



# Barriers to Cross-cultural Communication

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Erasmus+

# Barriers to Cross-cultural Communication

In this unit, we are reflecting on some barriers to Cross-cultural communication and learning some strategies to overcome them.

The barriers we are talking about are:

1. Language
2. Non-verbal communication
3. Stereotypes
4. Tendency to evaluate behaviour from the other culture as good or bad
5. High level of stress that typically accompanies intercultural interactions



# Language

## 1. Language

Language can be a barrier to intercultural communication not only in terms of the level of knowledge about the foreign language in question but also because language shapes the way we see the world and the way we behave.



# Language

## **For example, did you know that...?**

- The word “private” does not exist as a word in many languages
- Eskimos: 24 words for snow
- Words which describe moral concepts can be unique to countries or areas
- spoken language precision important in low-context cultures



# Language

Read this interesting article about how language can affect the way we think...

<https://ideas.ted.com/5-examples-of-how-the-languages-we-speak-can-affect-the-way-we-think/>



# Language

Strategies to overcome the language barrier:

(1) learn the language,

(2) find someone who can speak the language as an interpreter,

(3) ask for clarification if you're not sure about what someone says

(4) before a meeting, prepare and share an agenda

(5) after the meeting, write a minute with the main points discussed and points agreed (but consider explaining the reason for such communication, since writing follow-up emails after calls might be a sign of lack of trust to certain cultures)



# Non-verbal communication

## 2. Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication can play an important role in intercultural encounters. We need to be aware that most non-verbal gestures are influenced by culture and that, while some of them might look offensive or intrusive to you, for others culture they might be completely acceptable. Moreover, many times the other person is not even aware of her/his own non-verbal gestures and, sometimes, the same gesture might have different meanings for different cultures.



# Non-verbal communication

Let's take the following gesture as an example:





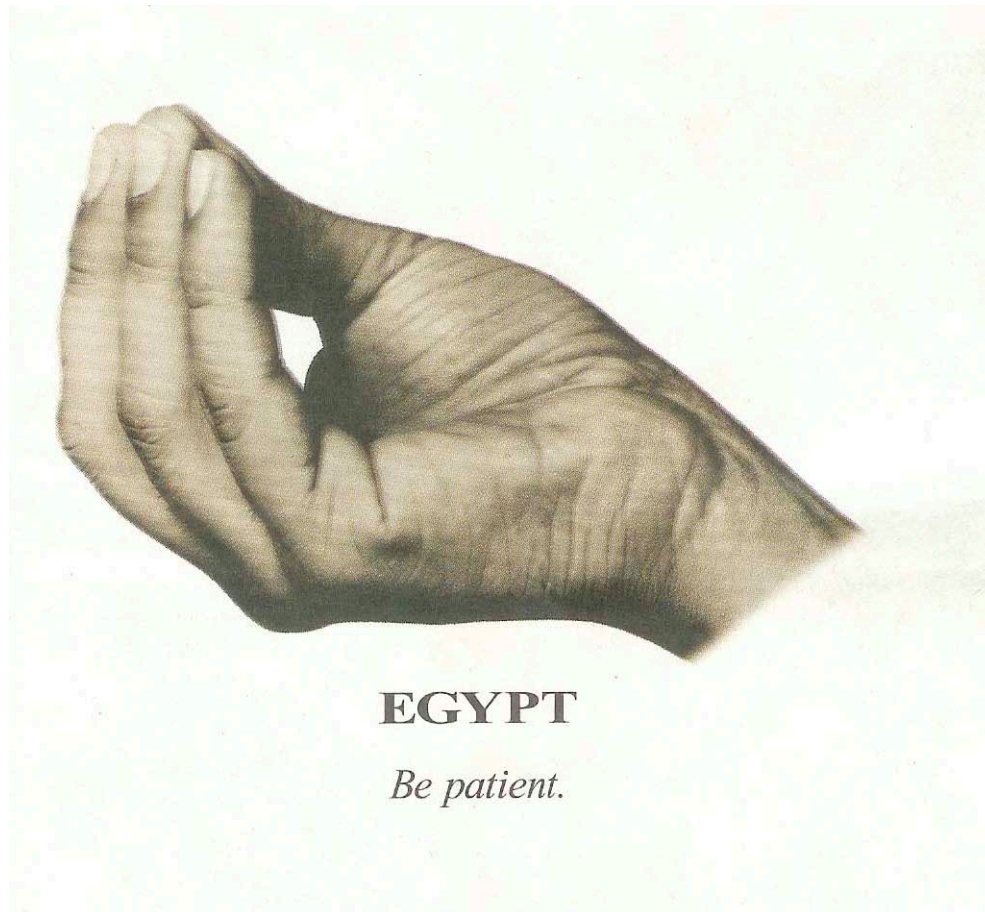
# Non-verbal communication



# Non-verbal communication



# Non-verbal communication



# Non-verbal Communication

See?

The same gesture can have different meanings for different cultures. So, be aware of your own non-verbal communication patterns and avoid to judge the gestures from others.

Other strategies to overcome this barrier are:



# Non-verbal Communication

- (1) Do not assume you understand any nonverbal signals or behavior unless you are familiar with the culture
- (2) don't take a stranger's nonverbal behaviour personally, even if it is insulting in your culture
- (3) develop an awareness of your own nonverbal communication patterns that might be insulting in certain cultures



# Stereotypes

## 3. Stereotypes

There is no doubt that stereotypes pose a barrier to intercultural communication.

We learned in Module 1 (Unit 4) what stereotypes are and how they are formed (see [this video](#) as a refreshing example).

So, what can we do to overcome this barrier to Cross-cultural Communication?





# Stereotypes

Strategies to overcome stereotypes:

(1) Make every effort to increase awareness of your own perceptions and stereotypes of cultures you encounter

(2) learn about the other culture

(3) reinterpret their behaviour from their cultural perspective, adapting your own stereotypes to fit your own experiences



# Tendency to evaluate behaviour from the other culture as good or bad

## 4. Tendency to evaluate behaviour from the other culture as good or bad

As we learned before, our brains are programmed to judge people from the moment we meet them. Still, we are also equipped with the ability of holding critical reflection towards such judgements.





# Tendency to evaluate behaviour from the other culture as good or bad

So, in order to overcome the barrier of judgment:

(1) Maintain appropriate distance

(2) recognize that you cannot change a culture (or yourself) overnight

(3) do not judge someone from other culture by your own cultural values until you know them well



# High level of stress that typically accompanies intercultural interactions

5. The last barrier to intercultural communication that we are talking about regards the high level of stress that typically accompanies intercultural interactions

Dealing with differences and the unknown might be a bit uncomfortable for some people.

Although interacting with people from different cultures can be very stressful at first, one must always keep in mind that the exchange can be very rewarding.

Let's take a look at some strategies to overcome this barrier:



# Tendency to evaluate behaviour from the other culture as good or bad

- (1) Accept the ambiguity of cross-cultural situations in which you are not sure of what others expect of you or what you can expect from them
- (2) work to reduce the other intercultural barriers discussed before
- (3) be forgiving of others and yourself – give the benefit of doubt



# Barriers to Cross-cultural Communication

In this unit, we saw some barriers to Cross-cultural communication and learned some strategies to overcome them.

The barriers we are talked about were:

1. Language
2. Non-verbal communication
3. Stereotypes
4. Tendency to evaluate behaviour from the other culture as good or bad
5. High level of stress that typically accompanies intercultural interactions

So, keep a note on the strategies suggested to overcome each of these barriers. You will surely have smoother intercultural experiences by taking them into account.

