**10c Page 123 READING TEXT**

Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

A universal language

People love to compare and contrast. In most parts of England, you buy your bus ticket on the bus. In France, you buy it at a metro station. In Australia, you can buy it from a newsagent. We all find this kind of comparison entertaining. Books on cross-cultural communication exploit our curiosity by focussing on differences between people across the world: in social behaviour, the roles they adopt in society, their attitudes to money, the significance of their body language, etc.

Proxemics, the study of different standards of personal space, is one example. How close I stand to someone when I am speaking to them depends not only on my relationship to them, but also on my culture. This is important because if the person I am with is not used to standing as near as I do when we are talking to each other, they might feel uncomfortable. Statistics tell us that the average distance at which two people stand in a social context – neighbours chatting for example – is anything between 1.2 metres and 3.5 metres. In Latin cultures (South America, Italy, etc.) and also in China this distance tends to be smaller, while in Nordic cultures (Sweden, Denmark, etc.) people usually stand further apart.

The messages sent by your posture and gestures is another case in point. For example, it is quite common in European countries to sit with your legs crossed and the top foot outstretched. But, as I know from personal experience, people in Arab countries hardly ever sit in this way – because they might show you the bottom of their shoe, which is a serious insult. It is said that in the Philippines, people often greet each other by raising their eyebrows quickly. In the USA, this is a sign of surprise.

Such information fills the pages of guides for travellers and international business people. But I would really question the usefulness of what are presented as ‘essential’ or ‘must know’ facts. Clearly it is important to know a little about eating customs, tipping and the rules concerning basic greetings – whether you should bow or shake someone’s hand. But beneath the surface, we are not so different. There are many signs that are universal in the emotions that they communicate. Focussing on these similarities – the things that we all have in common – is a much more profitable route than focussing on the differences.

Smiling is the best known of these, but not the only one. Behaviourists have proven that all over the world, people show sadness in a similar way. The face ‘falls’: the mouth becomes downturned and the eyes begin to look glassy. The person will probably look down or away and seem distracted.

There are also common factors when people are bored. They will look at other things in a distracted way – their watches, for example. Their feet will begin to move restlessly indicating that they want to escape; they tap their fingers or scratch their heads. Anger can also be read quite easily: the facial muscles tense up, often causing people to frown; the eyes stare, fixing themselves on the target of their anger; blood rushes to the face causing it to become red. If the anger is great, the body will also tense up as if preparing itself for a physical fight.

Understanding these universal signals and reacting appropriately is the real key to cross-cultural communication. If we all apply just a little sensitivity and common sense, it is unlikely that we will cause lasting offence by making the wrong gesture or invading a stranger’s personal space. Of course some cultures show their emotions more openly and others prefer to keep them more hidden. But isn’t that also the case within cultures, from one individual to another?

frown (v) /fraʊn/ to lower your eyebrows, causing lines to appear on your forehead

scratch (v) /skraʧ/ to move your fingernails backwards and forwards across your skin

stare (v) /steə/ to look intensely and for a long time at something

tap (v) /tap/ to hit something lightly with a finger or hand

Life