

The Art of Listening

Being a successful cross-cultural communicator with an international student often involves a strong investment in developing good listening skills. While the main objective is to encourage internationals to open up and speak, just shooting questions back and forth can become dull. Mutual satisfaction depends on practicing good communication skills, which entail some of the following characteristics:

- Select topics that are of mutual interest and require more than short answers. Make sure your surroundings are quiet enough to hear one another.
- All cultures differ in the spatial distance between two people engaged in conversation. Be alert to non-verbal cues that indicate the other person is feeling uncomfortable, and resist the urge to speak louder if your friend finds it difficult to understand what you are saying.
- Proper feedback maintains conversation. Use clarification questions that promote dialogue. Don't ask, "Do you understand?" Instead, ask questions like, "Do you mean to say...?" Use open questions instead of yes and no ones.
- Ask follow-up questions that indicate your interest in his or her feelings such as "How did you feel after that happened?" or "How would you respond to this if you were in your culture?"
- Help bring the conversation into focus by using summarizing statements, such as, "These seem to be the key concerns you have expressed..." or "Your primary point seems to be..." Often, such statements stimulate additional dialogue.
- Silence makes Americans uncomfortable in conversations. Resist the urge to blurt out something to fill the void. Silent periods may seem awkward to you, but they may indicate showing respect, providing some mental rest, or a transition between topics.
- Select questions that will get some mileage out of the conversation, as well as indicate greater depth of interest you have in knowing him or her better. Avoid questions that are too specific about family, or overly trite questions, such as, "Where is your country?" or "When are you going back?"
- Don't judge the quality of the relationship by how well you communicate on the same wavelength. It may take some time to adjust to one another's communication habits. Be patient, and ask God to help draw you closer as friends.
- Remember that cross-cultural communication is a skill to develop. Keep a humble and learning spirit.