

Dos and Don'ts for Learning from a Foreign-Accented Speaker

Do attend class and pay attention. What's the point of going to class if I can't understand the instructor? If you are removing yourself from the communication, you are not being cooperative. The communication will never improve if you aren't trying. It might give you some hope to know that linguistics researchers have found that your brain has the amazing ability to make sense of speech patterns very quickly. This means that when you can't understand someone's accent at first, if you continue to listen and try to make sense of their speech, you will most likely be able to hear the patterns and be able to understand. If you stop attending class or stop paying attention, you give up hope of being able to improve your level of understanding.

Don't pretend to understand. Let's face it, foreign accented speakers know they have accents. It's not going to be a surprise to them if you let them know you're having difficulty understanding them. One of the least effective things one could do when not understanding someone is to PRETEND to understand. Some students nod or say "OK" simply to move the conversation or class along. That's not doing anyone any good. It's perfectly alright to simply and gently say, "I apologize. I am having a little difficulty understanding you. If you could slow down just a little bit I'll be able to get it all correct."

The most important thing to the person with the accent is knowing you WANT to understand them. They're aware you might be having difficulty understanding, and nodding yes or pretending you understand won't help the situation at all.

Do ask questions. The instructor, like any other speaker, is relying on the listener(s) to provide feedback when s/he doesn't understand. If students don't ask questions when they haven't understood something, it's reasonable for the instructor to assume they understood. If you need to ask a question, be sure to follow the standards for asking questions in the instructor's classroom. Some instructors allow students to interrupt for questions, others prefer that students raise their hands and wait to be recognized. Keep a pen and paper handy so you can write down questions and not forget them.

Of course, the instructor should make efforts to allow for questions. Sometimes, an instructor who has a heavy accent or is less comfortable speaking English may avoid questions in the classroom setting, especially if the students in the course have complained a lot about his/her accent. The instructor may prefer to answer questions one on one during office hours where they can be sure students are understanding through the accent. Be mindful of this and try to be respectful of the instructor's wishes.

Don't RUSH. Often there's a tendency to want to rush someone who speaks with an accent. Rushing threatens the best of us, let alone someone who is not able to express themselves in our own style. Slow down. Take your time. If you find yourself constantly saying "uh huh" over and over in rapid succession, you may be rushing the person.

Do monitor your non-verbal cues. Your tone of voice is universal. So keep it at a light and slower pace. Smiling is also an international communication tool. They'll hear your smile in any language. However, just like they will understand your pleasant tone and smile regardless of their native language, they will also understand what rolling eyes, sighs, moans, and groans mean. We can communicate a lot without ever saying a word. Make sure what you are communicating to your instructor is positive in nature.

Don't Shout. Those with a foreign accent are NOT hard of hearing. Many a time we subconsciously speak louder or repeat the same word over and over, thinking that will help. It doesn't. People with accents normally hear very well. It's insulting to shout at them. Keep that smile on your face. It'll show you have the patience to help and keep trying to let them know that you aren't judging their accent and that you are doing your best to understand. It might take time, but it will help.

Do email your instructor. When you email your instructor, his/her response will not have an accent. If you are really struggling to make sense of an instructor's words try messaging them your questions for a response. S/he should be able to respond to you in writing to help you along. Check with your instructor or look in the syllabus to see what his/her email policy is. S/he may not be able to respond to you as quickly as you might like, but again try to communicate your needs to the instructor in a polite way.

Don't Be Rude. No one really thinks they're rude. But, if you've ever said to that person "Hey, I can't understand you," or even a short, terse, "HUH?" you're considered rude. Again, go back and explain you're having a little difficulty understanding them. They'll often repeat it for you. If the situation is hopeless and you simply aren't getting anywhere, don't be embarrassed or afraid to call for help. Perhaps another student can better understand what the professor is saying. Try to do this without disrupting the class. Try to remember, it's as frustrating to the instructor not being understood as it is to you not being able to understand.

Do visit your instructor's office hours. Sometimes the classroom is not the optimal setting for communication. Especially if you have a large class with 50 or 100 (or even more) students, often communication does not go well, even for native English speakers. This means that sometimes additional clarification might be necessary outside of class time. Students should take advantage of instructors' office hours. Be sure to go to office hours prepared with specific questions to get the most out of your time there.

Don't make the accent a scapegoat. Sometimes students get frustrated in a course with a foreign accented instructor and then blame everything on the accent when the accent might not actually be the problem. If you are frustrated, try to identify what is really going on and don't just blame the instructor's accent if there are other issues in the course.

Do the assigned readings and come to each class prepared. I'm not suggesting that reading a textbook should replace classroom communication. However, readings are often given to enhance students' abilities to engage with material during class. This is because if you've read something about the topic in preparation for class, you will be mentally prepared to hear about this topic. Your comprehension of what you hear in class will increase. As an added bonus, textbooks are written in English, without an accent.