

## Joining in a conversation ~ expressing yourself when you don't have the 'exact' words

Many learners often feel they simply don't have enough vocabulary to express themselves fully or completely in English. The following strategies could be useful for you in dealing with this problem:

### 1. Avoiding communication partially (or totally)

While we don't really recommend that you completely avoid communication because you're afraid that your vocabulary is inadequate, sometimes it might be necessary to just listen (and pay careful attention) when a conversation is on a topic you are unfamiliar with. If you're very brave, another strategy is to try to change the topic of the conversation to one that you *are* familiar with.

### 2. Adjusting or approximating the message

This means altering what you want to say slightly by omitting some items of information, making ideas simpler or less precise, or saying something slightly different that means almost the same thing. Imagine, for example, that you wanted to

borrow a pen from somebody but forgot the word 'pen'. Would asking for a 'pencil' (instead of a 'pen') affect your message very significantly? In this situation, another strategy would be to ask for 'something used for writing'. This practice of using a number of words to replace a single (forgotten/unknown) word is called 'circumlocution' and is a very important compensation strategy.

### 3. Invent a substitute word

This strategy is somewhat similar to the one above. Quite often when learners are trying to make do with the vocabulary they have and carry on with a conversation, they will invent new words. Here are a couple of examples: *wordbook* for 'dictionary', *moving stairs* for 'escalator'. Using these invented words to replace unknown words will not affect your communication significantly and will still allow you to get your message across. In fact, native speakers love inventing new words, especially when referring to new ideas and concepts or the latest developments in technology. Some of the latest newly invented words include: *tweet*, *social media*, and *m-commerce*. This is part of the natural development of a language.

### 4. Getting help

Sometimes when you can't think of the word(s) for expressing your ideas, you need to get help from your conversation partner(s). For example, you may ask them to provide you with a word in English by asking for a translation of a first language word (assuming that they can speak your native language). Another commonly used way of getting the word you need is physically pointing to the object you mean or miming (using gestures) to indicate meaning. Don't be afraid to use a few drama techniques when you're speaking.

## Joining in a conversation ~ listening strategies

What can you do when you are chatting with someone and you can't understand what that person is saying? During a conversation, many learners of English find it difficult to follow other speakers. Learners generally feel that this is due to the speakers' natural (often considered too fast) speaking speed and/or their use of unfamiliar vocabulary. The following strategies are useful in dealing with these problems:

## 1. Make an 'educated' guess

Good learners, and even native speakers, will often make an educated or informed 'guess' when:

- ◆ they haven't heard or understood something well enough
- ◆ when they hear a new word they don't know, or
- ◆ when they suspect that there is an extra, hidden meaning to what is being said.

In language learning, the term for 'guessing' is called 'inferencing'. When you 'infer' something, you make a conclusion based on the context. For example, doctors make a diagnosis (inference) based on symptoms (context). You can do the same thing when listening.

When trying to follow a conversation, you can use two different types of 'clues' to help you guess what your conversation partner is saying: one is to look for 'linguistic' or 'language' clues, the other is to look for 'paralinguistic' or 'non-verbal' clues.

### a) Searching for verbal clues

Often-times you can guess the meaning of an unknown word from its 'context' in a sentence. The 'context' can be provided by other words that you do know. Similarly, if you are familiar with the

topic of a conversation, you might be able to guess a word that you're not sure you heard properly by thinking about 'keywords' associated with the topic. Sometimes unknown words might sound like other words in English or even in another language that you know. You can use this knowledge to guess the meaning of these words.

### b) Searching for non-verbal clues

Non-language clues can be of various kinds: your general knowledge of the conversation topic, the relationship between the topic and the speakers, and the body language and tone of voice the speakers are using. These clues can all assist you in making a confident guess as to the speakers' attitudes towards the topic.

Perhaps, however, perhaps the most valuable clue in communication is non-verbal behaviour. Non-verbal behaviour includes things such as intonation, pitch, gestures, body movements, eye contact and facial expressions. Taking note of non-verbal behaviour is essential in making guesses when following a conversation. You can, for example, usually get a good idea about a person's feelings from his/her facial expressions. Likewise, intonation is often a

good indicator of 'implicit' or 'hidden' meanings and feelings.

## 2. Request assistance

This strategy requires you to be much more pro-active when trying to follow a conversation by requesting that your conversation partner help you understand what is being said. Try using the following strategies when asking for help:

- ◆ Request that your conversation partner slow down their rate of speech
- ◆ Ask them to repeat or clarify or verify what you think they've said
- ◆ Use synonyms (similar words) to check your understanding of unknown words
- ◆ Paraphrase (say in your own words) and repeat information back to the speaker
- ◆ Give feedback to show that you understand (or don't) such as nodding or shaking your head
- ◆ Summarize what you have understood to be the key points of a conversation

## And now...

If you would like any help or advice, or just a chat about your progress, please get in touch - **we are here to support your independent learning!** To contact us:

- Make an appointment to see an **adviser**. For details of advisers and their availability, please go to <https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-adviser-timetable/>.
- E-mail your questions to **iLANG** ([icilang@ust.hk](mailto:icilang@ust.hk)).
- Ask at the reception counter of the Language Commons — if the receptionist cannot help you directly, s/he will pass your query on to one of the advisers.

## What else can you do?

- Browse the many physical (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-commons/#resources>) and online materials (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/resources-speaking/>) for Speaking.
- Join a Speaking activity or short course (<http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/speaking/>).
- Join HKUST Toastmasters - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HKU STTMC/> - which meets on a regular basis for members to practice various skills useful in public speaking, including giving prepared as well as impromptu

speeches, listening, and providing each other with feedback and evaluation. Toastmasters adopts a "learn-by-doing" philosophy.

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