Confident Communication for Global Classrooms

This resource is designed to support effective communication in linguistically diverse learning environments. Because communication is inherently collaborative, it is most effective when both speakers and listeners share responsibility for constructing meaning and fostering mutual understanding.

Starting with a Positive and Growth Mindset

Understanding different accents and communication styles is a skill that develops with practice. If you don't understand someone immediately, avoid assuming the issue is with the speaker. It often takes time for your brain to adjust to an unfamiliar accent or speaking style.

Instead of thinking:	Try thinking:
• "I can't understand them." • "Their English is bad." • "They need to speak more clearly."	• "My ear hasn't adjusted to this accent yet." • "I probably need a few minutes to tune in." • "I'm missing some sounds now, but I'll likely understand more as the conversation continues." • "This speaker communicates differently than I'm used to, and I may need to listen more carefully." • "Understanding different accents is a skill I can continue to develop."
Instead of saying:	**Try instead:**
• "I don't understand you." • "I didn't understand anything you said." • "Can you speak properly?" • "Say it again" without specifying what was unclear.	• "Did you say...?" • "I understood the part about ____. What was the second part?" • "Could you explain that in a different way?" • "Just to make sure I understood correctly, are you saying _____?" • "Could you repeat the last point?" • "Would it be possible to write down that term or keyword?" • "I may ask a few clarifying questions to make sure I've understood correctly."

Skill Building Strategies for Both Listeners and Speakers

Situation	Skill(s)
All situations	**Listener:** 1. Allow time for speakers to express their ideas and complete their thoughts. 2. Recognize and respect that everyone speaks English with different accents, dialects, and communication styles. 3. Practice active, respectful listening by focusing on understanding the message rather than critiquing the delivery. 4. Ask respectful clarifying questions when needed. For example: “I couldn’t catch this one word. Could you repeat it or write it down?” 5. Be patient and supportive when misunderstandings occur; work collaboratively to clarify meaning. 6. Continue listening when you miss a word, as subsequent context often clarifies meaning.
	Speaker: 1. Use visual cues, slides, or written materials to reinforce key points. 2. Speak at a steady pace and audible volume.

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	3. Pause periodically to allow listeners time to process information. 4. Reiterate key points to help listeners follow the conversation. 5. Rehearse key terminology, names, acronyms, and unfamiliar words when they are central to the conversation. 6. Check for understanding and invite questions throughout the conversation.
Lectures (e.g., keynote talks, course lectures, and conference presentations)	**Listener:** 1. Preview materials in advance when possible (e.g., learning outcomes, posted lecture slides, and assigned readings). 2. Familiarize yourself with key terms to help you understand the context of what's being said. 3. Take notes to help focus your attention and capture main ideas rather than trying to catch every word. 4. Allow yourself time to adjust to the speaker's accent or communication style. Comprehension often improves after a few minutes of focused listening as listeners become familiar with speech patterns and pronunciation.
	Speaker: 1. Use supportive technology (e.g., microphones, captioning) or visual supports (e.g. slides, handouts, whiteboards) when available. 2. Design slides to support listening rather than compete with it. Ensure text and spoken explanations correspond to avoid overwhelming listeners. 3. Be transparent about the structure of the lecture/presentation to prepare your listeners for what is about to happen and to ground them when attention shifts. For example: "My talk will cover three topics…", "The next section of my presentation deals with…" 4. Define discipline-specific or technical terms, particularly when they are central to understanding. 5. Highlight key takeaways and revisit important points.
Group work	**All members:** 1. Practice active listening (listen with your full attention and focus on the task): • listen to understand rather than to respond • attend to non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, tone, gesture, and body language) while recognizing that their meaning may vary across individuals and cultures; interpret non-verbal cues thoughtfully and avoid making assumptions based on any single behavior. • ask open-ended or probing questions ("How do you see us dividing this task?") • request clarification respectfully ("Could you explain that idea further?") 2. Ensure all group members have opportunities to contribute. Team leaders, facilitators, and group members should actively create space for participation and invite input from those who may not yet have had an opportunity to speak.

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	3. Discuss communication styles and preferences as a group and develop an agreement for collaboration. You might consider: • how you'll make time for clarification • how accents and speech styles vary • how you'll support one another in understanding 4. Use shared documents, collaborative notes, or whiteboards to capture ideas, action items, and responsibilities in writing. 5. Encourage members to paraphrase or summarize important decisions before moving forward to ensure shared understanding. 6. Recognize that quietness, hesitation, or a preference for written communication may reflect different communication styles rather than a lack of interest or contribution. Similarly, recognize that directness and blunt comments may not reflect rudeness or a desire to dominate the conversation.
One to one (e.g., office hours, peer discussion, mentoring)	**Listener:** 1. Practice reflective listening: • paraphrase or summarize what you heard • reflect back to the speaker what you understood instead of asking them to repeat (see sample phrases above) 2. Make notes while listening and ask clarifying questions to deepen overall understanding rather than focusing on individual words or pronunciation. 3. If you miss something, identify the specific part you would like clarified rather than asking the speaker to repeat everything.
	Speaker: • Use multiple communication strategies when helpful, including examples, diagrams, gestures, written notes, or visual supports. • Pause periodically to check for understanding and invite questions. • Plan ahead: bring questions in writing or prompts for discussion to ensure the conversation stays on track and support shared understanding • Summarize key messages and next steps before concluding the conversation.
Complementary Teaching Strategies	
Instructors/TAs can also:	**A. Help students identify what else might be shaping their communication experience.** For example, are they encountering: • An unfamiliar accent or speech pattern? • Unfamiliar vocabulary or technical terminology? • Unfamiliar content or concepts? • Poor audio quality or environmental noise? • A rapid pace of speech? **Why?** Students may attribute all listening difficulties to an accent when several factors may be affecting comprehension. Developing the ability to identify the specific source of the challenge can reduce frustration and help students choose more effective strategies for understanding.

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	B. Use instructional practices that support communication and comprehension. For example: • Provide lecture slides, key terms, discussion questions, or other materials in advance whenever possible. • Clearly identify learning objectives and major concepts at the start of a lecture or activity. • Introduce and define discipline-specific terminology and acronyms before using them extensively. • Use examples, visuals, demonstrations, and summaries to reinforce key ideas. • Regularly signal transitions and summarize main takeaways throughout lectures. • Note sections that were unclear and revisit them later through slides, recordings, readings, or follow-up questions. **Why?** Comprehension improves when students can anticipate content and connect new information to prior knowledge.
	C. Encourage students to use effective communication strategies, such as: • Focus on understanding concepts and key messages rather than recognizing every word perfectly. • Compare notes with classmates to fill gaps in understanding and verify key information. • Keep a list of technical terms, names, or phrases they initially found difficult to understand and review them after class. • Reflect on which listening strategies worked well and which could be adjusted. **Why?** Successful listening does not require understanding every word. Effective listeners focus on constructing meaning and using context, visual supports, prior knowledge, and clarification strategies to support comprehension.

Want to **learn more** about communication strategies that support an academic culture where everyone can participate, contribute, and thrive?

- **Students** can book 1:1 appointments at Student Academic Success Services to build and practice writing and communication skills: academic.success@queensu.ca.
- **Instructors** can book individual consultations with educational developers at the Centre for Teaching & Learning: ctl@queensu.ca.

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