

Body Language Around the World

Body language varies from culture to culture and even from region to region in some countries. Non-verbal cues that are appropriate in Canada can have a very different meaning in other cultures. The following examples show a range of possible cultural interpretations of body language.

	Body Language Interpretations		
Thumbs Up	In North America, this means hitch hiking, or good job.	In Germany, it means number one, and in Japan, number five.	In Australia and Nigeria, this is an insult.
Pointing with Index Finger	Common in North America and Europe.	Considered impolite in Japan and China. In these countries people point using the whole hand.	
Touching	A pat on the shoulder or forearm is a common way to express “good work” in North American culture. Hand shaking is a common greeting in many Western countries.	In many Asian cultures, people typically don’t touch strangers.	Some Islamic and Hindu cultures typically don’t touch with the left hand.
Comfortable Proximity	North Americans stand approximately an arms length away.	Asians, especially Japanese, tend to stand more than an arms length away.	Latin Americans and Middle Easterners typically stand less than an arms length away.
Eye Contact	Direct eye contact is considered positive for most North Americans.	People in Arabic cultures make prolonged eye contact.	Japanese, Latin American, and Caribbean people may avoid eye contact to show respect.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Communication styles can vary widely across cultures including differing attitudes towards time, personal distance, or the amount of personal assertiveness. These differences can cause complications in communication between people of different cultures.

When we're communicating with someone from another country or cultural group, there may be fundamental differences to how each communicator perceives the process. Not understanding some of these differences may lead us to think that the other culture is "wrong" and ours is "right." What's important to remember is that we are merely different.

	Different Cultural Interpretations	
Silence	North Americans tend to respond quickly in a conversation.	In some cultures the polite response delay is longer, while in other cultures it seems everyone speaks simultaneously.
Voice Intonation	The English language relies on intonation, falling or rising of voice pitch, to indicate questions or emotions such as boredom, interest, enthusiasm, friendliness, anger, or even hostility.	In many Asian languages, changing the tone alters the meaning of the word.
Personal Information	Some people are open about how much private information they share and how much emotion they show.	Some people tend to keep personal information and emotions private.
Decision-Making	A consensus style of decision-making is the norm.	An authoritative style of decision-making is the accepted practice.
Task Completion	Emphasis is on the finished product.	More value is placed on the process than the product.
Assertiveness	Assertiveness is valued.	Assertiveness is perceived as pushy.
Conflict	Conflict is viewed as problematic.	Conflict is viewed as useful and even positive.

Communicating Effectively with Your Learner

- **Speak slowly.** The listener may only understand a few words, or may need to translate.
- **Speak clearly.** Some listeners do not hear final consonants (e.g. “d”, “t”) at the ends of words, and miscommunication may result. For example, there is a big difference between “I will send the letter” (implying it will be done soon), and “I sent the letter” (implying it already happened).
- **Repeat and paraphrase patiently.** Learners may need to hear the information more than once to understand it completely.
- **Keep your vocabulary and sentences direct and simple.** It is easier for learners to understand several shorter sentences than one long one, particularly if they are in the early stages of learning English.
- **Allow time for a response.** Processing and mentally translating take time.
- **Acknowledge and support your learner’s efforts to communicate.** Support can be given verbally (“Yes, I see,” “uh huh,” “oh”), and nonverbally (nod, smile, lean forward).
- **Check for comprehension frequently.** Ask questions to make sure your learner has understood; ask your learner to restate the important pieces of information you’ve given.
- **Avoid the use of metaphors, jargon, or popular sayings.** Unless your learners are high level and these literary elements are part of your language lesson, many will get confused.
- **Whenever possible, use visuals, diagrams, pictures, etc..** Linking verbal and visual clues will assist the learner’s understanding of what’s being said.
- **Use examples to illustrate your point.** Specific examples will help to increase understanding of the larger issue or point.
- **Write down key information points.** Having important information (e.g. dates, times, addresses) written down for students will reinforce critical information, and give learners an additional point of reference.
- **Keep an open mind about people, and resist stereotyping.** A favourite expression among ESL teachers is “assume nothing.” Check your own perceptions and ideas by communicating with your learner.
- **Be patient.** Patience and following the points above will produce rewarding results.