

They say a name like mine can hold you back in life, but I will never change it

## Level 2: Intermediate

### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What does your name mean? Do you know where it comes from or why it was chosen for you?
- Has anyone ever had trouble saying your name? How did it make you or others feel?
- Do you think a person's name can affect their chances in life? Why or why not?

### 2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then use the words to complete the definitions.

anglicise                      gazed at                      prejudice  
audition                      heritage                      proud of  
conversation starter                      mispronounce  
familiar                      negative impact

1. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, you have experience of it or understand it well.
2. When you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you say it incorrectly.
3. A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ is a short performance by an actor, singer or dancer to show their ability to get a part in a show.
4. When something has a(n) \_\_\_\_\_, it causes harm or damage.
5. A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ is a question, statement or topic that is interesting and starts a discussion.
6. To be \_\_\_\_\_ something means that you are pleased about something that you or someone else has achieved.
7. To be \_\_\_\_\_ means that something or someone is looked at for some time with interest or love.
8. The traditions, beliefs and history of a group of people are called their \_\_\_\_\_.
9. When you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you make it more English in sound or character.

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10. An unfair or negative opinion that is formed without much thought is called \_\_\_\_\_.

**b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.**

1. Spain has an important cultural \_\_\_\_\_, which includes flamenco music and dance.
2. People sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ city names to make them easier for English speakers to pronounce.
3. Martha was nervous before her \_\_\_\_\_ for a role in the show.
4. My name's Siobhán, but it's very common for people to \_\_\_\_\_ it. The correct way to say it is *shi-vawn*.
5. Please tell your manager if you experience any kind of \_\_\_\_\_ or discrimination at work.
6. The couple \_\_\_\_\_ their baby boy with love.
7. Smoking and vaping can both have a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ effect on a person's health.
8. I'm very \_\_\_\_\_ my daughter for being so kind to others.
9. London feels \_\_\_\_\_ to me because I lived there when I was at the university.
10. At the party, Eli used a funny story about her pet dog as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ to get everyone talking.

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*An unusual name can have a detrimental impact on your life and finances – but in my experience, it also has advantages*

#### Xaymaca Awoyungbo

13 January, 2025

- 1 Growing up, there was a familiar pattern for me on the first day of school, or whenever a new teacher took the register.  
“Blake.”  
“Here, sir.”  
“Aaron.”  
“Yes, sir.”  
“Hmm ... wow ... how do I ...? Please forgive me if I mispronounce your name.”  
I would look up and see a mixture of fear, panic and confusion as the teacher gazed at my name. You’re probably wondering how to pronounce it as you read this.  
“It’s Xaymaca [zy-ma-ka], sir.”  
I’ve heard it all, from “Zakamaya”, to “Can I call you something else?”, to “I’m not even going to try pronouncing that”.
- 2 My name is considered cool at best, and strange at worst. Apart from the difficult first meetings, I have the kind of name that could have a negative impact on my life, and my finances. A 2022 study found that people with difficult-to-pronounce names were much less likely to find their first academic job, and when they did, it was at institutions with lower standards.
- 3 My surname, Awoyungbo, could make job hunting even harder. Research from the University of Oxford shows that people with Nigerian heritage must send 80 per cent more applications than white Britons to receive a positive response from an employer.
- 4 None of this is a surprise to those of us who have lived with the effects of such prejudice. As a result, some of us decide to shorten or anglicise our names to make them easier to pronounce. The actor Kal Penn, whose real name is Kalpen Modi, changed his name partly as a test. He found that the number of times he was called to a second audition increased by 50 per cent after using an anglicised name. “I was amazed,” he said.

- 5 But I will never change my name. For one thing, there’s just history attached to it. Xaymaca means “land of wood and water” and it was the name given to modern-day Jamaica by the Taino people. It’s a history many people don’t know about, even Jamaicans, and it is often a conversation starter. I remember speaking to a colleague about it where a question as simple as: “What does your name mean?” started a discussion about our family history. We’ve remained friendly ever since.
- 6 I can usually tell if I’ll get on with someone based on how they respond to learning my name. If they say that my name is strange, it probably won’t lead to a long and happy friendship. If they look interested and ask a question about it, I think that’s a sign we could be good friends.
- 7 For me it’s about respect. People will learn your name when they respect you – you only have to take a look at Ronaldinho, Beyoncé or Tchaikovsky to know this is the case. If I changed my name just to make it easier for strangers to pronounce, I’d lose my sense of self-respect.
- 8 My first name has the same number of letters as Charles and the same number of syllables as Benjamin. It’s not very difficult, only unusual. My names are not only letters on a job application but part of my identity, an identity that I’m proud of. We should all be proud of our names.
- 9 Before my grandfather’s journey to the United Kingdom, my great-grandfather said: “The name Awoyungbo shall be heard in London.” How could I let him down? By displaying and pronouncing my name in public, I hope I am making things easier – not for myself, but for other journalists entering the industry – as well as the next generation of new teachers.

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### 3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer (a, b or c).

1. Why doesn't the author want to change his name?
  - a. He shares the same first name as his great-grandfather.
  - b. It means 'land of wood and water' and is historically important.
  - c. It is a common name in Jamaica.
2. How does the author feel about other people's response to his name?
  - a. He feels that people like it because it is unusual.
  - b. He likes that people usually pronounce it correctly.
  - c. He notices that it can make people feel confused.
3. What was the outcome for Kal Penn when he changed his name?
  - a. He experienced no change in his acting career.
  - b. The number of times he was called to auditions increased.
  - c. It confused the director he worked with.
4. The author says that a good sign of friendship is when people ...
  - a. try to show interest and ask about the meaning of his name.
  - b. pronounce his name correctly.
  - c. recognise the cultural importance of his name.
5. What message did the author's great-grandfather want to give his children?
  - a. Change your name, so it is easier to pronounce in foreign countries.
  - b. Anglicise your name, so you have better job opportunities.
  - c. Be proud of your name and speak it out loud for people to hear.

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## 4 Key language

a. Find a form of these words in the article.

act  
apply

ease  
friend

historical  
identify

pride  
short

b. Choose the correct form of the words from the previous activity to complete the sentences.

1. I look at my children with a great feeling of \_\_\_\_\_ at what they have achieved.
2. Oscar has worked as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ for five years and will appear in an exciting, new TV series this month.
3. Experts managed to \_\_\_\_\_ the painting as one by a famous French artist.
4. Please remember to send your job \_\_\_\_\_ to us by October 31st.
5. My \_\_\_\_\_ with Alice is very important, and we help each other in good and bad times.
6. Liam passed his maths test with \_\_\_\_\_ and got 95 / 100.
7. Our local museum has a number of \_\_\_\_\_ documents from the seventeenth century.
8. I recommend that you \_\_\_\_\_ some of your longer paragraphs to make your essay better.

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### 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you think it's important to keep your name to show your culture or who you are, even if people might judge you for it? Why or why not?
- It's common to anglicise place names (changing *Firenze* to *Florence* for example). Do you agree with this practice? Why or why not?
- How can people learn more about other cultures and make sure they treat everyone with respect, no matter where they come from?

### 6 In your own words

- a. Research to find the meaning and history of your own first or surname and write a brief description of it. You can ask family members for information, search historical records or find online resources. Explore where the name might have come from (e.g. country, culture or language) and what it might mean.
- b. Share any relevant or interesting information you find with your class.