



I Can't Pronounce Your Name, What Should I Do?

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Dawn and I have a wonderful routine of going out to breakfast on Sunday mornings when I am home. When we go to iHop, the same waitress, Erica, typically serves us. As we were chatting, she mentioned that her real name is not Erica, rather, Ha. I was surprised and not surprised at the same time. It is not unusual for our international friends to create nicknames or new names altogether to accommodate those of us from the United States. Many Americans, I included, have difficulty remembering and/or pronouncing names that are unfamiliar. So when Erica/Ha, told us her given name, I was surprised she had altered it because it was so easy to pronounce and remember. It was then she shared her reasoning.

When Ha and her sister Pu, arrived to the United States from their homeland of China, they experienced ridicule because of their names. She described how people would poke fun at her by saying, HaHaHa. It may seem innocent enough, but the impact on Ha was significant. You can well imagine how her sister Pu, pronounced as pooh, fared. They decided to "Americanize" their names. Ha chose Erica because what could be more American than having a name that is contained within the word America—AmERICA?

I recall a similar story of a student from Johns Hopkins University. He anticipated that his name would be difficult for most Americans, so he Americanized his name. He decided on George, because what could be more American than the name of our first President, George Washington? As he was telling his story, he began to cry. His sorrow quickly turned to frustration and in that moment he made a declaration. He stated his name is no longer George and proceeded to direct people now to call him by his given name.

Is it wrong for people to change their name? Not my place to say, but I can certainly understand of why people would consider it and more importantly, I have had a glimpse of the impact of such a decision. What is wrong, however, is for others to create nicknames or change people's name because it is difficult to pronounce.

Here are some helpful tips provided by Blog of www.quickbusinessenglish.com

How to Improve your Intercultural Communication – 10 Quick Tips

- 1) Slow Down: Even when English is the common language in a cross-cultural situation this does not mean you should speak quickly. Slow down, speak clearly and ensure your pronunciation is intelligible. Don't be afraid to ask native-English speakers to slow down, repeat things, or to explain points again. They also need to realize that speaking more slowly helps intercultural communication.
- 2) Take Turns: Cross cultural communication flows better when people take turns to make a point and thoroughly listen to each other.
- 3) One Question: Try not to ask double questions such as, "Do you want to carry on or shall we stop here?" In a cross-cultural situation, the listener may only comprehend one question.
- 4) Avoid Negative Questions: Many cross-cultural communication misunderstandings have been caused by the use of negative questions. For example, "Aren't you satisfied with our progress?" In English, we answer 'yes' if the answer is affirmative and 'no' if it is negative. In some cultures, a 'yes' or 'no' may only be indicating whether the questioner is right or wrong. For example, the response to "Are you not coming?", may be 'yes', meaning 'Yes, I am not coming.'
- 5) Be Supportive: To work in another language requires confidence and feeling comfortable. Give encouragement to professionals whose English is good but not perfect.

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6) Write it Down: If you are unsure whether something was understood, write it down and show the other person, or check with them. This can be useful when using large figures.

7) Check Meanings: When communicating across cultures never assume the other party has understood. Be an active listener and summarize the main points of what was said.

8) Avoid Excessive Use of Jargon: Professionals working in multinationals often use an excessive amount of jargon in their day-to-day activities that people outside of their company often don't understand.

9) Humor: In many cultures business is taken very seriously. Professionalism and protocol are constantly observed. Many cultures will not appreciate the use of humor and jokes in the business context. Humor can be used, but think carefully whether it will be understood and that it won't cause offense.

10) Maintain Etiquette: Many cultures have certain etiquette when communicating and doing business. Do some research and ask colleagues about cultural differences when communicating and doing business.

Resources:

My video on working with people with accents <http://youtu.be/hZQxeYIziSY>

Life as an international student in the US <http://youtu.be/9A5wnZuMuH4>

International Students Choose the U.S. <http://youtu.be/zKrToqjeJT8>

Essential Guide for International Students -- US version <http://youtu.be/bbR8wFEEmZM>

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Dr. Maura Cullen is the author of "35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap". She is widely considered one of the nation's foremost authorities of diversity issues on college campuses today. Maura has over 25 years of experience as a keynote speaker and trainer. She earned her doctorate in Social Justice & Diversity Education from the University of Massachusetts, is a Founding Faculty member of the Social Justice Training Institute and Founder of the Diversity Student Summit. To learn more visit www.TheDiversitySpeaker.com.