



Communicating across Languages (and Cultures)

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We live in a world where it is becoming increasingly likely that you will interact with people whose first language and cultural background are vastly different from your own. We are not only living in a multilingual and multicultural country; we are also constantly connecting with others across the globe online and via social media. As a result, it is imperative that we recognise that we may encounter situations where we may need to adjust the way we communicate to overcome language and cultural barriers.

In Australia, English is the dominant language. However, many people do not have English as a first language and often speak other languages within their families and communities (NSW Department of Education, 2021). According to the 2016 Census, approximately 21% of the Australian population speaks a language other than English at home.

Top 10 languages other than English spoken at home in 2016 by state/territory

NSW	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	Northern Territory	Australian Capital Territory	Other Territories
Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin	Italian	Mandarin	Mandarin	Australian Indigenous Languages	Mandarin	Norfolk-Pitcairn
Arabic	Italian	Vietnamese	Mandarin	Italian	Nepali	Greek	Vietnamese	Malay
Cantonese	Greek	Cantonese	Greek	Vietnamese	German	Tagalog	Cantonese	Mandarin
Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Spanish	Vietnamese	Cantonese	Greek	Mandarin	Hindi	Cantonese
Greek	Arabic	Italian	Cantonese	Tagalog	Italian	Filipino	Spanish	Tagalog
Italian	Cantonese	Korean	Punjabi	Afrikaans	Cantonese	Malayalam	Italian	Australian Indigenous Languages
Hindi	Punjabi	Hindi	Arabic	Arabic	Spanish	Nepali	Arabic	Fijian
Spanish	Hindi	Punjabi	Hindi	Punjabi	Dutch	Vietnamese	Greek	Min Nan
Korean	Sinhalese	Tagalog	German	Indonesian	Arabic	Indonesian	Korean	Afrikaans
Tagalog	Spanish	Japanese	Polish	Hindi	French	Thai	Urdu	Vietnamese

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, Customised tables courtesy of [RacismNoWay](#)



Clear Communication



If we want to avoid frustration and confusion when speaking with others, we should take some time to consider how we could communicate more clearly.



Why is it important to be able to “Communicate across Languages”?

There are many reasons why it is important to be able to communicate across languages. People who speak no or little English, and those with poor literacy skills, are amongst our most vulnerable during a crisis. There can be numerous challenges involved with ensuring that critical, potentially life-saving information is successfully communicated to all people within a diverse community during a health crisis or natural disaster (Language on the Move, 2020).

In business settings, it is also crucial that tasks and instructions are clearly communicated to and understood by our employees who may not be completely confident with their English skills. That is why it is essential that business processes such as Safety and Environmental Plans are documented and integrated in a manner that is simple, clear and easily understood by all employees and visitors regardless of their English skills. These plans are worthless if they cannot be used and understood by the very people who will need them. Businesses that do not account for the diversity of language skills in their employees, partners, and customers risk productivity loss and even increase the risk of workplace incidents occurring due to misunderstandings. The same can be said for life’s everyday interactions: if we want to avoid frustration and confusion when speaking with others, we should take some time to consider how we could communicate more clearly.



Communication, Language & Culture are intertwined

To make things more complicated, we often need to also consider cultural contexts & backgrounds as well as language barriers when communicating with those who are not native English-speakers. Understanding that cultural diversity can affect how a message is presented and received is key to improving cross-cultural communications. While it is not necessarily practical to study individual cultures and languages thoroughly, it can be helpful to look into basic cultural influences if you know the background of the people you are going to communicate with. However, it is crucial that you do not make cultural assumptions and generalisations about people.



The SBS has developed a useful Cultural Atlas tool for modern [Australian Culture](#) (Evason & Scroope, 2021). Reading through this tool provides an interesting insight into how modern Australian culture affects the way Australian’s generally communicate. In fact, it is a helpful tool not only for people from foreign cultures but also as a self-reflection guide for Australian’s who want to understand how the way they communicate may be confusing to those who do not share the same cultural background.

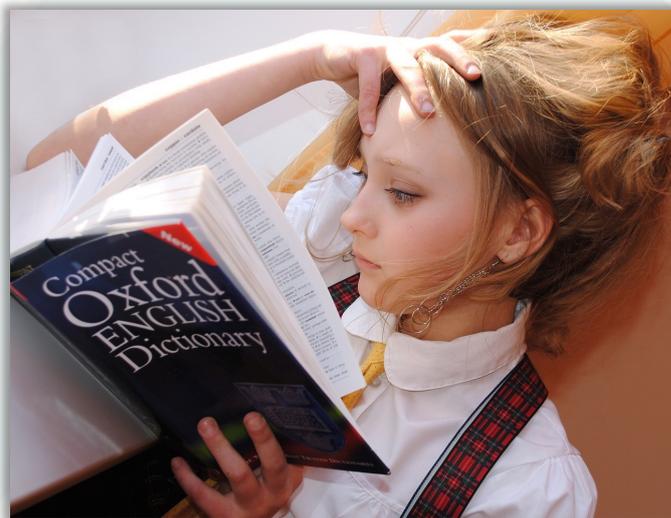
Effective Communication Techniques

There are some things you can do to prepare for the next time you communicate across language (and culture):

- ◆ **Speak Slow & Clear (and not louder):** Speaking at a steady pace will help others to understand what you are saying and give them time to think. Take the time to ensure that you pronounce words as clear and correct as you can. Many of us, unfortunately, also tend to talk louder when we believe we are not being understood. Increasing your volume doesn’t help with comprehension; instead, it can appear quite rude (Oxford Royale Academy, 2021).



- ◆ **Keep it Simple:** Do not make your sentences long or complicated. Talk about one topic at a time. Additionally, it is a good idea to avoid humour and sarcasm unless you know that the other person will understand and appreciate it (Mind Tools, 2021).
- ◆ **Choose your words carefully:** Generally, try to use simple vocabulary and avoid phrasal verbs (such as break down, come across, see to, turned into). For example, the phrasal verb 'Get up' can be confusing for a non-native English speaker because it is used in many different contexts such as stand up, or get out of bed, or even to refer to an outfit. When communicating with speakers of Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian), using words rooted in Latin can be easier to understand, like 'difficult' (instead of 'hard') or 'departure' (instead of 'got up and gone').
- ◆ **Avoid Idioms & Slang:** Most of our idioms and slang words require a shared cultural background to be understood. The same can be said of jargon (Formal, industry-specific words) and colloquialisms (Region-Specific words like Flat out, Arvo).
- ◆ **Separate Questions:** Only ask one question at a time. Too many questions in one sentence increase the likelihood of misunderstanding, especially if the other person has to think hard about recognising that they have been asked a question as well as what the topic of that question was.
- ◆ **Check for understanding:** It is important to check that the key points of your conversation are being understood, but you must do this gently. There are ways of saying 'Did you get that?' without seeming rude (Newman Group Inc, 2019). You can try using open-ended questions to encourage the other person to freely share their thoughts (Grossman, 2019). When explaining a task or request, ask the other person if they have any questions at the end of the conversation or ask, 'Did I include everything you need to know?'.
- ◆ **Paraphrasing:** If you need to repeat a point to a person, use the same words you originally used because using different words or terms can create further confusion. Unless you have realised that you have said something that was originally confusing and therefore need to rephrase with more appropriate words.
- ◆ **Be aware of cross-cultural etiquette standards:** Body language can be useful in illustrating a certain point; however, be aware that body language is used differently across cultures. Generally, it is a good idea to make eye contact with who you are speaking with, but some further research into cultural norms for eye contact can be helpful in avoiding offence. Appropriate levels of personal space also differ across cultures. Be aware that certain gestures or phrases may not mean the same thing to you as it does to others (some gestures/phrases we use freely are sometimes considered taboo in other cultures) (Grossman, 2019). Take note that the tone of someone's voice is not always an accurate reflection of their intentions but rather a product of their cultural background.
- ◆ **Be Expressive:** bearing in mind the difference in cultural norms for body language, it is still helpful to be expressive when communicating. Your expression and tone of voice can help others understand your personal feelings on a subject.
- ◆ **Be forgiving:** be prepared to forgive mistakes and acknowledge that misunderstandings may occur. Don't waste effort on trying to be 'precisely' understood; instead, it is important that the key points of your message are communicated well, rather than all the little insignificant details that you may have included. Be open-minded to differences and accept feedback. Provide support and encouragement to people who struggle with the language, as this will help them learn and improve confidently.



Conclusion

In this increasingly multilingual and multicultural nation, individuals and businesses should be taking steps to improve the way we communicate with others who share a different 'language' and cultural background – and the easiest way to do this is to keep it simple, avoid idioms and be patient. As we all know, a failure to understand instructions is one of the main reasons things do not go to plan (because the plan was not easy to understand in the first place). If you or your organisation would like help with developing practical and inclusive safety and environmental management plans, please get in touch with Integrate Sustainability through enquiries@integratesustainability.com.au or call (08) 9468 0338.



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■ environment ■ safety ■ community

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