

Quick Tips for Communicating More Effectively with Nonnative English Speakers (NNES)

In response to requests from faculty, staff, and students, the Student Academic Success Center language support team has put together some tips for communicating more effectively with students who are non-native English speakers (NNES). The suggestions below have been drawn from the experience of the language support staff, feedback from faculty and staff at Carnegie Mellon, and from literature in the field.

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| Openly address the issue | Be explicit about the problem: if a speaker is too fast, ask them to slow down; if their volume is too low, ask them to speak louder. |
| | Feel comfortable asking about their native language. |
| Adjust your language | Observe your speed: Are you speaking too quickly? If so, slow down; pause slightly between phrases rather than slowing down equally on each word (if needed, exaggerate these pauses). |
| | State instructions clearly and concisely: Verify understanding by asking NNES to restate in their own words, or ask a few questions to verify that they have understood. |
| | Reword frequently: Speaking louder will not help; the NNES has a problem with fluency, not with hearing. Avoid slang, idiomatic expressions or examples that rely on cultural knowledge. If you use an idiomatic expression, reword it. For example, <i>Getting a scholarship like this happens only once in a blue moon. In other words, the probability is extremely low. You have very little chance of getting the award.</i> |
| | Avoid using complex sentence structure: The use of double-negatives and questions within questions may be unclear to NNES. Potentially unclear: <i>Would you mind hanging on a minute?</i> Better: <i>Please stay on the phone for a minute and I will get back to you.</i> |
| | Say “no” simply and clearly: Indirect responses, considered to be more polite in the US, often confuse NNES. Potentially unclear: <i>I’m sorry, but it looks as if it is past the deadline to register for this class. I’m afraid it’s too late.</i> Better: <i>You cannot register for this class. It is past the deadline.</i> |

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| Make use of non-linguistic techniques | Use visual stimuli: Draw or write as you talk to help with understanding. You could also ask students to write or draw if they have difficulty explaining. When examining a policy, brochures, written policy statements, handouts, etc. should frequently be used to present main points, key terms, and examples. During phone conversations you might suggest that students look at related web pages or email texts while you discuss an issue. |
| | Supplement your words with gestures: Point to handouts or allow students to read them, especially when you explain a policy. |
| Be aware of cross-cultural differences | Ask students for input or questions: Some students come from cultures in which students do not question someone in authority or who is older. |
| | Be alert to misunderstandings: If you do not understand, interrupt the conversation and try to clarify the point of confusion. Restating what you (the speaker) had said is also a good strategy, especially when dealing with complex questions and issues. |
| | Avoid asking yes-or-no questions: In some cultures it is impolite to give a negative response, especially to someone in a position of authority. Some NNESTs will be uncomfortable saying “no” to questions. Instead of: <i>Do you understand? Is that clear?</i> It is more effective to ask: <i>What questions do you still have?</i> |

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Online:

American Ways, Althen, G. (2003) Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11470896-american-ways-third-edition>

Recognizing and Addressing Cultural Variations in the Classroom: A Guide for Faculty (pdf document).

Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Intercultural Communication Center, Carnegie Mellon.

<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/InternalReports/culturalvariations.pdf>

Watch Your Language: Improving Communication with Non-Native Speakers (Cornell University), this on-line training program gives strategies to help native speakers improve their own speaking, listening, vocabulary and cultural understanding when interacting with non-native speakers.

<https://www.cornell.edu/video/playlist/improving-communication-with-non-native-speakers>

Books:

Craig, S. (1999). *Figuring foreigners out: a practical guide*. Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

Flaitz, J. (ed). (2003). *Understanding your international students: an educational, cultural and linguistic guide*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hooker, J. (2003). *Working Across Cultures*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.