

## #4: ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Talking with people from other backgrounds helps people learn about other cultures and get a new perspective on one’s own culture, but can sometimes create challenges. Here are some tips for communicating across cultures. To share other ideas, or for help with other topics, contact Brea Barthel, Language & Culture Support Specialist ([barthb2@rpi.edu](mailto:barthb2@rpi.edu); 518.276.3241; Folsom 155).

| Consideration                         | Notes & Suggestion(s)   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Jet lag                               | A large shift in time zones may leave someone confused and tired for many days. If you are talking with someone who just came from far away, be friendly, use short sentences, and do not expect the person to remember what you say. Travelers, be patient with yourself while your body adjusts to the time change.   |
| Culture shock                         | Someone arriving in a new culture may start off with great enthusiasm and excitement (the Great! stage). That may lead to disappointment when everything continues to be unfamiliar (the Hate! stage). Adjustment will usually level off to an Okay stage. Note that culture shock may come in cycles, with low periods recurring in stressful times (such as when a home holiday is not celebrated here or after bad family news).   |
| Choice of topics                      | Cultures may have different ideas on what topics are appropriate or impolite, which may depend in part on the setting and people in the group. Some common experiences that can be discussed include classes, computer games, sports, career goals, food, and home towns. Americans usually do not discuss age, salary, or politics.  |
| Language choice                       | Speaking in one’s native language is easiest and fastest, but can be a challenge in mixed groups if it leaves people out of the conversation. Americans, speak English clearly, watch for indications that someone may not be understanding you, and be patient if others talk in their first language. Non-native speakers, try to speak in English in mixed groups, and mention when you need to switch to your first language to speak with others.  |
| Responding to listening challenges    | Everyone may be reluctant to ask for help when they do not understand what someone said. But if you just give (or get) a blank stare or nod, communication has not happened. If you understood part of what was said, say the words you understood, and show which word(s) you did not understand (“You are asking me directions to <i>which</i> building?”). If you had trouble understanding anything at all, ask the speaker to repeat the statement, or say it in other words. A smile always helps, too, to show you are interested in sharing ideas.          |
| Reducing listening challenges         | When listening in a new language allthewordsruntogethersoit’shardtotellwhatwordsarebeingsaid. Whether you are a native speaker or new to English, try to use space between words, and pause between sentences. Writing down key ideas can help, or asking someone to repeat what you said.  |
| Translation time / cognitive overload | Non native English speakers may need extra time to translate information into their first language, decide a response, and translate back to English, or need to consult an online dictionary for help. For native speakers, be patient, and wait longer than the usual three seconds for a response, to allow for translation time.  |
| Time-related differences              | Some cultures or people expect promptness: things will be done at the time they are scheduled. For other cultures, schedules are more flexible. Discuss expectations when setting a deadline or time to meet.   |
| Non-verbal differences                | In most American cultures, eye contact is considered a sign of interest and honesty. In some cultures, however, making eye contact or having lively facial expressions in formal situations, or with people of higher status, may be considered rude. In some Indian cultures, a sideways nodding motion for “okay” is different than the head-shaking movement meaning “no.” Interpersonal space – how closely people stand together in line or when talking – can also differ among cultures, and may depend on relative age, gender, and the level of formality. |
| Use of idioms                         | One thing that will be learned by interaction with people from various backgrounds is just how often everyone uses idioms -- phrases where someone could look up every word in a dictionary and still not understand the meaning. Often these may be cultural references to music, common jokes, or movie dialogue. If you get a blank or confused look in a conversation, think about the words you said, and how you can rephrase your idea.  |
| Asking questions                      | Both native and non-native English speakers can be confused by statements phrased with negative terms, especially if a question at the end changes the meaning. (Example: “You know where the Union is, don’t you?” might be answered “Yes, I do” or “Yes I do not” or “No, I do” or “No I do not.”) Try to ask questions without using negative wording or tag lines (continuing the example, “Do you know where the Union is?”)   |
| “Dangerous English”                   | Because of pronunciation differences, words spoken by a non-native English speaker may sound like insulting or inappropriate terms (such as missing the r sound in “fork”). International speakers, if someone laughs, shows surprise, or gets upset by something you say, ask what’s wrong. Native speakers, help others understand the challenges in their pronunciation or word choice if they seem confused by a response. English speakers, be aware that many cultures have stricter limitations on using “swear” words.                                      |