

Tips for Communicating with English Language Learners (ELL)¹

At the Beginning of an Interaction

- **Be empathetic!** Put students at ease and help them to relax with a friendly smile and welcoming body language. Don't look nervous.
- **If a student seems worried, acknowledge the difficulty of the task.**
"I know this is hard, especially in a different country with a different language."
- **Make your expectations clear.** Define the role of the advisor and the role of the student in the session.
"I can explain your different options, but you will have to choose what courses you want to take next semester."

When You Speak

- **Speak clearly – enunciate!** Use full words instead of reductions (see textbox).
- **Observe the speed of your speech.** If you are speaking too quickly, slow down and pause slightly between phrases. Speak in a slow and steady, natural rhythm rather than separating and exaggerating each word as if they have a hearing problem.
- **Avoid the use of slang, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references.** If you do, reword it to clarify what you mean.
"If you take this course, you can kill two birds with one stone. In other words, you can fulfill both a general education requirement and a major requirement if you take this one course."
- **Speak directly.** Native English speakers often use indirect speech to sound polite, but this can be confusing to ELL students. Say 'no' simply and clearly.
Unclear: *"I'm sorry, but it seems like it is past the deadline to register for this class."*
Clear: *"You cannot register for this class. It is past the deadline."*
- **Avoid complex sentences,** especially using double negatives and questions within questions.
Unclear: *"Would you mind hanging on a minute?"*
Clear: *"Please wait on the phone, and I will speak to you again in a minute."*
- **Build some repetition and re-wording into what you are saying.**
- **If a student doesn't understand, re-phrase what you are saying.**
- **Ask students to restate your questions or comments in their own words** so that you can check their understanding.

Native English speakers often shorten and combine words in the following ways:

Using contractions

"I cannot" vs. "I can't"

Dropping sounds

"act nice" pronounced "acnice"

"friendly" pronounced "frienly"

Blending sounds

"did you" pronounced "didja"

"want to" pronounced "wanna"

- **Avoid asking yes or no questions.** Since it is impolite to give a negative response in some cultures, especially to someone in a position of authority, some ELL students will be uncomfortable saying 'no' to questions.
"Do you understand?" vs. "What question do you still have?"
- **Write down key words** (in print, not cursive). Some ELL students are more comfortable reading than listening, so use brochures, written policy statements, handouts, etc. to present main points, key terms, and examples. During phone conversations you might suggest that students look at related web pages or emails while you discuss an issue.

When You Listen

- **Be patient when waiting for a response.** It may take the student some time to formulate the sentence correctly. Don't look impatient. Encourage students without rushing them.
- **Focus on what you can understand.** Don't get flustered by what you can't.
- **Don't be afraid to request clarification or say that you didn't understand something.** Just be patient and encouraging when you do so.
"Could you repeat that?" or "You went where?"
- **Check your comprehension of what the student said by re-phrasing and asking the student if your re-wording is correct.**
"You are from Mongolia?" or "You are here to register for classes?"
- **Try to avoid finishing students' sentences for them,** but feel free to suggest words if students are really struggling to think of vocabulary. Many ELL students can understand more words than they can produce.
- **Be aware that ELL students may be painfully embarrassed about their level of English.**
- **Be aware that students may not have a high enough English proficiency to sound polite.**

Other Things to Consider

- **Be aware that different cultures have different concepts of 'personal space,' different amounts of eye contact, and different expectations about touching.**
- **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.**
- **Feel free to discuss language and cultural differences; be willing to learn from ELL students.** They have a lot of knowledge to contribute and are usually excited when someone shows interest in their culture.

Sources¹

Carnegie Mellon University Intercultural Communication Center's [Quick Tips for Communicating More Effectively with Nonnative English Speakers \(NNES\)](#)

Cornell University's [Watch Your Language](#) video series

Sandra Issa's [Tips for Communicating with Non-Native Speakers of English](#) (University of Kansas)