

The Education Academy

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

# Say it Right

Normalising the pronunciation of non-English sounding names

# What is the issue/ problem this resource will help to address? Context setting

## Why are Names Important?

The Say It Right initiative was introduced by the Student Opportunities Coordinator Kaozara Oyalowo at De Montfort University SU. The purpose of the initiative is to normalise the pronunciation of non-English sounding names. Names continue to be an important reflection of different cultures around the globe not only for the individuals but for their families also. Different cultures have their own way of choosing names based on faith, a family member, weather or even historical events and the family's wish for what the child will be when they grow older. For example, the Yoruba people of West Africa believe that names have an influence in shaping a child's social attitude and behaviour, therefore parents are encouraged to give names that are respectable (Balogun and Fasanu, 2019).

## The issue

Despite the beauty and richness of some of these practises, name discrimination continues to play a major role for people of colour regarding employment, job applications and university applications. Research by the BBC in 2018 showed that on average different ethnic groups are sending in 80% more job applications than their white counterparts because of their name. There was a level of unconscious bias happening where applicants were being discriminated against because of their name.

To understand why this happens continues to be a problem. In today's workplace, education system and beyond, it is important to understand the history of European colonisers defiling and

suppressing African and other identities. Often staff and students with non-English names face microaggressive behaviour such as people asking to shorten their names or call them by a nickname. They may experience a constant butchering of their name or even dismissiveness, despite seeing other white counterparts with non-English sounding names pronounced correctly and with precision (Phillips, 2020). This is an experience that individuals endure from primary school all the way into the job world.

This discriminatory practise is called linguicism. Linguicism or linguistic discrimination is defined as unfair treatment which is based on use of language and characteristics of speech, including first language, accent, size of vocabulary (whether the speaker uses complex and varied words), modality, and syntax (Nordquist, 2017). This includes discrimination based on someone's name.

Name discrimination and stigmatisation are extensions of a racist society (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Fitzpatrick (2020) mentioned that, during colonialism and slavery, European colonisers attempted to suppress and erase the collective African identity by leaving people nameless or renamed people. This was a way to create inferiority amongst the people and impart shame within the African community. Today, we see migrants and immigrants alike adopting English names for themselves and their children in order to decrease the subjugation they may face i.e. job prospect or mockery in the western world. Furthermore, a significant number of non-English sounding names are translated or spelt using the English alphabet by individuals.

## At university level

As mentioned earlier, linguicism can influence job prospects but also university applications. In 2017, UCAS proposed British universities to enforce name-blind applications to reduce the level of discrimination faced by students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, in the following year, UCAS was criticized as its system led to black students being 22 times more likely for their application to be flagged as fraudulent.

Furthermore, when it comes to marking, naming discrimination remains a threat. Chowdhury et al (2020) observed in Australia that students with Chinese names are less likely to receive mark above a grading threshold.

## How should this resource be used and by whom?

This resource should be used by both student and staff alike. As a HE institution that fosters an inclusive environment of openness and welcomeness, it is important that we actively encourage the people around us to take care when pronouncing names unfamiliar to us.

## How to address this issue?

At the minimum level, we must respect people's names and make a conscious effort to say them correctly. Beyond university and pre university,

there is still work to be done to ensure naming discrimination does not affect people's job prospects but by understanding and respecting people's names and thereby we can start to create an accepting and less bias environment.

Although names may sound funny or unfamiliar in English, however, it is essential to remember that these names may have a significant meaning in another language. Students or staff may feel embarrassed to share their names because of fear of dismissal or others making fun of their names. Students may shorten or adopt a nickname to avoid standing out.

We acknowledge that students with certain disabilities may struggle in pronouncing certain sounds and words, this is not to alienate those students and staff. Finally, we also acknowledge that some sounds from other languages will not exist in the English language. There are different ways to overcome this; there may be English equivalents and when there are none, we must sound the name as close to the original sound as possible. More times than not, most students and staff with names with no equivalent in English are aware of this and may offer alternative means of saying the name. However, it is their choice to offer an alternative.

## 4 practical steps to address this issue:

1. **What you shouldn't say: "I'm never going to remember that", "do you have something shorter for that?" "Can I call you \_\_\_\_\_ instead?" "What is your real name?".** These kinds of statements can make staff or students feel dismissed or not heard. Asking to call someone another name other than the one they introduced themselves with has strong echoes rooted in colonial practise of renaming people. It can also be considered as an example microaggressive behaviour.

Additionally, some students particularly from China or other East Asian background may adopt English names, thus it is not our place to question or uncover what their 'real name' might or might not be. We must also be conscious not to deadname students or staff even if we knew them with a previous name. Deadnaming is using the name a transgender person was given at birth but no longer uses upon transitioning (Merriam-Webster, 2022).



2. **What you shouldn't do: tapping the person, pointing, replacing their name.** Although certain situations arise where tapping is required, this should not replace the basic formalities of saying or asking how to say someone's name.
3. **What you should say: "Nice to meet you \_\_\_\_\_", I really want to make sure I say your name correctly, can you teach me?" Forgive me, could you remind me..."** It is important for staff and students to practise saying people's names especially if it's something they struggle saying, it gives the other person a chance to correct them.
4. **What you should do: Double check name spelling, correct other people, ask for accents, and tone markers.** It is important to double check spelling especially when writing emails. We should take extra care to write names the way it is spelled to us or if we struggle to pronounce names, writing down the way it sounds phonetically is a great to learn their correct pronunciation.

## References

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