



# CONNECTIONS

*Communicating in Culturally Diverse Settings*



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## How to Communicate When English is NOT the Primary Language

There are millions of Americans for whom English is not the primary language. This can certainly create some communication problems within the workplace, but there are several things you can do to communicate more effectively with a person who has some difficulty speaking English:

1. **Have Patience with the Person.** Give your speaking partner a chance to get his or her message across. Keep in mind that

the person is speaking a language that is not his or her native tongue so additional time may be necessary. Also, if you are having trouble understanding the person's words (e.g., due to an accent), listen closely for several minutes without interrupting. This can greatly aid your comprehension of the message.

2. **Make Sure the Noise Level is Low.** Noise is one of the biggest barriers to effective communication and can create many dis-

tractions. Try to find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed for a few minutes so that you can focus on your speaking partner's message.

3. **Use Active Listening to Check for Understanding.** Active listening may be the most powerful tool there is for effective communication. It consists of the listener's attempt to give back (or *reflect* which is why this is also called reflective listening) what has been stated by the speaker. This

## How to Communicate When English is NOT the Primary Language (continued)

serves two very important purposes. First, it allows the listener to further clarify what the speaker is saying. Second, it clearly demonstrates to the speaker that he/she is being heard and understood. Both you

and your speaking partner should "reflect" back to each other what the other has said to confirm comprehension of the message.

4. **Speak Clearly and Concisely but Not in a Patronizing Manner.** One of

the biggest mistakes that people make in cross-cultural communication is to "talk down" to someone because of their difficulty with English. This can happen unintentionally so be aware of how you are

COMMUNICATING IN  
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## When English is NOT the Primary Language (continued)

responding, both verbally and non-verbally, to your speaking partner.

5. **Pay Close Attention to Nonverbal Clues.** Because of their difficulty with verbal communication, a person may communicate a significant part of the message by nonverbal means. This can include the person's facial expressions, tone of voice, posture and body language.

6. **Try Not to Finish the Person's Sentences.** Sometimes this is difficult to do because you want the person to "spit it out" and tell you what's on his or her mind. However, your speaking partner may have trouble finding the right words. It is more effective to be patient, and let the person finish at his or her pace.

7. **Reduce Your Rate of Speech and Repeat or Rephrase Statements.** If necessary, speak more slowly, and repeat or rephrase statements until your communication partner understands. Likewise, ask your partner to repeat statements if you don't understand.

## The CONNECTIONS Series

CONNECTIONS is a series of interactive training and coaching programs geared toward the development of a core set of diversity competencies. It is a skills-based program designed to improve one's ability to effectively communicate with culturally different persons and to efficiently resolve a wide variety of conflicts. CONNECTIONS will help your organization improve workforce quality, enhance individual and team performance, improve customer service, increase market sensitivity, enhance leadership skills and improve employer-employee relations. For more information on how CONNECTIONS can significantly enhance performance, visit [www.doctorholmes.net](http://www.doctorholmes.net).

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