

Interacting Better With People Who Speak English as a Second Language

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According to U.S. Census Bureau figures there estimated to be over 26-million foreign-born people in the United States (9.7 percent of the population). As cultural boundaries melt together in today's workplace, your opportunities for interaction with people who speak other than English as their primary language increases. Such instances can lead to frustration unless you are prepared to deal with it.

Strategy #1 - Let Your Learner Guide the Conversation

Where interacting with someone who speaks English as a second language, let them take the lead when he or she has questions, comments or ideas. Give them an opportunity and adequate time to voice their thoughts without interrupting them. Some people may take a while to get to know you before feeling comfortable enough to ask a question or voice an opinion. This could be out of embarrassment about their language skills or fear of making a mistake. Depending on where they were reared, some foreign language speakers may take a rigid or formal approach and get right down to business by taking the lead. Still others may choose to have someone else act as a mediator or intermediary. In any event, recognize the cues and follow along when you can.

Strategy #2 - Be Flexible

Communicating with people from other cultures who do not speak English fluently can be frustrating and complicated for you, them and others who are in the area. Even if you do not understand someone's culture or language, use positive listening, non-verbal and verbal techniques to try to enhance the communication.

Part of your flexibility will come from recognizing that your views are not the way of the world. Making the mistake of believing that everyone has the same experiences and sees things as you do can lead to communication and relationship breakdown. Probably it is wiser to assume that people with whom you come into contact from other cultures do not have the same basis of knowledge and experience. Then, proceed to share information with each other openly and freely. Listen for points of agreement or commonality.

Strategy #3 - Listen Patiently

Recognize that while you may be frustrated, so is the other person. Take the time to focus on what he or she is saying and try to understand the intent of their message.

Strategy #4 - Speak Clearly and Slowly

Keep in mind that most adults in the United States speak at a rate of about 125-150 words per minute. While this may seem acceptable to you, it is fast for someone who is trying to get a message from you or someone else, translate it into their language in their mind, then respond in English. This entire decoding and encoding process of messages takes time. Speak at a rate slow enough that allows understanding without being insulting.

Strategy #5 - Speak with Normal Volume and Tone

For some reason, many Americans feel that if they raise their voice to someone who does not speak English well, that the person will understand what is being said. An excellent example of this practice can be seen in the movie Rush Hour with Chris Rock and Charlie Chan. In that movie, Chris Rock (who plays a police officer from Los Angeles) goes to the airport to pick up a Chinese police officer (Charlie Chan). Rock assumes that Chan cannot speak English and raises his voice as he yells, "Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?" Not only did Chan understand, but he later begins to communicate fluently in English. When Rock asks surprised and miffed, Chan nonchalantly says, "I did not say I didn't speak English. You assumed that I did not speak English." Such actions do little to enhance communication and learning. In fact, yelling or changing tone does nothing to enhance learner understanding and may well anger or embarrass them. Just because someone is unable to speak English, does not mean that he or she is deaf.

Strategy #6 - Pause Frequently

This allows others to translate what you said into her or his language, comprehend, then respond in English or ask questions.

Strategy #7 - Paraphrase Messages

To verify accuracy, after focusing on what you think a person's message might be, you may want to feed back your interpretation of the person's message in your own words (paraphrase). In cases where you feel that you don't understand, either paraphrase the part of the message to the point you did understand or ask clarifying questions. For example, "Rasheed, I think understand your question concerning the differences between verbal and non-verbal communication; However, I'm not sure I understand your point. Specifically, what do you disagree with?"

Strategy # 8 - Use Open-ended Questions

Use open-ended questions to encourage others to freely share information. This is opposed to closed-end questions which do not allow you to accurately gauge a person's viewpoint or understanding. Either because of embarrassment, or to prevent saying "no,"

some people from other cultures may not admit that they do not agree, have an answer, or want to do something when you asked with a closed-end question. This reluctance can lead to misunderstandings and possibly resentment if you do not recognize non-verbal signals being sent.

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