

# 9

## Interacting with Friends

Communicating in the university does not always require you to be formal and academic. Yes, you constantly work with your peers and tutors in classroom settings, but much of your life in the university is also spent outside the classroom, especially in informal settings such as hanging out with friends, meeting for a group project and so on.



In fact, one of the best things about a university is the friends you make. However, social and cultural exchanges are not spontaneous processes. Making and interacting with friends require knowledge, skills and effort, especially when we interact with people who come from a culture different from our own. Globalisation has opened up immense possibilities for people from different cultures to interact with one another and *global universities* are some of the places where such interaction takes place.

This chapter suggests a few tips on how you can develop cross-cultural awareness in the university to make your interactions with fellow students a pleasant experience. The most important tips are:

- Be aware of different greeting styles
- Find out how people want to be addressed
- Ask, do not tell, people what to do
- Respect other people's decisions
- Speak "rationally"
- Use a common language when in groups
- Use English appropriately

### 9.1 Be Aware of Different Greeting Styles

In Western English-speaking cultures, such as in England or Australia, a common way of greeting someone whom you meet (either a friend or a complete stranger) is saying

*Hello! How are you?* Some people may make the mistake of taking the question literally. When someone you have just met asks you this question, the best response is something like *Good, thanks*. Do not tell them how you really are — especially when you have had a bad day!

In traditional Chinese culture, when people meet, instead of saying *Hi* or *How are you?* they can say the person's name. This Chinese norm may not be familiar to people from other cultures. If you are not familiar with this norm, you might think you need to stop and talk but probably all that the other person wants to do is to greet you and walk away.

## 9.2 Find Out How People Want to be Addressed

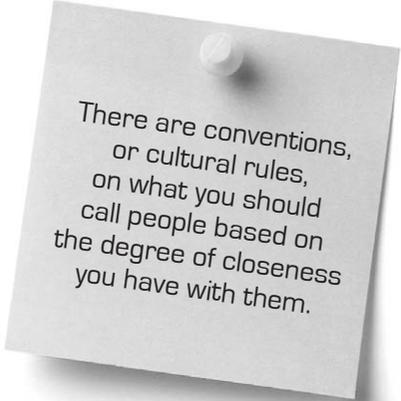
Names convey cultural meanings about how people relate to each other. To put it in another way, there are conventions, or cultural rules, on what you should call people based on the degree of closeness you have with them.

Take the name *Daniel* in Western English-speaking cultures, for example. In Britain, Australia or New Zealand, the name comes in three forms: *Daniel*, *Dan* and *Danny*. *Daniel* usually implies acquaintanceship, e.g. between colleagues, whereas *Dan* implies chumship/mateship, e.g. between friends and *Danny*, affection, e.g. within the family.

In Singapore culture, however, such a distinction is lost in many instances. If someone uses *Dan* as a short form for *Daniel*, this may mean that he cannot see the fine distinction between the two names. However, it may make someone from another culture uncomfortable being called *Dan* by someone who is not a close friend.

In Chinese, forms of address that reflect some kind of familiarity or affection include *Ah*, e.g. *Ah Meng* and reduplication, e.g. *Měng Měng*. Because of what such names reflect, avoid using them unless the addressee is someone you are quite familiar with. On the other hand, if someone addresses you using those kinds of names, it might mean that the person wants to be on friendly terms with you.

To avoid misunderstanding, find out from your new friends how they want to be addressed. It is only after you have known them for some time and become good friends with them that you start using a more personal form to indicate a closer kind of relationship.



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### 9.3 **Ask, Do Not Tell, People What to Do**

In Singapore culture, people tend to get their friends to do things by using an imperative or command, e.g. *Pass me the book* or *Meet me at the library*. This is acceptable, especially among friends or people who are familiar with each other. However, if you do this to someone from another culture, say a friend on campus, it might be deemed a rude way of speaking.

Instead of the imperative, try to use the question form and if necessary the word *Please*, e.g. *Could/would you pass me the book please?* or *Could you meet me at the library?* This is certainly more polite and is more widely accepted as the norm for asking people to do things for you.

If somebody does do something for you, it is good to acknowledge it. Saying *thank you* is something some people forget to do. After all, in many cultures, *thank you* is not needed among family members; it can even be a taboo. However, remember you are not at home but in a university. Showing your appreciation to someone who has done something for you by saying *thank you* goes a long way in maintaining good relations.

### 9.4 **Respect Other People's Decisions**

Some people do not normally like to take *No* for an answer and constantly apply pressure on the addressee to say *Yes*. In some cultures, this is a social taboo.

When interacting with friends socially, do respect people's decision. Of course, you can give them a second chance by saying *Are you sure?* E.g. *Are you sure you don't want to join us for dinner?* If the answer is still *No*, respect their decision.

Sometimes you may think somebody needs help but unless you know the person really well, it is important to offer your help first rather than imposing yourself upon them. Ask the person if they want you to help them. Do not assume that they want it. If they say *No*, respect their decision (although that should not stop you from adding something like, *If you need my help later, let me know*).

### 9.5 **Speak "Rationally"**

In some cultures, people, including many Singaporeans, tend to speak exaggeratedly. For example, they tend to use words like *very*, *always*, *every day*, *never*, *nobody*, etc. when talking about a situation. In addition, they tend to sound certain and definitive and, in Singapore English, a device for this purpose is the particle *one*, e.g. *He won't do it **one***.

The way some Singaporeans speak exaggeratedly may come across as being irrational and irresponsible. If you are not used to this way of speaking, do not be alarmed. See this as a cultural experience. It is not difficult to decipher what is said if you know that in Singaporean discourse *very* sometimes means *a bit*.

When describing something, try to sound reasonable. Tone down what you say. Do not say:

*all* when you mean *many*  
*many* when you mean *some*

*always* when you mean *much of the time*  
*every day* when you mean *on some days*  
*never* when you mean *rarely*  
*no one* when you mean *very few people*, etc.

When you speak unexaggeratedly with someone, you engage in rational discourse. Rational discourse is one of the things you are supposed to learn in the university.

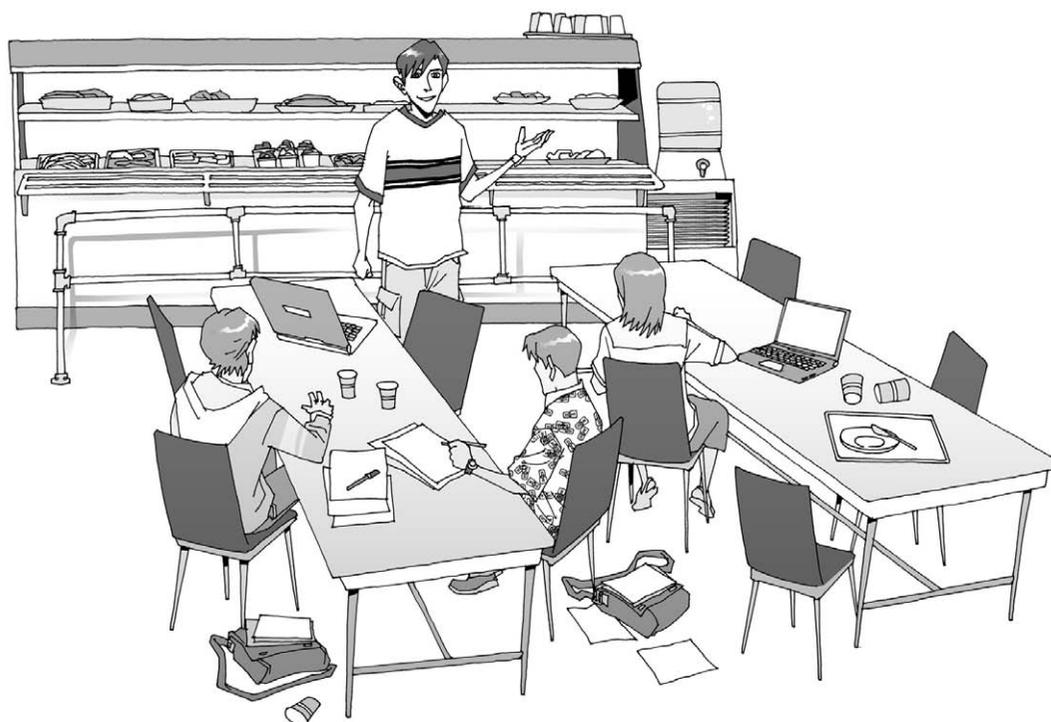
## 9.6 Use A Common Language When In Groups

Many, if not most, people in the university speak at least two languages. When in groups, make sure that you use a language that is common to all. In other words, when you are among friends who speak your language, make sure that there is no one in the group who cannot understand and speak that language.

In the university, it is English which is usually the language of cross-cultural communication, that is, it is the language that is usually common among friends of different nationalities.

There is no problem speaking informally in Chinese with friends, but if this is done in front of anybody who does not understand the language, it will make them uncomfortable. It will ostracise them and may discourage them from participating in any meaningful talk or discussion.

It goes without saying that if everyone in the group is comfortable using Chinese, or any other language for that matter, and if the situation allows it to be used, then this will not pose a problem. The key point always is, when you are among friends, find a common language to use.



## 9.7 Use English Appropriately

For Singaporean students who want to speak in a way that is comprehensible to speakers of Standard English and for those who want to know how Singaporeans speak, the following table gives some Singapore English utterances with their closest Standard English matches.

**Table 1: Examples of Singapore and Standard English**

Singapore English utterances	Suggested Standard English utterances
<i>Exchanging greetings</i>	
[How are you?] OK <i>lǎ/lō</i> .	Good thanks! And you?
<i>Finding out how people want to be addressed</i>	
	I am John and you are? What's your name? How may/should I address you?
<i>Getting someone to do something</i>	
Get me chicken rice.	Could you get me chicken rice please?
Don't do that!	Would you not do that please? Please don't do that.
Don't be late!	Please don't be late. Could you try not to be late please?
Come <i>lǎ</i> . Why you don't want to come?	Are you sure you don't want to join me?
You must always have a back-up copy.	You may want to make a back-up copy.
<i>Responding to a suggestion or an offer</i>	
[Can I get you something?] Yes.	Yes, please.
[Do you want to join me for lunch?] OK.	That would be nice! I can't but thanks for asking. I'd love to, but I can't.
<i>Using the understatement</i>	
You're wrong!	I'm not so sure. I don't think so. Are you sure?
He always late <i>one</i> .	He has a tendency to be late. He's often late.
Why he never listen <i>one</i> ?	Why doesn't he listen?
He very unhelpful <i>one</i> .	I don't think he's very helpful. He's not very helpful.
Very nice, <i>right</i> ?	It's nice, isn't it?

Here are a few tips on how to use English appropriately:

- When someone says *How are you?* remember to say the same thing in return.
  - Always try to find out how the other party wants to be addressed, if only as an ice breaker.
  - When you want someone to do something, avoid making it sound like a command.
  - When responding to a suggestion or offer, remember to say something nice, even if your answer is negative.
  - Try to learn to use the understatement and this includes not saying that someone is wrong (even if you think that they are). Try to say it in a nice way.
- See *Chapter 8: Interacting with peers and tutors* for more tips on interpersonal communication.

Among all-Singaporean groups, it is of course more natural to use Singapore English as the use of Standard English can sound pretentious. The point is to make sure that whatever variety of English is used is appropriate to the context where it is being used.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, you have been introduced to some suggestions on how to make your interactions a pleasant experience in the university. There are of course many more things that have not been included for the want of space. Do take the initiative to find out more about the cultures and customs of the people you meet. When in doubt, the best thing to do is ask. It is a good way to learn and shows your sincerity.

### Further reading

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