



B1-B2 • Business English

# Cultural Misunderstandings in Business

## 1. WARM-UP QUESTIONS

1. Have you experienced a cultural misunderstanding at work?
2. How do greetings differ across cultures?
3. What should you research before a global call?
4. When is direct feedback helpful or harmful?
5. How do time expectations vary internationally?

## 2. VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Match the words with their meanings:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. high-context   | a. acceptance of unequal authority                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. low-context    | b. adapt content for a specific culture            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. power distance | c. actions that protect someone from embarrassment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. face-saving    | d. accepted social behavior rules                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. taboo          | e. subtle difference in meaning or feeling         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. etiquette      | f. direct, explicit communication style            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. stereotype     | g. communication relying on implicit cues          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8. consensus      | h. socially prohibited behavior or topic           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9. localize       | i. oversimplified belief about a group             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10. nuance        | j. general agreement of a group                    |

## 3. READING

### Signals That Don't Translate

Global business runs on English, but not on one culture. In a high-context culture, silence may signal respect; in a low-context one, it can sound like resistance. Direct feedback that

seems efficient in New York can feel rude in Tokyo. Power distance also matters: in some places, juniors expect to listen, not challenge.

You can't memorize every rule, but you can be curious. Ask how people prefer to communicate, watch for face-saving, and avoid stereotypes. Localize slides, check idioms, and leave time for clarification. Good etiquette isn't about being perfect; it's about staying humble while the group finds a shared rhythm.

Misfires often come from invisible defaults: calendars that ignore holidays, 'yes' meaning 'I heard you' not 'I agree,' or humor that doesn't travel. Before a cross-cultural call, check time zones, pace, formality, and decision style. During the call, summarize agreements in simple English and invite corrections. Afterward, send a short recap with next steps. Curiosity plus clarity beats charisma.

## 4. COMPREHENSION

1. How do high-context and low-context styles differ?
2. Why can direct feedback be risky?
3. What role does power distance play in meetings?
4. Why should we avoid stereotypes?
5. How can localization help global teams?

## 5. VOCABULARY REVIEW

Fill in the blanks with words from the vocabulary list:

1. In \_\_\_\_ cultures, meaning lives between the lines.
2. A \_\_\_\_ style states ideas openly and plainly.
3. In high \_\_\_\_ settings, leaders speak more and are questioned less.
4. People use \_\_\_\_ strategies to avoid embarrassment.
5. Discussing politics at lunch may be \_\_\_\_.
6. Learn basic \_\_\_\_ before a formal dinner.
7. Beware the \_\_\_\_ that hides differences inside a group.
8. The team reached \_\_\_\_ after a long debate.
9. We should \_\_\_\_ the product copy for Brazil.
10. Tone is full of \_\_\_\_ that change the message.

## 6. WORD FORMATION

One cell is blank in each row. Complete the missing form.

Verb	Noun	Adjective
____	respect	respectful

offend	_____	offensive
differ	difference	_____
_____	translation	translatable
negotiate	_____	negotiable

## 7. COLLOCATIONS

Match the words that go together:

- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1. cultural | a. norms     |
| 2. direct   | b. feedback  |
| 3. polite   | c. tone      |
| 4. local    | d. etiquette |
| 5. shared   | e. rhythm    |

## 8. ERROR CORRECTION

Find and correct the mistakes:

1. She gave too direct feedback and her colleague felt offense.
2. We doesn't localize materials for the audience.
3. If he would knew the etiquette, he avoid the mistake.
4. There are many stereotype about punctuality.
5. People in the call was confused by idioms.

## 9. GRAMMAR REVIEW

Complete the sentences:

1. If we \_\_\_\_\_ (ask) about preferences, we might avoid offense.
2. Only after the meeting \_\_\_\_\_ (end) did they explain the taboo.
3. Had I \_\_\_\_\_ (check) the idioms, the slide would be clearer.
4. If the power distance \_\_\_\_\_ (be) high, juniors may stay quiet.
5. She felt embarrassed because the tone \_\_\_\_\_ (seem) rude.

## 10. PASSIVE VOICE TRANSFORMATIONS

Change to passive voice:

1. They changed the agenda to fit the culture.
2. Someone translated the contract overnight.
3. The team will localize the website.

## 11. DISCUSSION

1. Which cultural differences are most surprising to you?
2. What's a polite way to disagree across cultures?
3. How can leaders lower power distance in meetings?
4. What questions show respectful curiosity?

## 12. CRITICAL THINKING

Write 150-200 words about a real or imagined cultural misunderstanding at work, and propose steps to prevent it next time.

### Answer Key

Vocabulary Preview: 1-g, 2-f, 3-a, 4-c, 5-h, 6-d, 7-i, 8-j, 9-b, 10-e

Vocabulary Review: 2. high-context; 3. low-context; 4. power distance; 5. face-saving; 6. taboo; 7. etiquette; 8. stereotype; 9. consensus; 10. localize; 11. nuance

Word Formation: respect/respect/respectful; offend/offense/offensive; differ/difference/different; translate/translation/translatable; negotiate/negotiation/negotiable

Collocations: 1-d, 2-b, 3-c, 4-a, 5-e

Error Correction: She gave feedback that was too direct, and her colleague felt offended. | We don't localize materials for the audience. | If he had known the etiquette, he would have avoided the mistake. | There are many stereotypes about punctuality. | People on the call were confused by idioms.

Grammar Review: 2. ask; 3. ended; 4. checked; 5. is; 6. seemed

Passive Voice: 1. The agenda was changed to fit the culture.; 2. The contract was translated overnight.; 3. The website will be localized.