

## Tips on Cross-Cultural Communication

When carrying on a conversation with someone of a different culture, it is important to know what you can talk about and what topics you should avoid. Lack of such knowledge is often the major cause of miscommunication(1) and can lead to ill feeling(2). We all can tell stories about unpleasant encounters(3) resulting from language or cultural barriers(4). Here I' ll share an example to illustrate how misunderstandings can occur if certain rules are not observed(5) in cross-cultural communication.

The experience was related to me by an exchange student(6) from Europe, and it concerned her life at Tamkang University. Having lived in Taiwan for over three years, she was constantly baffled(7) by the local students she came in contact with. According to her, the things that annoyed(8) her the most were questions such as “Where did you buy your clothes?” “How much did they cost you?” “Is your bracelet real?” “Are you married?” or “Do you have a boyfriend?” Some students in her class surprised her by touching her hair and feeling her clothes completely uninvited(9). She had a hard time understanding such intrusions of privacy(10). Apparently what we Chinese consider as proper behavior may be perceived as rude(11) or offensive(12) in light of(13) a different culture.

How do we maintain a conversation with our foreign friends without causing misunderstanding or giving the wrong impression? Here is a rule of thumb(14): Avoid topics involving one' s personal life or matters of privacy. Unless you know the person well, you should stay with safe subjects such as the weather, traffic, school, work and similar

conversation fillers(15) for making casual(16) conversation. Be friendly, polite, and sensitive to your partner' s reaction. Above all, you should always get ready to move to a different topic or end the conversation whenever appropriate.

Here are some conversation starters for making small talk(17):

Nice weather we have (are having) today.

Is it cold enough for you?

Boy. I hate this traffic!

Are you new here?

Are you a ... major?

How do you enjoy the class?

Did you hear about...?

Do you work here?

Hi. Do you mind if I sit here?

Is this seat taken?

1. miscommunication (n.) 錯誤傳達；傳達不清；辭不達意。2. ill feeling 不好的感覺。3. encounter (n.) 遭遇，碰見。4. barrier (n.) 障礙物，阻礙，隔閡。5. observe(v.) 遵守。6. exchange student (n.) 交換學生。7. be baffled by (v.) 使困惑，使為難。8. annoy (v.) 煩擾，困擾；令人惱怒。9. uninvited (adj.) 未受邀的，不請自來的。10. intrusions of privacy 侵犯隱私。11. rude (adj.) 無教養的，無禮的。12. offensive (adj.) 令人不愉快的；令人憎恨的；令人憤怒的。13. in light of 觀點；看法。14. rule of thumb 參考要旨。15. conversation filler (n.) 客套的談天話題。16. casual (adj.) 非正式的，平常的。17. small talk (n.) 談天，閑聊。

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