

# TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITH CULTURALLY-DIVERSE STUDENTS

UC San Diego  
International Students  
& Programs Office

## 1 ACTIVELY LISTEN

Second language students often develop a "script" in their mind of what they want to say to you before they enter your office. Allow them to get through the script, so they feel certain that you have heard what they have to say. This can be difficult if the script is long and you can easily anticipate their question or issue.

## 2 LIMIT USE OF JARGON AND IDIOMS

Limit the use of acronyms, abbreviations, jargon, colloquialisms, and idioms when speaking (or writing) to international students, even if English is their first language. Terms like "ASAP", "on target", "home run", or "all set" are U.S. culture-based and may have little meaning to an international student.

## 3 CONSIDER OTHER PERSPECTIVES

Certain feelings and behaviors (both yours and/or the person with whom you are communicating) can be indicators that cultural differences are at play when interacting with someone from another country such as frustration, taking offense, repetition, no response, or inappropriate responses for the situation (i.e., nodding continuously when clearly the individual does not understand, awkward laughter, ending the conversation abruptly, seeming distracted, etc.). Allow these indicators to remind you to take a deep breath and find a different way to approach the issue or explanation.

## 4 CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

After you have discussed an issue with a student or explained a procedure, ask for an explanation in their own words. Don't just ask the student if they understood everything you said. This question may not confirm their level of understanding, since the culture of some international students dictates that saying they do not understand shows that either you failed in your explanation or they failed in understanding. "Do you understand what I told you?" will often be answered with a polite "Yes, thank you" as the student walks away without the vital information they need. When faced with culturally-based differences in communication, our initial reaction may be surprise, especially when those differences relate to the tone or perceived attitude of a message. However, once we open our minds to the fact that there is no right or wrong way to communicate—and that our own culture's communication norms are not the only, nor the best, way to interact — we will not only be more receptive to intercultural communication, but we will be more successful at it.

## 5 USE FEEDBACK LOOPS

Try restating and summarizing. Paraphrase what you think the student said and ask if that is what they meant. After you have discussed an issue or topic with a student, be sure and ask them to explain it back to you in their own words.

## 6 USE VISUALS AND WRITTEN WORD

Words coming out of a person's mouth can be difficult to understand. The problem is not knowledge or intelligence, but may be communication. In addition, spoken English used in academia may be different from that used elsewhere. To portray concepts, use visuals such as a workflow diagram and action timeline. Write important words down. Be sure to provide handouts and outlines.

## 7 SEPARATE YOUR QUESTIONS

Refrain from asking double questions such as, "Do you want to carry on or shall we stop here?" In stressful situations, students may experience cognitive overload and only the first or second question may have been comprehended. Let your listener answer one question at a time.

## 8 CONSIDER NON-VERBAL CUES

If a student does not make eye contact, it may be out of respect. Women from many cultures do not want to touch or shake hands with a male. Pointing a finger or placing hands on hips may be a sign of disrespect.

## 9 HELP NAVIGATE BUREAUCRACY

This process is not the same in every country or culture because strategies for getting a favorable response vary. Some approaches include working up to the most senior person in the office or organization, only accepting the answer of someone "in charge," asking repeatedly until a favorable response is received, or only accepting the answer from a male staff member. Be clear in your message and be certain the student understood what you said. Be patient because you may have to repeat yourself to emphasize that there are no exceptions to the policy/procedure/answer and that the answer will be the same no matter how many times the question is asked. Talk with your colleagues and supervisor about how you will deal with requests to talk to a "higher up."

## 10 EXPLAIN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

You should assist international students as they work to understand U.S. customs and how "things are done here," but do not pressure them to change their behavior or viewpoints unless the change is absolutely necessary for academic or social success or to avoid serious conflict. Consider whether the situation could be better resolved if you changed your own behavior or viewpoint.

## 11 NAMES

Learn to say given or preferred names of international students correctly. Do not expect the student to select a U.S.-based nickname or shortened version of their name. This effort will go a long way toward making the student feel welcomed and respected.

## 12 BE CURIOUS

Take the time to learn at least a little about your students' countries of origin, customs, languages, and the larger issues of concern in their home countries (i.e., current events).

## 13 CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Don't assume that all students from a particular country or culture will behave or respond in the same way. Likewise, do not expect a student to know what everyone in their country thinks about a particular topic. Similar in the U.S., perspectives vary from region to region and group to group in any country.

## 14 WATCH THE HUMOR

In many cultures, discussions with individuals of authority (faculty, advisors, and staff) are taken very seriously. Professionalism and protocol are constantly observed. Many cultures will not appreciate the use of humor, sarcasm, and jokes in this context. When using humor think whether it will be understood in the other cultures.