Practically Speaking

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Many front line library employees need to interact successfully with non-native speakers of English on a regular basis at circulation desks, reference desks, and student peer assistant stations in libraries across Canada. This article lists some practical tips and suggestions for making these interactions more effective and more pleasant for both library users and library staff.

1. Remember that every interaction is a two-way street. Both parties must participate and work with each other to make each interaction successful.

2. Comprehensibility – Being comprehensible means being able to be understood by a native speaker. Non-native speakers who approach library service points should be trying to be comprehensible to native speakers working at these stations. However, native speakers need to be comprehensible as well. Being comprehensible in your native language could mean consciously slowing down your rate of speech or not using jargon. Slowing down, however, does not mean speaking down to people. Library staff who are native speakers should practice slowing down their rate of speech without changing their tone of voice. Otherwise, they risk sounding patronizing or insulting to non-native speaking adults if they talk to them as if they are children. Non-native speakers asking library questions are for the most part generally able to comprehend positive and negative tones of voice, facial expressions, and body language.

3. Comprehension – Comprehension is the flip side of comprehensibility. Comprehensibility lies with the speaker producing the verbal output, and comprehension lies with the receiver of the verbal output. Comprehension is therefore also an important value for both partners in a speaking interaction. To practice meaningful comprehension, native speakers can learn to listen more for content than for form. This means being able to disregard grammatical errors in English production and focus instead on the meaning of the question. This again is a technique that can be practiced and put to use in everyday situations.

Comprehension can also be gauged after an interaction with non-native speakers. Asking “Does this make sense to you?” instead of “Do you understand?” is a good technique to use for this purpose. It shifts the heavier burden of more explanation from the non-native speaker to the native speaker. This occurs because the first question emphasizes the native speaker’s need to explain something in a way that can be better understood by the non-native speaker. In contrast, the second question shifts that burden of meaning squarely back to the non-native speaker who may or may not be able to fully express why something was not clear.

4. Use circumlocution. This means using different words to describe something that was not understood. For example, if someone did not know what was meant by the word “stapler”, the use of circumlocution would be to describe it as “a tool you use to attach two pieces of paper together.” Circumlocution means “talking around” and it can be another useful technique to use with non-native speakers.

5. Attitude makes a difference. If you project a cheerful or positive attitude towards working with non-native speakers, these vibes can almost become contagious. You will attract questions if you have the ability to make people feel comfortable in approaching you. Another way to consider the importance of attitude is to consciously consider the benefits as well as the challenges of working with non-native speakers. Beware the “deficit model”1 reported in library literature that describes every encounter with a non-native speaker as an opportunity for a problem to arise. Remember that you are part of a successful interaction too.

6. Use multiple learning styles. Non-native speakers have to achieve comprehension across multiple language proficiencies. These proficiencies include speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Each one of these proficiencies requires much cognitive effort to engage in. And the non-native speakers who must work in all four areas of proficiency may have different preferred learning styles as well. What this means practically is that if you are a native speaker experiencing difficulties communicating with a non-native speaker, it may help the interaction to employ a different modality: say something and then also write it down on a piece of paper, or say something and physically act a motion of what to do, or say something and use a picture to provide an accompanying visual clue.

7. Show sympathy, but practice empathy. Sympathy can mean sharing an emotion with someone such as pity or commiseration, but empathy means putting yourself in their place. If you have ever lived, worked, or attended classes in a language environment different from your native language, you are well positioned to use a lot of empathy in your library dealings with non-native speakers. Even if you haven’t had these kinds of opportunities, however, you can still imagine what it could be like to exchange places with this person. Putting yourself in their place can go a long way towards bringing about successful interactions.

8. Be open to working with a third person if it helps aid the interaction. Involving someone who knows both English and the native language can sometimes smooth exchanges and bring them to successful conclusions. It is not failure to involve a third party in an interaction; it is instead a very useful way to help interactions move forward.

9. Use conversation repair techniques. This means trying to overcome gaps and halts in the conversation in a positive way. For example, rephrasing a question or answer using different words is a conversation technique. So is using fillers such as “um” or “ah” to give yourself more time to think of a response. Speaking more slowly or clearly can also be a conversation repair technique, as can simply apologizing and frankly admitting that you did not understand the question and asking the questioner if they could try asking the question again in a different way.

10. Use recasting. This refers to giving feedback in the form of a question instead of indicating directly to someone that they made a mistake. For example, if a non-native speaker comes up to the circulation desk and asks directions to the “free section,” you might reply by saying, “You need directions to the open stacks?”

11. Don’t correct people’s grammar or vocabulary use unless they ask you to. It inhibits the flow of conversation, reduces fluency, and adds to stress levels. It can grind an interaction to a halt because it forces the non-native speaker to concentrate more on accuracy (not making grammatical errors) and less on fluency (keeping the communication going regardless of grammatical inaccuracies).

12. Observe successful interactions. Try to discover what makes them successful, and then practice emulating them. Often successful interactions come about because of a combination of positive factors such as approachability, emotional support or understanding, positive body language, a willingness to engage in interactions that might require use of the techniques listed in this article, and the ability to learn from these encounters. All of these factors go beyond the simple transmission of a piece of information, so it is important to keep this bigger picture in mind.

13. Learn from your mistakes. Mistakes in this sense refer to stoppages in communication, not grammatical errors. If an interaction was not successful, accept it as a learning experience. Then try to discover why it was not successful and consider how such a situation could be remedied in the future.

14. Read more about working with international users who are non-native speakers.2 Learning from the library literature can result in a deeper understanding of successful interactions with non-native speakers and can further inform your thinking about working with this group of library users.

15. Invite guest lecturers in to talk to library staff. Many college and university campuses include people who are knowledgeable about working with people from different cultures or who have different native languages. Some of these experts could include international services administrators, faculty members in applied linguistics or education, or international users themselves who might be willing to share their insights and experiences with library staff.

16. Make international users feel welcome in your library. Creating a comfortable and positive place for interactions to happen can lead to successful initial interactions. Some ways to do this could include creating or posting a welcome sign in different languages, displaying flags from different countries, or advertising foreign language material in your own collection.

17. Solicit feedback from non-native speakers. This can be done both formally and informally. Formal ways could include anonymous paper surveys or web surveys, putting a formal feedback form on your web site or conducting exit interviews. Informal ways could include simply speaking with international users to find out what might help them feel more comfortable or become better library users.

18. Brainstorm with other library staff for more ideas about how to have successful interactions. Never underestimate the power of a group to stimulate more ideas than you could come up with yourself. Exposure to different social media by group members could also potentially fuel new ideas about more ways to work successfully with non-native speakers in your library.

19. Try to learn another language yourself. There is no better way to keep yourself humble or to make yourself feel like you have something in common with other language learners. A healthy appreciation of the effort it takes to learn another language can go a long way towards strengthening personal connections between non-native library users and library staff.

20. Smile.

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