

It all begins with ‘How’s your day?’

By

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It was my first day in Vancouver, arriving with two big luggages, struggling to get into a telecommunication store to purchase a mobile phone plan. When I stepped into the store, I received warm greetings from a saleslady, ‘Hey there! How’s your day?’ I stood like a statue at the entrance, trying to switch my language from Cantonese to English, then I gave the worst reply, ‘Oh, I’d like to get a phone plan.’

Hong Kong is a fast-paced city. Everything must go fast and smooth to stay efficient and effective. Therefore, we seldom greet each other before starting off a formal conversation. I often walk into a store, pick up a shirt and tell a saleslady to pack it for me – no extra words, except ‘How much is this?’ and ‘Please pack this for me.’ I did not realize that my curt response has something to do with cultural differences and that’s why I was surprised when the saleslady asked ‘Is this your first time to Vancouver?’ Verbal greetings in Canada are different and this was a valuable lesson. As Canadians uphold the idea of politeness in terms of verbal communication, I faced my first obstacle upon arrival— that is to be polite not just in my tone of speech, but to reveal politeness within my response.

Greeting each other is an important element as people never directly start off conversations. The main topic is always revealed after a chat. When I go into a clothes store in Vancouver, the salesladies never greet me by merely saying ‘Hello’, instead, they usually ask ‘How are you?’ When I walk into a restaurant, while the waitress leads me to my seat, she initiates a conversation by asking ‘How’s your day?’ or ‘The weather is so nice today!’ When I cook at the hostel, residents passing by may drop in and chat, and they usually ask about my food or my cooking. It is common to start off talking about something casual, and this method makes mingling with others easier. It is polite in this context and shows that the saleslady is not merely concerned with whether I am buying in her shop or not; the waitress is not merely considering the amount of food I will order; residents and students are not trying to get free food, instead, they would like to show friendliness and politeness to me. If someone in Hong Kong tries to chat with me on the street, I would probably think that he is insane or trying to cheat me and I will walk away as soon as possible. However, in Vancouver, it is just a usual situation for strangers to start talking during a bus ride or while

waiting in line. It is rude to jump into a serious topic immediately without greeting appropriately.

People who have different cultural backgrounds act differently. While we think that having a side-tracked conversation is a waste of time, some people treat it as a chance to get closer to one and other. When I first met my buddy, Mina, who is a Canadian, she started off the conversation by saying 'Your t-shirt looks cute!' Later, she told me that this is how Canadians try to shorten the distance between people. They are trying to view every stranger as friends by blending in. This heart-warming act makes me feel like a part of the community. Although I am new to this place, no one is ever trying put on a tag on me saying that I am a foreigner. Instead, they show politeness to me and make me realize that a polite greeting is not a waste of time, but an essential process for relationship-building. This helps me to understand locals' cultural beliefs that are embedded in their daily communication.

While a greeting can show politeness, follow-up questions play a similar role as well. As I step into a restaurant, order food and start eating, it is a must for a waiter to come over and ask 'How's the food?' to show politeness. Then, how should I respond? This comes to the second element which I have never come across in terms of daily communication: positivity. Since we were toddlers, we have been taught to say 'I'm fine, thank you' when someone asks 'How are you?', yet, the word "fine" has different meanings in terms of geographical location. In a non-English speaking place like Hong Kong, 'fine' is a word used to express something that is more than average; but in an English-speaking country like Canada, 'fine' only means a satisfactory condition. From my observation, locals love to use more positive words like 'great', 'cool', 'awesome' to reveal their feelings. Therefore, when I simply say 'It's fine' or 'It's okay', my response is less positive. The choice of word plays an important role in spreading positivity through verbal communication.

Using encouraging wordings can build one's confidence as well as give out a good impression. After I gave an individual presentation during a linguistics course, the professor gave me a smile and a nod, and said, 'That's awesome, you did a great job!' Although my performance may not be as good as 'awesome' nor 'great', the comments he gave did boost my confidence in that specific research area. If he had said 'That's fine' or 'Okay. Next', I guess I would never have been brave enough to actively participate in class, to raise my hand and to answer questions. Therefore, it can be seen that embedding positive wordings within

one's speech is really crucial. In this case, my course professor gave me the confidence to participate in class. Also, if it is a casual situation on the street, positivity can always cheer someone up through a friendly smile or saying 'Have a great day!'

Travelling differs from studying abroad in terms of the quantity and quality of time spent. I often lack the sense of blending in while travelling to another country, as it is unnecessary for me to totally understand their culture and lifestyle if I am going to stay there for a couple of days. However, studying abroad is different, as I have to get into the community and fit into social circles in the host country. I have never stayed in a foreign country, especially an English-speaking country, for more than one month, not until I have this chance to join this year-long exchange program and I now realize the importance of blending in through intercultural interactions.

After realizing the reasons for embedding politeness and positivity in communication, I began trying to blend into the local language culture. English is not my mother tongue so it is quite difficult for me to develop an intuition for this second language. At first, communicating with locals reminded me of my identity, that is, that I am a foreigner. I cannot speak good and fluent English and I cannot speak Canadian English. I was conscious of each and every word I produced when communicating, hoping that people would feel like I can speak good English. I met a classmate Kevin, who is a Canadian, and he praised my English as he said 'I thought your first language is English and I've never imagined you are an exchange student!' He might have just been polite to me by praising my English, but I felt accepted into the local social circle. Since that day, I have become more and more confident in speaking to others. I frequently chat with locals, and do not merely observe and mimic their style of language. I try to truly understand their intentions and use of language characteristics: politeness and positivity. By understanding the importance of these features, I have become closer to the culture and beliefs upheld by locals.

I started to build a sense of belonging to the place where I am staying, feeling that I have successfully blended in as a part of the community. The aim of learning English in Hong Kong is merely for communication. We learn to speak precisely and concisely; we learn to imitate the English of native speakers to facilitate our verbal communication. Learning English in Canada is different as I can understand more of the cultural reasons behind the use of English, and this has helped me to develop a global identity, that is, I feel a

sense of belonging to a worldwide culture (Jackson, 2014). I have begun to read Canadian news reports, hoping to learn about things happening in Canada. I try to understand the new governmental policies launched in Canada, pay attention to incidents happening in British Columbia, and read articles that mention the best dates and places for outings. I have begun to build up my identity as a resident in Canada, not merely that of an exchange student who will leave this city within months. Observing and understanding language characteristics has helped me to understand how I can blend in. From a linguistics perspective, the Whorfian hypothesis suggests that linguistic structure and behavior may either influence or determine social structure or worldview (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015) and thus help to shape social and cultural values. As mentioned by Scollon (2013), language is like a cultural tool. Understanding a language contributes to the understanding of social and cultural values of the country. My sense of belonging can thus grow through language and cultural socialization.

Identity is basically our self-concept or sense of self as it defines how we see ourselves and our place in the world (Jackson, 2014). I hope that through intercultural communication, I will be able to acquire a more multicultural identity by observing, understanding and accepting more of the Canadian culture and lifestyle through communication. It sounds 'great' for me to walk around on the campus and to talk to people I do not know. When I ask 'How's your day?' to a student who is standing just in front of me in the queue, I feel more at home here!

From the above reflective writing process, I have a deep reflection on my own behavior towards enculturation. I did not purposely pay attention to the politeness and positivity wordings used in daily speech when I first arrived in Vancouver. However, I have come to realize that it is my hope of blending in that has driven me towards changes in my communicative style through reflection on my study abroad experience. By this reflection process, I am able to gather my observations bit by bit and put them together to form a whole picture of what I have understood through my interaction with locals. Little by little, I observed communication styles in single conversations and this raised my awareness of the cultural influences on language use. As I reflect now, I realize that I have learned a lot from my study abroad experience, and hope to learn more in the next semester!



This is a photo taken on Grouse Mountain when I joined some locals to play on the zip line. They were very nice and talkative!



I helped out as a volunteer in an Exchange Information Session provided for local students. I met many local students who are interested in coming to Hong Kong for exchange! Some even shared with me their thoughts about Hong Kong, as well as my mother tongue, Cantonese!

References

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About the author

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