

Healthy Language

Working with native and non-native speakers of English

The most obvious definition of a non-native speaker is someone who speaks a language other than English; someone who, as an infant, learned a different language as his or her first language, and then later in life began learning English.

Usually such a person will speak English with an accent. Generally the older you are when you start to learn a language, the more accented your speech will be. However, there are exceptions. If someone starts learning English at a very young age, he or she will probably sound like a native speaker, but technically isn't. In general, many English learners will retain an accent that marks them as non-native speakers.

Another factor to consider in defining non-native speaker, is the increasing number of world Englishes. Different varieties of English have differing norms for pronunciation, for grammar, and for vocabulary. You may perceive some varieties as more standard than others. And you may find it difficult to understand English speakers who use a nonstandard variety of English, or who speak in a dialect or accent you're not familiar with. English really is an international language. In fact, there are now more non-native speakers of English in the world than there are native speakers of English.

Throughout this article, the term non-native speaker will be used to encompass all of these possible situations. Whether the person you communicate with has a strong accent or none at all, you'll be able to use many strategies to improve your communication with people from different cultures.

In our increasingly globalised world, it's becoming more and more common to interact with people who speak English as a second or third or fourth language. Communication, being a social interaction, involves give and take from all participants. Let's start exploring things that you can do to help that interaction go more smoothly.

2. In most interactions, you do some talking and some listening. When you're talking to a non-native speaker of English, there are several things you can do to be more clearly understood. Non-native speakers were asked what native speakers can do to help improve communications. Here are some of their responses.

SPEAKER 1: It helps me when native speakers talk slower.

SPEAKER 2: Slow down. I understand more if they slow down their speaking speed.

The most common response we hear from non-native speakers is to slow down. But be careful when you're slowing down that you don't also talk down to them. There's a difference between slowing your speech and talking down. Just speak a little more slowly.

SPEAKER 1: It's helpful when you use clear speech.

SPEAKER 2: It helps if you use clear intonation.

You can enunciate more clearly. It's important to understand that speech is a steady stream of connected sounds. We tend to think in individual words. And we certainly read and write in individual words. But when we're speaking, all of our sounds are really connected into a steady stream. This is easier to notice in a language you're less familiar with. This can even happen when you are familiar with the language. In fact, this happens with native speakers and song lyrics all the time, which is what is known as Mondegreens. One famous example is from the Beatles' song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." The line "the girl with kaleidoscope eyes", has been famously misheard as the girl with colitis goes by. It's really a similar combination of sounds but with a totally different meaning.

SPEAKER 1: Sometimes they use really short words, which confuses me.

SPEAKER 3: It's helpful when you use full words instead of short words.

To help you to be understood better by non-native speakers, use fewer reductions. Now, we naturally use these in our speech to save time and to maintain the rhythm and the cadence of English. But these can be hard for non-native speakers to hear. There are several different examples of reductions that we naturally use in our speech. One is trimming sounds. An obvious example of this is in contractions where we'd say "he's" instead of "he is" or "can't" instead of "cannot" or "shouldn't've" instead of "should not have". And these are even visually noted with an

apostrophe to show that something has been dropped from this word.

There are other patterns where we also drop sounds and it's not noted by any marking or apostrophe. For example, the phrase "act nicely" tends to drop that T sound. And we would pronounce it more like "acnicely" at normal speed. Or, in the word "friendly", we tend to drop that D sound and pronounce it more like "frienly" when we're speaking at a normal speed.

A common thing we do is to drop H sounds in some words. A sentence such as "she gave him her pen", sounds more like "she gave 'im 'er pen." This helps us maintain the rhythm. But we're losing some of the sounds that are really present in the words.

We also drop entire syllables. In a word like family, we tend to really make that two syllables-- "fam-ly." The same thing with "corporate". We make that two syllables-- "cor-prate."

We also blend sounds together. If we take the phrase "did you", in normal speech we would tend to say, "didja." And we're actually introducing a totally new sound, "ja", that isn't present in the word "did" or in the word "you." But as we combine those sounds together, they blend, and our tongue and mouth muscles are preparing for the next sound so that this extra sound is produced in the phrase. This happens with a lot of phrases like "aren't ya" or "where'd ya" instead of "aren't you" or "where did you".

Additionally, we shorten verbs in general, saying "wanna" to instead of "want to", "gonna" instead of "going to", or "hafta" instead of "have to." Now, any one of these isn't that problematic. But in regular speech, we tend to build a lot of these into our sentences. And over time, this can cause problems for a non-native speaker to understand us.

3. Vocabulary is an important issue to keep in mind when speaking to someone from another culture. Once again, let's see what advice international students have for native speakers.

SPEAKER 1: Don't use a lot of idioms.

SPEAKER 2: Using fewer idioms will help.

Idioms are notoriously difficult for non-native speakers. An idiom is a phrase that has its own meaning separate from the individual words making up that phrase. Let's take an example, the idiom, "to get cold feet."

A non-native speaker might know what the verb, "to get" means. And they may know what cold means. And they probably know what feet are. But if you put that phrase together, "to get cold feet," they have no way of knowing that it means to become nervous.

We have a lot of idioms in English. And a lot of them come from sports: "right off the bat," meaning instantly or immediately, "out in left field," meaning something very strange or out of the ordinary, "throw in the towel," meaning to quit or to give up.

Something like, "level the playing field" is a little easier to understand the connection. If we level the field, we make things even and fair for everyone involved. But some idioms are really difficult to understand, for example, "hit it off with someone." Actually, this sounds rather violent.

But of course, it's a positive thing. If you hit it off with someone, you get along with them. You have a good relationship.

There are several other idioms in English that don't come from sports; for example "down the road," meaning later, or "up in the air," to signify uncertain or unknown, "a rule of thumb," meaning a general rule, and also, "foot the bill," meaning to pay for something. Idioms are very common. So it's important if you're talking to someone from another culture to try to avoid idioms or be prepared to explain them or reword them if necessary.

SPEAKER 3: Use easier words.

SPEAKER 4: Expect first that some kinds of words are hard for us to understand.

One example of a type of word that can be difficult for non-native speakers is a multi-word verb. Now you can probably guess that a multi-word verb is a verb that has more than one word. But it acts as one unit, as one word.

We can take "to break" as an example of a regular single-word verb. And we probably understand what that means. Now a multi-word version of that word is "to break down," which we usually use to describe a machine or a process, something that stops working.

We have another version in "to break up," which we can use to mean crumble. We break up a biscuit. Or we break up a chunk of ice. To break up can also be applied to relationships, as in to break up a meeting or to break up with a significant other.

And for non-native speakers, these slight differences and difference in uses can cause some misunderstandings and problems. In an academic setting in particular, we can see a lot of examples of common multi-word verbs; but consider a single-word substitute; for example, "submit" a report rather than "hand in" a report. We might "distribute" a paper rather than "pass out" or "hand out" the paper. We might ask students to "listen" rather than "listen up" or to "solve" a problem rather than "figure out" a problem.

SPEAKER 5: Use less slang and local jokes.

SPEAKER 2: It would be nice if people could realise they are using slang sometimes.

Slang can be really difficult for non-native speakers. And one of the reasons is because it's constantly changing. It's always new. Slang is meant to be something that distinguishes a subgroup from another group. It evolves constantly. We see that a lot with generational differences. But it also comes across in cultural differences.

Even common slang or something you might think of as relatively old or not really new or changing can be difficult for non-native speakers. A phrase like, "to go out," meaning to date someone can be difficult for non-native speakers. That's still slang to them.

Be prepared to avoid it or rephrase it if necessary.

SPEAKER 4: I know it's boring, but repeat difficult words and difficult phrases.

SPEAKER 6: It is helpful if you rephrase or re-explain what you say.

Be willing to reword, rephrase what you say, or use synonyms. Especially if you're using idioms, multi-word verbs, or slang, this is going to be helpful to the non-native speaker. Be prepared to explain what you mean or use a different word.

Perform comprehension checks. Check that the person you're talking to understands what you say. You can say things like, "does that make sense?" or "do you understand?" or "OK?". Be aware that you should often try to check that the other person understands you.

4. Most interactions involve both speaking and listening. There are several things that you as a listener can do to better understand accented or non-native English. The first thing is to listen actively. Don't just pretend to understand something, but make sure that you do understand it. But do this politely.

You can do things like confirming that you understood correctly. We typically do this by taking part of the previous utterance and forming it into a question. So if someone is telling you where they're from, and you're not sure you understood correctly, you can confirm it by saying, "you're from Nigeria?" Ask a question about it.

Another thing that you can do is request clarification. This includes explicit questions, such as "could you repeat that?", or "I don't understand". Or it could be taking a piece of what you did understand to get more information of what you were missing. "You went where?"

You can also use body language. If you're confused and you look confused, hopefully the person you're talking with will pick up on that and re-explain or re-word what they're saying. You can also nod or agree if you are understanding to give them a signal.

Focus on what you can understand. Don't get too flustered or upset about missing any one individual word. But if you get the general meaning or if you understand some words, use those to form a question to further clarify what the person is saying.

Usually people are happy to reword or rephrase or re-explain what they mean, because they want to be understood. Keep in mind that non-native speakers can usually comprehend more than they can produce. So if they're struggling

with pronouncing a word or they can't quite think of the right vocabulary, they might recognise that if you supply it for them, and they will probably understand what you're saying even if they can't produce it.

One student said, "I've always found that people with a lot of experience in foreign countries are easy to communicate with".

If you've been in that situation, if you know how frustrating it is to try to communicate in a different language, or to not be understood in a different situation, you tend to be more sympathetic to a non-native speaker. So think about putting yourself in their shoes. Be patient. Demonstrate a willingness to communicate with them. Don't look nervous. Try to relax, and they'll try to relax. Smile, use welcoming body language, and be more understanding.

You can also openly address the issue. It's OK to discuss language and culture differences.

Someone said that he likes it when a native speaker shows enthusiasm about mutual learning, not that he or she is doing him a favour by talking with him. So be willing to explore and share with a non-native speaker, and you can also benefit from that interaction.

5. You may have wondered what makes English so difficult for people to master. Grammar, spelling, and vocabulary all contribute to the complexities of English. But let us focus on English pronunciation to get a better understanding of why this can be a difficult language to speak. When we look at specific sounds, we can find people have problems if they have to start producing a sound they're not used to, a sound that doesn't exist in their native language. For English speakers, you might think of the French R or the Spanish R. Those don't exist in our language. So it's difficult for us to start saying correctly.

Vowels are a very common problem for non-native speakers exactly because of this reason. English has 12 vowel sounds, 8 diphthongs and 5 triphthongs. That's a lot of vowel sounds! Other languages have fewer. And some languages, like Spanish or Japanese, have about five vowel sounds. So someone coming from a different language into English is suddenly faced with a lot of new vowel sounds, many of which they're unfamiliar with, and many of which can be very similar to one another, for example, the "eh" and "ah" sound, as in left and laughed. If I take the sentence "I left when I saw the clown", versus "I laughed when I saw the clown", it completely changes the meaning of the sentence based on that one vowel sound.

Another common vowel difficulty is the "i" and "e" sounds, as in "lid" and "lead." Some languages have one or the other of these sounds. But we often find that non-native speakers confuse or replace or have difficulties with these two sounds.

Another vowel sound that's difficult for a lot of people is what we call schwa. This is the most common vowel sound in English. And it sounds like "uh." It's always a short, quick, reduced sound. And it's never stressed. It's always unstressed. So if we take a word like "syllable", it actually has two schwa sounds. The last two sounds are both schwa. And the first vowel sound is "i", that other difficult sound mentioned a little earlier. So what we tend to see with non-native speakers when they're having difficulties with some of our vowels is that they replace them, sometimes with a fuller or stronger vowel. So they might say something more like "Seel-ah-bull".

A reason that people can have difficulty with English sounds is when two sounds are different in English, but they're not differentiated in that person's native language. A common example of this is L and R. Of course, in English, L and R are separate sounds or separate phonemes. And they can make a difference between two words-- "lot" versus "rot." But in Korean, for example, L and R are not separate phonemes. They can be interchanged in a word, and it doesn't change the meaning of the word. So Korean speakers, as well as Japanese speakers or Chinese speakers, often have problems with the L and R distinction in English.

Two consonants that are difficult for people are L and N. So you might hear confusion between "lot" and "not" or "evil" and "even." This is particularly common for people from southern China, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Another pair of consonant sounds that are difficult are V and W. And we see this in German speakers, Turkish speakers, people who speak Chinese, Hindi, and Persian, among others. So you might hear something more like "ve vill visit the city this veekend" where they're making all V sounds and none of the W sounds, or all W sounds and none of the V sounds, or interchanging the two.

The TH sounds in English are notoriously difficult for non-native speakers. And part of this is because we stick our tongue between our teeth to make the TH sound. It's called an interdental. There aren't a lot of sounds in the world's languages that require a person to move their tongue outside of their mouth. So for many people, this is something very strange and uncomfortable to do. So you may see that a non-native speaker has some kind of substitute for the TH

sound in English. They might use an S a Z combination as in "I sink zis is hard." They could use a T or D substitution as in "I tink dis is hard." Or sometimes F or a V sound to substitute-- "I fink vis is hard."

English consonants are often consonant clusters, when you have two or more consonants together in a word or phrase. Now different languages allow different combinations of what consonant sounds you can put together. And if a language uses a consonant combination you're not familiar with, there are a couple strategies that speakers use to try to pronounce that combination.

One strategy is to add a sound. And we see this a lot with Spanish speakers in S clusters. In English, of course, we can use S and another consonant at the beginning of a word-- words like "school" or "study." But in Spanish, it's not allowed to have an S cluster at the beginning of a word. There's always an E in front of it. So what you may find if you're talking to a native Spanish speaker in English is that he or she says things like "estudy" or "eschool." They're inserting that extra sound that they're used to in their language to make it an easier combination of sounds to say.

Another thing people might do is to delete sounds. So if we take a word like "belts" that has an L, a T, and an S all together at the end of the word, they could say "bels", "bets", "bet." They're dropping some of the sounds to make it easier for them to say.

Stress and intonation is a further factor in English pronunciation that can cause difficulties for non-native speakers in speaking it. Research has shown that this can be even more important than individual sounds. The rhythm, the cadence, the melody of all language is something that we use strongly to identify the language and understand what a person is saying, more so sometimes than individual sounds. Many languages are syllable timed, which means that every syllable is even. Each syllable has equal stress and an equal amount of time devoted to it.

English isn't like this. Some words carry stress. They form the peaks. They're the strong words. While other words, tending to be our grammatical little linking words, are shortened or reduced. And they fill in the space between the more stressed, peaked words. So if we take a sentence like "This hospital is located in Macclesfield, Cheshire", "is" and "in" are very, very short and soft. They're not stressed at all. Other words like nouns verbs, adjectives, and adverbs tend to have more stress.

A non-native speaker who comes from a syllable-timed language is going to tend to give more even distribution to that stress. So they might say something like "Ma- ccles- field hos-pi-tal" because they're trying to make the syllables more even like they're used to.

What we typically see with a non-native speaker is a combination of all of these factors. They have some difficulties with specific sounds as well as difficulties with the general stress and rhythm patterns of English. But if you're more familiar with some of these factors, if you're aware of the more common stress, consonant, and vowel difficulties that non-native speakers face, you might find it easier to understand accented English.

6.

We have been talking a lot about language. But it's not just linguistic factors that can cause problems when talking to a non-native speaker of English. Sometimes misunderstandings occur because of cultural differences. By culture, we mean the beliefs, the values, and the behaviours that a person holds based on the society that they grew up in or their home culture, the norms that were common in their home group. When your assumptions or expectations about these beliefs or behaviours don't match another person's, misunderstandings can occur.

Culture is still a tricky word to define. We can talk about UK culture, and we find subcultures within that culture. There's a lot of variation even within a culture. But we can still generally classify UK culture and compare it to general classifications of other cultures. Researchers have identified several different classifications or categories for doing this.

One of these is individualist and collectivist cultures. An individualist culture values personal freedom, independence, and privacy. However, a collectivist culture values the group; relationships, cohesion, and cooperation are important.

If we look at these two cultures on a spectrum, we can see that the UK is pretty far on the individualist end of things. We can see this in common phrases or proverbs in UK culture. If you want it done well, do it yourself. Good fences make good neighbours. And if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, with beating them being the preference.

How can this cause a misunderstanding? I have a great example from my friend's experience studying Spanish in Mexico. She chose to live with a host family, which consisted of a host mum and a host brother, who at the time was about her age. He was 32. And he still lived at home with his mum.

She thought that was a little bit weird. She didn't understand why he was still living at home. And later, when she was talking with her Mexican language partner, she found out that in Mexican culture it's common for children to live with their parents at home until they get married. And if they never get married, they continue to live at home.

When you look at this in terms of individual and collective cultures, this makes a lot of sense. Mexico has a very collectivist culture, where the family and group cohesion is important. And she was looking at it from a very individualist UK culture, where she valued self-sufficiency, being on her own in college, being on her own after she graduated, not living with her parents. She was misunderstanding that relationship because her expectations were different from the general culture in Mexico.

A further category we can use to classify cultures is high context and low context. A high context culture uses a lot of things implicitly. A lot is understood. You're indirect. You read between the lines. Non-verbal signals can carry a lot of meaning.

In a low context culture, the context isn't as important because people are direct. They're explicit and to the point.

Now, if we view these again on a spectrum, we can see that the US is more on the low context side of things. They tend to cut to the chase. They don't beat around the bush. They say what they mean and mean what they say.

An example of a misunderstanding resulting from this sort of a comparison happened to a colleague when she was teaching English in China. She wanted to do some baking. So she asked the officials at her school if she could use the school kitchen to do some baking. And she was told that they didn't have eggs.

My friend saw eggs in the market. She saw them in the grocery store. She sometimes saw them delivered to the school. So she didn't understand why they were telling her they didn't have eggs.

What she later found out was that the school didn't have an oven, which is, incidentally, pretty common in China. They don't do a lot of baking. So not a lot of people have ovens. But she didn't know this at the time.

So she had been offering to bring her own supplies. She'd buy her own eggs. She just wanted a place to be able to bake. The Chinese officials gave her an indirect response. They were trying to save face. They didn't want to directly admit that they didn't have an oven and risk embarrassing themselves or disappointing their foreign visitor. So they indirectly told her no by saying there were no eggs.

My friend, of course, coming from a very direct culture, was confused by this. And thought, well, why didn't you just tell me? If you had said there was no oven a long time ago, I would have stopped pestering you. So there we see a conflict between high context and low context, direct and indirect communication styles.

There are several other categories for different cultures that can also lead to misunderstandings. How a culture views time, if it's very strict and controlled or if it's more relaxed. How do you consider your control over the environment. If you have an internal locus of control, you can manipulate and control a lot. If it is external, you can't do much about things.

Another cultural factor is something called speech acts. So, for example, how we apologise and what we apologise for varies from culture to culture. The same with compliments - whom you compliment, what's an appropriate compliment; how you begin or end a phone conversation, how you agree with someone, how you disagree with someone; all of these are culturally bound.

The important thing to remember about culture overall is that it's always present, so much so that, most of the time, we don't notice it or think about it until something goes wrong.

When we're talking with someone who has accented English, that's a cue to us right away that they're from a different background. They're from a different language. You're going to be expecting some differences.

But this can be particularly problematic for a non-native speaker who has a very high level of English, someone who doesn't have much of an accent, who has a great command of their vocabulary, and grammar, and speed. We might mistakenly think they're more similar to us than they really are. So don't always assume similarities between people.

If you're in an uncomfortable situation, you can question if culture has something to do with it. Our tendency is to attribute an uncomfortable situation or problem to the specific person we're working with, that there's a flaw in their personality or something is wrong with that person. But it could also be the bigger issue of culture, that your

expectations or assumptions don't match.

It's important to remember that this advice will vary for each non-native English speaker. You may encounter people who have a very advanced command of English. Maybe you know someone who sounds like a native speaker, with no discernible accent. He or she may still have difficulties with more obscure vocabulary or slang. Other non-native speakers may have an intermediate or novice level of English speech. This will also vary depending on how much time the person has been studying and speaking English, what their native language is, and what their educational backgrounds are.

No matter the speaker's level, remember that your attitude can go a long way in making the interaction more successful. Be patient and friendly. Put yourself in the other person's shoes, and try not to get flustered. Communication is a two-way street. You both need to negotiate the interaction to effectively listen to and speak with one another.