
8. What are some other resources SLPs can utilize to learn about accent modification?
9. Do you have any success stories that you can share with us?

Quote Of The Conversation

"SLPs, that's the best approach. It's really, don't focus on the accent. We love the accent. We want to support that. Focus on intelligibility and naturalness, and then, keep an eye on these suprasegmentals because those are huge."

-Robert (Bob) McKinney, M.A., CCC-SLP

Robert (Bob) McKinney, M.A., CCC-SLP

Lead SLP at the Sweetwater Union High School District



Robert (Bob) McKinney, M.A., CCC-SLP holds M.A.s in Communicative Disorders, International Relations, and Education. He speaks six languages, has lived in six countries, and has worked with clients from over eighty nations. He currently works with predominantly bilingual students as the lead SLP at the Sweetwater Union High School District. At San Diego State University, he teaches

undergraduate phonetics and supervises graduate students in the Accent and Communication Training Program. Bob had a 26-year career teaching English as a second language, including seventeen years at UCSD's English Language Institute.

In 2019, he published "Here's How to Do Accent Modification: A Manual for Speech-Language Pathologists." He has served on the board of directors of the California Speech Language Hearing Association, and he is currently the president of the Corporate Speech Pathology Network (CORSPAN). He and his SLP wife Szilvia are raising their 12-year-old son as a bilingual speaker of English and Hungarian.

Keep the Conversation Going

Guest Speaker Information

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Book: [“Here’s How to Do Accent
Modification: A Manual for
Speech-Language Pathologists”](#)

CORSPAN: www.corspan.org

Facebook Group: [SLPs in Accent
Modification](#)



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Mattie Murrey

Hello, and welcome to The Missing Link for SLPs podcast. I'm glad you're here. Today's episode is part of the SLP Spotlight Series, where I talk with SLPs in a variety of SLP positions and settings, doing things that we knew SLPs did, but also working in areas that we've never thought or heard of SLPs working in. It is amazing the opportunities these SLPs have taken and where their careers have gone. This is storytelling time!

PART 2

Mattie Murrey

Welcome to part two of Bob McKinney's interview. I did not expect part one to go for so long, and I finally had to just hold up a timeout sign to Bob. And I said, "We're going to split this up because I don't want to shorten what you have to say." In fact, Bob is going to come back on for episode part three and part four for us. But this is part two of the one night where he and I just sat and talked for a long time. So, welcome to part two with Mr. Bob McKinney, author of "Here's How to Do Accent Modification: A Manual for Speech-Language Pathologists." Sit back and enjoy.

Mattie Murrey

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Mattie Murrey

And we are back, picking up with Bob McKinney. We just have this great conversation going about accent modification. And we are just going to pick right back up, as Bob said, with question number five, which is?

Bob McKinney

Well, this was about the advice for best mindset and approach. And I was glad that we could talk about this because I think this will help explain some of the misunderstandings about what we actually do. And just to start off — and I know we've talked about this — that idea of cultural humility and client-centered approach is extremely important to us. But in terms of what we actually do, a lot of the great research in this field comes from the ESL world. And it was, a lot of it, done in the '90s by during and Monroe. And they've written a lot of books and articles about this. But they were the first ones, I think, who, really, they were pioneers because they were able to... They tried to tease out different aspects of someone who's a non-native speaker. And it was just amazing work. But what they really tried to do first is isolate the accentedness, they called it, which is just the accent itself. And I think that's beautiful. Because that just tells you that the part about just sounding different — and as much as you can separate that out for



effective communication — doesn't need to be touched at all, because it's beautiful and who cares? Right? We love it.

Mattie Murrey

Right.

Bob McKinney

So, that's the kind of sad part about it is, it's a branding issue. Because we call ourselves accent modification, but to be honest, we really don't work on accent ever. So, we try to isolate that part. You know, somebody is from Ireland. They sound like they're from Ireland. You know they're not from San Diego, but they're from Ireland, so who cares? Right? So, we try to separate that part out. And I think if we could explain that to our peers even more, it would take a lot of these issues off the table.

But the next thing they want to isolate is the obvious one, which is intelligibility. And that's usually, for most SLPs, the huge thing that you're focused on. Because to communicate, we know you have to be intelligible. So, that goes to everything we do. If you want to share your ideas, you have to be intelligible. You have to say something, and other people have to understand it.

They added a third thing, which they called comprehensibility. And, for them, that sometimes is called ease of understanding, but it's just sort of like, how hard is it for you to understand someone even if they're intelligible? Now, I personally think that area could be redrawn a little bit. So, in my book, I put that as naturalness. Because I think SLPs are also good at that, which is... Naturalness, to me, means that... Let's separate that out from intelligibility. I can understand exactly what somebody said, but they said it so differently from the way I'm used to and different patterns, that I focus a lot on how they were saying it versus what they were saying. So, this is the idea of just speaking naturally versus the intelligibility. And I think that SLPs have a huge bias towards intelligibility and accuracy because we mostly work with native speakers. We don't work on naturalness as much. You know, sometimes you do, maybe with clients who stutter or alaryngeal speech or certain areas where that's going to come up. But, normally, we're focused on, "Hey, can you get this sound accurate? Good, you're good to go." Versus, with our accent clients, that's not enough to be accurate. So, I really focused on, I call it clear and natural, that you have people who have to speak intelligently and then naturally.

Bob McKinney

The other thing is, we need to focus on segmentals and suprasegmentals. Because the SLP world focuses very heavily on segmentals. You know, you think about the kids and you're working on a certain phoneme. They're working on their S, or they're working on their R. And a lot of SLPs are not really trained in some of these suprasegmental features of English, like dysprosody. Or intonation, we like to call it, too. The rates. The phrasing. Linking. These are not things that are taught in our undergraduate programs, or even in grad school. Because it doesn't play as big of a role with our clients. In the ESL world, which is where I started, it's huge over there. So, when I did teacher training, which is over 30 years ago — I was in Budapest —



right away, they were telling us, okay, these are the suprasegmentals. This is what works. And when I went to grad school, it never came up once, I don't think. Or rarely. So, it's just interesting to see that the ESL world kind of had that figured out many, many years ago. I mean, it's going back to the '40s, really. So, I think SLPs, that's the best approach. It's really, don't focus on the accent. We love the accent. We want to support that. Focus on intelligibility and naturalness, and then, keep an eye on these suprasegmentals because those are huge.

Mattie Murrey

Very good.

Bob McKinney

That intonation is huge. You know, some of these things play a major role in communication.

Mattie Murrey

It is huge. And also, I know when we work with accent mods, we also work with just some of the idioms and mannerisms and gestures.

Bob McKinney

Absolutely. Yes. Yes. Facial expressions. Gestures. That's a big part of it, too.

Mattie Murrey

So, next question. Number six. What words of advice do you have for the student or the new speech pathologist who's going to be working with an accent mod? Where do you start?

Bob McKinney

Well, I think you do want to dust off your phonetics book — or if you're a student, you probably have it available somewhere nearby. Maybe you could read it for the first time. Just kidding. But you do want to make sure you're up to date on your phonetics because that's the most relevant course that you can take. And then you want to fill in the gaps. And a lot of the gaps are in terms of the vowels. Because you probably studied the vowels, but you need to be up to speed on that. And then the suprasegmentals, and I talked about that a little bit. So, really, bridging that gap so that you understand some of the things. And you can get a lot of materials. And I'll talk about some of that, too. You know, my book, I hope, is a good way to bridge the gap.

And then maybe a little bit of grammar, too. Because I think people imagine, as a native speaker, you think, "Oh, well, my grammar is perfect because I'm perfect in English." But that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about these things that you learned as a two year old that you can't explain to somebody that's really challenged. So, those are the things that those ESL people kind of have a better grasp of. Because they're, they're used to somebody asking some questions. You know, "Why did you say, 'I enjoy skiing, but I decided to ski' and you can't say, 'I decided skiing?'" And it'll catch my clinicians off guard, because they'll think, "Uh, I don't know." Because we don't learn that stuff in school. That's the internal part of the language that we learned as kids. So, some of that you do want to brush up on. And then get your



resources. I hope that my book is good for that because that was what it was designed for. Again, I know there are training programs out there.

Mattie Murrey

What's the name of your book again?

Bob McKinney

"Here's How to Do Accent Modification" from Plural Publishing. There are also a lot of training programs out there. But again, for students, you know... And I actually did one as a student, but I didn't feel like it was worth it, and it was a lot of money, so I would say no. And these programs can be pretty expensive. They're very good often, but you know, get a book and you'll be fine. And then, I would say, if you're starting out in the field, maybe a new SLP, just start testing the waters and asking around and see what you can come up with. And maybe start a little side practice and do some marketing. And get involved in some organizations. I'd like to talk at some point about CORSPAN later, but there are a lot of organizations that will kind of get you started on that. And just test it out.

Mattie Murrey

Tell us about CORSPAN right now. Because that's a great resource.

Bob McKinney

Absolutely. Yeah. So, CORSPAN is the Corporate Speech Pathology Network, and I didn't know much about it. I mean, if you probably asked me five years ago, I would have said, "I don't know what that is." But when I was doing my book, I was looking at resources. I wanted to have part of my book be, where do you go next and where you can get more knowledge. And so, I reached out to a lot of agencies and organizations. And that was one that I really connected with right away because they got right back to me. We had some Zoom meetings, and they just had such great energy. And now, the people that I connected with through CORSPAN are now my close friends, really, and colleagues. And then I sort of, just by being involved, I ended up becoming the president of it. So, now I'm president. I started two weeks ago. And I'm not a private practitioner, and I told them that. They know that. But I feel like it was a good fit because I do feel like we need to advocate. And I love the professional development. It's a community. So, I'm not as up to date on what prices to charge or how to market because I don't do that. I try to listen. But I still feel like we, as a community, work a bit. So, a little more background on it: We only take people who have their Cs or an equivalent. So, we're international. We have people in Australia, Canada. We've got several countries, Portugal. So, probably like seven or eight different countries that we represent. But you have to have your Cs. And we do like people to have a little bit of experience. I mean, I think if you just got your Cs, you're welcome, but, you know, maybe get out there and try a little bit. But everybody's welcome. Once you get your Cs, look us up. Because it's a nice little networking thing, and then we do a lot of professional development.

Mattie Murrey



How do you spell CORSPAN?

Bob McKinney

Oh, yes. C-O-R-S-P-A-N.

Mattie Murrey

No E. S-P-A-N. What does it stand for again?

Bob McKinney

The Corporate Speech Pathology Network.

Mattie Murrey

And the website? Support?

Bob McKinney

Yeah. So, corspan.org.

Mattie Murrey

Community. Everything.

Bob McKinney

Yeah. And we have a directory. So, that's also a nice marketing thing because it's searchable through Google. Our names come up. You just fill out a profile. So, you can get clients through it. But I think most people recognize the value in the community that we've created because we're constantly talking about these things. We're talking about accent. We're talking about presentation skills. We're talking about transgender voice. We're talking about anything that anyone who's in a workplace might need to improve their communication.

Mattie Murrey

Very, very needed resource. Tell us about the Facebook group, please.

Bob McKinney

Oh, yeah. Right. That's right. And then we've got the "SLPs in Accent Modification" Facebook group because that's run by Paula Gallay right now. And that's just an amazing community. There are over 3,000 members on there now. I was actually on there typing away this morning because there were some interesting discussions going on today. Students are welcome on there. And you just have to be an SLP, or in a program and doing accent modification. That's really it. Because they just wanted to have a separate space from the ESL people. Because in the old days, I guess, people would argue who's better at it and there was no need for that. We need our own little community. But it's very open, as far as, you know... You don't have to have your Cs for that. You just have to be a student and you're in the field and all that. So, it's a great resource. And people ask questions. And people get contacts. And as a provider, you can advertise on there, too.



Mattie Murrey

I love the resources you share. We've got your book, which is "How to Do Accent Modification." We have CORSPAN, which is the community. We have the Facebook. This podcast. What are some other resources?

Bob McKinney

Well, I think also that I have that sheet, and so, people are free to download that because I really didn't put a lot of the more expensive courses in there. And people can find those ones. But I put really lower-cost things on there from the ESL world that people can use with their clients. And then, we do have some professional development. I gave a talk, just about a year ago, for speechpathology.com, which is also a wonderful organization.

Mattie Murrey

I've spoken for them.

Bob McKinney

What was yours on?

Mattie Murrey

Clinical fellowship. Supervision. I've got some more topics coming up. I've got a really fun one coming up called "SLP at the Improv." It's how to have those really natural conversations that are just crucial to say what you want to say.

Bob McKinney

Yeah. Yeah, it's a great organization. I've been a big-time fan. Before I talked with them, I always subscribed every year. It's just a great place.

Mattie Murrey

You're going to give us a download with courses and other resources, you said?

Bob McKinney

Yeah, I think I sent you that. So, you should be able to give that. And it's got the links to everything on there.

Mattie Murrey

All that will be there in the show notes. Wonderful. Final question: So, I know you have tons of stories, and we love, love, love stories on this site. To me, that's one of the things that keeps me going. It's the stories that we all share with one another. And it's that language. Because we all have the ability to write the stories that we want to write, or help the clients write the stories they want to write. Do you have any stories you can share with us?

Bob McKinney

Yeah, I think I do. I do have a couple. And when I was writing the book — and it brings back memories of working with Plural Publishing — I told them, I'd love to have these little insets in



there, where we could have clients talking about it. And we could have students talking about it. And we could have practitioners talking about it. So, we really had all three of those covered. And they're peppered throughout the book. So, it's just people that I knew and clients. And so, we all have tons of stories, and they're all amazing. A couple of the ones that come to mind are some of the non-native clients that we've had, and especially the ones in our field. Because I know I'm a strong advocate for the non-natives in our field. And I know how challenging it is. And I put that in my book because you can imagine. I mean, it's so burdensome and it's so challenging to get through these very intense graduate programs and the undergrad programs. And then, if you've got another layer on top, with being a non native speaker, it's hard for me to even imagine it.

So, I think of a couple of students that have come to mind over the years. And a couple of them are in the book. But one of them was one of my undergrad students. She was from China and came as an exchange student. And to be honest, I don't think they were excited about having her in the class at first because she was an exchange student. She didn't quite go through the regular things. Whatever the story was, she stayed in and she was amazing. She was still not sure about differentiating some of the phonemes coming in. And yet, she was like my top student in the class. She was just so sharp. And we're good friends now, and we have been for a while. She applied to graduate school and didn't get into a couple of schools that surprised me, that she didn't get in. But she got into — and I won't name school names for this, but let's just say it was in the top five — but she got into a school that was in the top five U.S.-ranked speech-pathology programs.

So, I thought, well, there's my Cinderella story, right? Non-native gets into a graduate program. Everything's great. Well, it wasn't such smooth sailing. When she was doing her clinical during her first semester of clinic, her supervisors felt that she was having problems with intelligibility, with some other issues. The clients didn't always understand her, maybe the confidence level. And so, she called me up, and I knew it couldn't be good because she was calling me around Thanksgiving. And I just, I had a feeling. So we talked. And she said, "Well, they told me that I just need to get some support and take some time off." And this and that. And, you know, I'm thinking with all these issues going on now, where there's almost a drive to keep SLPs out of this area. And I think, wow, these are the times where you really need SLPs to get in there and say, "Okay, is that really the issue? And what can we do? And maybe we can provide her some support." So, we did. We did some accent modification with her. And it was helpful. And she did graduate. And she's got her Cs. So, I do feel that, you know, we were there to advocate. I mean, we were ready to communicate with some of her people at her university and tell her what's going on. And to also keep an eye out and to make sure they weren't doing something inappropriate — that they weren't just judging too harshly because she was a non-native. So, I think about her.

Bob McKinney

I think of another wonderful, wonderful, talented clinician, who was also my former undergrad student, and was very shy as an undergrad. And I remember on the discussion boards, reading



her posts and thinking, "Oh my gosh, she's so eloquent. I don't even know who she is." And I have taught large classes. But I went up to her and said, "Hey, how come I never hear you in class? I don't know who you are." And she was extremely shy as a non-native speaker. And she didn't have the confidence. We had her in our program. We did some accent modification. She was at a very high level. I wouldn't have referred her for it, but she felt that she wanted to have it for her confidence. And she ended up... The reason I think this is such a successful story is because, when she got into grad school in our program, we put her back on the other side of the table. And we had her as a clinician doing accent modification, which was wonderful. And so, it was great to see her. She felt like she improved her confidence so much, and then she was able to get out there and really feel good about the way she communicated.

So, you know, it happens all the time. A lot of us hear stories where a student is struggling because it's so challenging as a non-native. And we do a lot of consultation, or sometimes, we do provide accent modification services. I just think that those students would be really struggling... If our programs, if they stigmatize what we do, then I think everybody's going to think, "Well, what do we do? What do we do?" And we're there to say, "Well, we are experts. We know what it's like. We know what it means. We know what's important for communication, and we can work and help out and support these students." Because we all know, we want more non-natives of every language. Every language. You know, I tell my students, because I think there's also a misconception that it's just Spanish because that's such a huge demographic. And Spanish is extremely important, obviously, in this country. But every language is important. And you're going to find a client — no matter what language you speak — you will be called, and you'll be so needed one day. Because someone's going to get you in there to work with that client speaking that language, and you're going to save the day. And also, just having that understanding, that is such an important background for all of our students. I wish everybody spoke another language.

And that's another good point to end on, I guess, is that it's never too late. You know, I really started getting into languages when I was really older, you know, in college, really. And then, languages that I use every day now, like Spanish, I learned in my 30s. And you can learn a language at any age. So, I encourage all our SLPs who are not so sure, and they may be thinking, you know, "Is it too late?" Give it a go. Give it a go. You can do it.

Mattie Murrey

You are truly inspirational. This has been a treat. This has been a treat working with you today and talking with you and having these conversations. I look forward to seeing you next time. We're going to talk about speech pathology in the high school setting.

Bob McKinney

Absolutely. That sounds good. Or bilingual anything.

Mattie Murrey

Bilingual. And then I would love to tap into traveling SLPs.



Bob McKinney

Oh, that too. Okay. Let's do it.

Mattie Murrey

Alright. More to come.

