

Tips for Communicating with Non-Native Speakers of English

Sandra Issa, Associate Director for Student Services

Applied English Center

(785) 864-4606

stompson@ku.edu

Below you will find some suggestions to help you communicate with non-native speakers of English.

When speaking...

- Speak clearly.
- Speak at a steady speed.
- Avoid the use of slang, acronyms, or specialized words.
- Avoid cultural references.
- Speak directly.
- Build some repetition and re-wording into what you are saying.
- If a student doesn't understand, re-phrase what you are saying.
- Write down key words. (Use printing, not cursive.)

When listening...

- Be patient when waiting for a response. It may take the student some time to formulate the sentence correctly. Don't look impatient.
- Encourage the student without rushing him or her.
- Try to avoid the temptation to finish the student's sentences for him or her.
- Be aware that the student may be painfully embarrassed about his or her level of English.
- Be aware that the student may not have a high enough English proficiency level to sound polite.

When checking comprehension...

- Don't assume you understand what the student has said. Even if you get what seems to be a clear answer to a question, ask the question in another way to check if the answer stays the same.
- Check your comprehension of what the student has said by re-phrasing and asking the student if your re-wording is correct.
- Ask the student to re-word your questions or comments, so you can check his or her understanding.
- "Yes" doesn't always mean "yes." In some cultures, direct disagreement is considered rude. (Try explaining that, in this culture, and in this situation, it is important to be direct and to speak the truth.)

When interacting...

- Be aware that different cultures have different "comfort zones."
- Be aware that different cultures use different amounts of eye contact.
- Be aware that different cultures have different expectations about touching.
- Be aware that some cultures prefer oral to written communication.
- Be aware that "rules" can be negotiated or worked around in many cultures.
- Be aware that some students might be exhibiting signs of culture shock.

Expectations

- Make your expectations clear. Define the role of the tutor and the role of the student in the session. (For example, you might say, "I'm not going to tell you the answers to the problems, but I will explain each step of the process.")
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the task. ("I know this is hard, especially in a different country with a different language.")