

Draft product

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Project card / In card summary:	Learn about the unique features of New Zealand English.
In project summary:	Do you speak Kiwi? Many international students have problems understanding New Zealanders when they first arrive in the country. Learn why this is and what you and your students can do about it.
Header list - Add Summary Point:	You will learn: ● about some unique New Zealand vocabulary and the Kiwi accent ● about the informal and indirect speaking style in New Zealand ● about resources and repair strategies for students when encountering language problems

1. Introduction

On first arrival, many international students are surprised by the way New Zealanders – or Kiwis, as they call themselves – speak. International students are often familiar with English from American or British media, but Kiwi English is a bit different and can hold some surprises even for native English speakers coming from the USA, the UK, and neighbouring Australia. Why is this?



At first, some international students might find it difficult to understand their Kiwi teachers.

First of all, New Zealanders speak fast! They typically speak a lot faster than Americans, and they use some words and phrases that are distinctly Kiwi (“New Zealand-ish”). This includes words from *te reo Māori*, the language of the indigenous people of New Zealand.

Kiwis also have their own way of pronouncing words that differs from accents in other English-speaking countries. Finally, the specific culture in Aotearoa New Zealand has shaped the style of speaking, that is, how Kiwis talk and behave in a conversation. Kiwis are often quite informal in their style of speaking. Sometimes, international students misunderstand this and think that New Zealanders are being impolite. Kiwis can also be indirect in comparison to other cultures.

Let’s take a look at each of these features of New Zealand English in turn, and explore resources and strategies that can help students be well prepared for “speaking Kiwi”.

2. Unique New Zealand vocabulary

Kiwis use words that many international students might not know. Before we look at the reasons, let’s look at the following case study and answer the questions below.

Case Study: “Is this really English?”

Jiahao from China is a student at a polytechnic in New Zealand. His classmate Zack invites him to a party on the weekend at his parents’ beach house.

Zack says: *“I’ll have a party at my parents’ bach in Waikanae. Are you keen? It’ll be a potluck, so please bring a plate. I’ll provide some kai, maybe fish and chips, and fizzy drinks. If you want*

alcohol, that's sweet as, but it's BYO, ey. And we can't get sloshed. My whānau might pop by in the evening. And don't forget your togs. If it's sunny, we can go for a swim. I always have togs in the boot anyway, so I can go for a swim whenever I want."

Jiahao is confused. He understands that he is invited to a party but not much else. Is Zack really speaking English?!

Back to you: Which of Zack's words and expressions might be difficult to understand for Jiahao? Why are they difficult for international students? What country, region, or other language do these words and expressions come from? You will find answers to these questions as well as definitions of difficult words in the text and materials below.

The British connection

Many international students are more familiar with American English through entertainment and media. However, New Zealand is closely connected to the United Kingdom, and New Zealanders like Jiahao's friend Zack in the case study above use many British words and expressions: *fries* (USA) are called *chips*; the *trunk* (USA) of the car is called the *boot*; and when someone asks you whether *you are keen*, they want to know if you are *interested* in doing something.

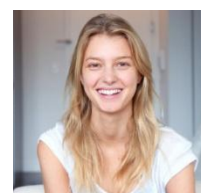
One important word for international students is *college*. Please note that in New Zealand, *college* refers to high school or secondary school – contrary to American English, where *college* refers to (the first years of) university. The British connection includes some youth language and slang. Zack used the word *sloshed*, which is similar to the American word *wasted* and means *drunk, inebriated*.

Homegrown vocabulary

Kiwis also use a lot of "homegrown" words and expressions. That means that many words or phrases have been coined and are only used in New Zealand. Some vocabulary is also shared with New Zealand's closest neighbour and ally Australia. Zack in the case study above used some of these regional words and expressions: *togs* means *swimwear*; *fizzy drinks* are *soft drinks*; and *bring a plate* means *bring food to share*. A go-to website for international students is NauMai NZ, for example for information on Kiwi English: [NauMai NZ – Speaking New Zealand English](https://www.naumai.co.nz/).

Both New Zealanders and Australians have a habit of shortening words; for example, *brekkie* is short for *breakfast*, and a *cuppa* means *a cup of* (tea), as in: "Want some brekkie?" – "I'll only have a quick cuppa. I'm late for work." Kiwis and Aussies (Australians) also like to use initialisms – words created from the first letter of each word in a phrase pronounced separately – such as *BYO* (**b**ring **y**our **o**wn ... alcohol) and *DIY* (**d**o **i**t **y**ourself ... instead of hiring someone to do it for you).

"In my first few weeks in New Zealand, I went to a café and ordered a cappuccino. The waiter said: 'Sweet as.' I thought: 'How rude! He made an inappropriate comment about my butt!' I told a friend and she said: 'No! Not 'sweet ass'! In New Zealand people say 'sweet as' when they want to say 'okay' or 'very good'."



Matilde, university student from Canada

Māori vocabulary

While the most-widely spoken language in New Zealand is English, te reo Māori – the language of the indigenous people of New Zealand – is also an official language, and most people use some Māori words when speaking English. Words like *whānau* (family), *kai* (food), or *hui* (meeting) are commonly used by most New Zealanders. People also frequently use Māori greetings such as *kia ora* (hello), *mōrena* (good morning), or *tēnā koutou* (hello everyone).

If you wonder how to pronounce Māori words, have a look at this webpage by the New Zealand Ministry of Education: [Pronunciation Guide](#). To hear the correct pronunciation, you can use the online Te Aka Māori Dictionary: [Māori Dictionary](#). A beautiful introduction to the Māori language is one of Maisey Rika's music videos (YouTube): [Tangaroa Whakamautai](#).

Younger students might be interested in watching Disney's Moana in te reo Māori. To get a taste, they can listen to all the songs in te reo Māori on Youtube (and on other platforms), starting with: [You're welcome! / Mihi mai rā!](#). Teenagers might prefer Lorde and her 2021 album: [Lorde - Te Ao Mārama](#).

60 common Kiwi-isms

Here is a printable mini dictionary for you and your students with 60 essential words and expressions in Kiwi English and te reo Māori: [60 common Kiwi-isms](#). This mini dictionary explains some of the words Zack used in the case study above, such as *potluck*, *whānau* and *kai*.

If you want to test your knowledge of Kiwi English and te reo Māori, take the quiz below. You can also look words up in the mini dictionary above.

Quiz: Test your knowledge of Kiwi-isms

Instructions:

Do you speak Kiwi? Test your knowledge of New Zealand English and essential Māori words.

In each of the following sentences, one word is missing. Select the correct Kiwi word from the choices below the sentence.

Question 1:

"Party at our house! Bring a _____, please. Something savoury would be best. A lot of people already said that they'll bring dessert."

- A. plate
- B. ute
- C. jumper

Feedback: The correct answer is *bring a plate*. It means, please bring food to share with several people. A *ute* is a pickup truck, and a *jumper* is a (woolly) sweater.

Question 2:

"Dwayne The Rock Johnson is an ordinary, down-to-Earth _____, despite being a famous movie star!"

- A. crayfish

B. bloke

C. bach

Feedback: The correct answer is *bloke*. A *bloke* is a normal man, a guy, a chap. A *crayfish* is a small lobster, and a *bach* is a – usually modest – holiday house.

Question 3:

“Hi Tamsin! How are you?” – “Kia _____, Malcolm! I’m doing great, thank you.”

A. tūpato

B. ora

C. kaha

Feedback: The correct answer is *Kia ora!*. This Māori greeting is widely used in the sense of an informal *hi* or *hello*. *Kia tūpato!* means *Be careful!*, and *Kia kaha!* means *Stay strong! Keep going!*.

Question 4:

“I quit smoking two months ago. I haven’t touched a cigarette since.” – “_____ on ya, mate! That’s awesome!”

A. Ta

B. Sweet

C. Good

Feedback: The correct answer is *Good on ya!*. It means *Good job! Well done! Congratulations!*. *Ta!* is a quick, informal way to say *Thanks!*.

Question 5:

This toilet is for _____ only.



A. wāhine

B. tāne

C. morena

Feedback: The correct answer is *wāhine*, which is a Māori word for woman. *Tāne* means man, and *Morena!* means *Good morning!*. By the way, *wharepaku* means toilet in te reo Māori.

Question 6:

“I am moving house. How can I transport all the big furniture?” – “No _____, mate. I have a ute. We can put the furniture on the back, and I’ll drive them to your new place.”

A. worries

B. way

C. wonder

Feedback: The correct answer is *No worries!*. This is an essential phrase in New Zealand, and students will hear it all the time. It means *no problem* or *don't worry about it*. Many Kiwis also say *no worries* in response to an apology: "Did I just step on your foot? I am so sorry!" - "No worries." *No way!* means *Absolutely not!*. You can say *no wonder*, when you are no longer surprised about something because you have found out why it is happening. For example: "No wonder Jenny can't sleep at night. She drinks two cups of coffee after dinner!"

Question 7:

"I lost my job!" – "Kia _____! Stay strong, my friend."

- A. ora
- B. kaha**
- C. tūpato

Feedback: The correct answer is *Kia kaha!*. It means *Stay strong! Keep going!* and is said to encourage someone. *Kia ora* is an informal greeting that many New Zealanders say every day instead of *hello*, and *Kia tūpato!* means *Be careful!*.

Question 8:

"Let's get up really early tomorrow and go tramping!" – " _____ , nah. I'd rather sleep in."

- A. Kai
- B. Heaps
- C. Yeah**

Feedback: The correct answer is *Yeah, nah*. It's a very Kiwi way of disagreeing, by first showing some polite acknowledgement but then saying a careful *no*. *Kai* is a Māori word for food, and *heaps* means *a lot*.

Question 9:

"I studied all night for the exam! I haven't slept at all! Now I am _____ . I just want to sleep."

- A. stoked
- B. kaimoana
- C. knackered**

Feedback: The correct answer is *knackered*. It means *tired* or *exhausted*. *Stoked* means *excited*, and *kaimoana* is a Māori word for *seafood* or *shellfish*.

Question 10:

"I passed my practical driver license test!" – "Ka _____ ! Well done!"

- A. kite
- B. pai**
- C. hao

Feedback: The correct answer is *Ka pai!*, which means *Well done! Good job!*. *Ka kite (anō)!*, means *See you (later)!*. *Ka Hao* is the name of a Youth Choir from New Zealand. You can listen to their album *Ka Hao: One Tira, One Voice* on the streaming service of your choice. Check out this music video on YouTube: [Ka Hao - 35 \(feat. Rob Ruha\)](#).

[SCORE + End greeting:]

Your score: ____ / 10.

Ka pai! Well done! Share the mini dictionary “60 common Kiwi-isms” with your students, so they can practice speaking Kiwi as well.

3. The Kiwi accent

When international students first arrive in New Zealand, they might initially struggle with the way Kiwis pronounce English. This is because New Zealanders have a distinct accent. This accent has developed over time, ever since the first English speakers arrived in Aotearoa. It has been influenced by British English varieties as well as contact with other languages, in particular te reo Māori. The Kiwi accent is no better or worse than any other English accents – but it is a little different from British or American varieties. Have a look at the following scenario and answer the questions below.

Case study: “What is the Prime Minister saying?!”

Minh has recently arrived from Vietnam to attend high school in New Zealand. For an assignment in her class on global citizenship, she is listening to a speech given by the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, at the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) in 2019. In Vietnam, Minh had very good grades in English but when she listens to Jacinda’s speech, she has problems understanding some of the words. What is the Prime Minister saying?! She turns on the subtitles and notices that she knows all the words, but she doesn’t always recognise them when she hears them.

Back to you: Watch the video clip (0:00 to 0:54) of Prime Minister Ardern addressing the UN Assembly: [Jacinda Ardern addresses the UN General Assembly](#). Note how she pronounces the words *president*, *secretary*, *first*, *world*, *better*, *people*. Would you pronounce these words differently? How does Jacinda’s pronunciation differ from that of mainstream American and also British speakers? You will find answers to these questions in the text and materials below.

A, E, I, U - Kiwi vowels have changed

One main reason why New Zealand English sounds different from American but also British and even Australian English lies in the different vowel sounds. Vowels are the sounds that you can sing, that is: a, e, i, o, and u. Many of these sounds are different in New Zealand English. This change – or vowel shift – has happened over time and follows a regular pattern.

To understand what happened to the New Zealand vowels, we can look at the letters that commonly represent some of these vowel sounds: A, E, I, U. In New Zealand, their pronunciation has shifted in – roughly – the following way:



In other words, the word *pat* is pronounced more like *pet*, while the word *pet* sounds more like *pit* in New Zealand. And finally, *pit* sounds more like *putt*. In Prime Minister Ardern’s speech in the case study above, *president* sounded more like “prisidint”; *secretary* sounded more like “sicritery”; and *better* sounded a bit like “bitter”. The news network Re: News has created a

helpful video essay to explain these changes: [Re: News – How the Kiwi accent evolved](#). To see a few more examples of these vowel changes, open the table below.

Table: How New Zealanders pronounce vowels

A → E	
Example word (normal spelling)	(Roughly) how New Zealanders pronounce these words
sad	<i>sed</i>
trap	<i>trep</i>
pack	<i>peck</i>
E → I	
dress	<i>driss</i>
egg	<i>igg</i>
bed	<i>bid</i>
I → U	
kit	<i>kut</i>
fish	<i>fush</i>
chips	<i>chups</i>

“An older woman at church told me about her friend. I heard that her friend’s name was ‘Piggy’. I thought that’s a strange nickname. I only later realised that her friend’s name was probably ‘Peggy’. And a little boy at church said to his dad: ‘I want my bear!’ I heard ‘beer’ and was a bit shocked that small children drink alcohol in New Zealand. Now I know: the ‘eh’ sound is more like an ‘ee’ sound in New Zealand.”



Malia, student at a PTE from the USA

As in Malia’s story above, these different vowel sounds can lead to misunderstandings. To international visitors, *bear* sounds more like *beer*, *air* like *ear*, *peg* like *pig*, *pig* like *pug*, and *bed* like *bid* or *beard*. New Zealanders see this problem with a sense of humour and joke about their own accent. They are making fun of it in TV commercials like this one for the supermarket chain Pak’nSave: [Bottle of bear](#). Or check out this Christmas commercial by the airline Air New Zealand: [A Very Merry Mistake](#).

Consonant sounds in Kiwi English

Some consonants are also pronounced a bit differently from other English accents. Consonants are the sounds in a language that you cannot easily sing. To produce a consonant such as t, p, k,

d, b, g or s – to name just a few, you typically close your mouth a little bit and create a hissing sound – sssss or ffff – or you stop the air coming out of your mouth completely for a moment before letting it out again, creating an “explosion” – for example for p or t.

One consonant that can be different in Kiwi English is the “l”. You might have noticed this, when you heard Prime Minister Ardern say the word *people*. At the end of words or syllables after a vowel, it often sounds more like “uh”. *People* sound a bit like *peo-puh*. When a Kiwi says *April*, it sounds a bit like *Apruh*, and *school* sounds a bit like *schooh*. A sentence like “I feel fine” might sound a bit like “I feeuh fine”.

More British than American

If you have watched the Re: News video essay recommended above – [How the Kiwi accent evolved](#), you know that New Zealand English is strongly influenced by British English. A large part of the early European settlers came from the United Kingdom, and New Zealand was a British colony and domain for over 100 years. Today, Queen Elizabeth II is still the official head of state of New Zealand, and ties between New Zealand and Great Britain remain close. For this reason, New Zealanders sound a bit British when it comes, for example, to sounds like:

- “r”: While you can hear it clearly at the beginning of words or syllables like **R**ichard or Ha-rry, you can barely hear it at the end or in the middle of words or syllables. Most Kiwis – just like many British English speakers – pronounce the word *car* a bit like “caa” and the word *farm* like “faam”. The word *bird* is pronounced without the r-sound. You might have noticed Prime Minister Ardern’s pronunciation in her speech at the UN General Assembly of the words *first* and *world* without a clear r-sound.
- “a”: Kiwis pronounce *can’t* and *tomato* like “caan’t” and “tomaato” – just like most British do.

Uptalk - Are you asking me or telling me?

A final feature of New Zealand English that international students might wonder about is so-called ‘uptalk’. Uptalk is defined as:

“... a manner of speaking in which declarative sentences are uttered with rising intonation at the end, as if they were questions.”

([Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries](#))

When young Kiwis tell a story, they often sound a bit like they are asking a series of questions, because they let their voice go up instead of down at the end of a sentence: “And then I met my friend Kara? We ate ice-cream and had a coffee? ...” You can get an impression of what that sounds like, if you listen to the character Korg in Marvel’s 2017 film *Thor: Ragnarok*, played by Kiwi actor and director Taika Waititi.

You might have heard people expressing negative views about uptalk. They say that it is unprofessional and that speakers sound insecure and don’t know what they want to say. However, in New Zealand (and in other countries), uptalk is a common feature of everyday language and doesn’t raise any eyebrows. Nobody thinks that speakers using uptalk are insecure. Most people don’t even notice the rising intonation until someone points it out to them. And research has shown that uptalk – also sometimes called high-rising terminal (HRT) – can be a sign of politeness and solidarity towards the listener.

Still, international students might initially be confused and wonder: Are you asking me or telling me? Therefore, knowing about uptalk can avoid some confusion.



Pop Culture Tip

To get a better idea of what Kiwi English sounds like, here are a few film, TV, and audiobook tips for your students:

- **Hunt for the Wilderpeople** (film, 2016): Set in New Zealand, you can hear older and younger speakers of both Pākehā Kiwi English and Māori-accented English.
- **Thor: Ragnarok** (film, 2017): In this Hollywood blockbuster, the character Korg is voiced by New Zealand director/actor Taika Waititi.
- **Flight of the Conchords** (TV series, 2007-2009): In two seasons, we follow the life of a Kiwi band trying to become famous in the USA. You can compare their Kiwi accents with the accents of American characters.
- **The Changeover** (fantasy thriller for older teenagers, 2019): In this supernatural coming-of-age story – based on the book by popular Kiwi writer Margaret Mahy – a teenager must become a witch to save her little brother. Rated M (16+) due to frightening scenes.
- **NZ audiobooks for young listeners:** [RNZ - Audiobooks for Teenagers](#).

4. Kiwis are pretty informal, but ...

Let's start the discussion of Kiwi informality with a short case study.

Case study: Informality in New Zealand

Malaysian PhD student Jackie arrived in Auckland three weeks ago. This morning she has her first meeting with her supervisor, Professor Susan Smith. They meet in Professor Smith's office.

Jackie: Good morning, Professor Smith.

Susie: G'day, Jackie. Please, call me Susie. Let's go to a café and have our meeting there. I need a cuppa. It's my shout.

In the cafe, they sit down at a table and start discussing Jackie's PhD work.

Susie: So, how's it going with your literature search, Jackie?

Jackie: To be honest, I am struggling a bit. I don't really know how to start.

Susie: Oh, dear, for three weeks? Why didn't you send me an email? Please tell me if you need help.

Back to you: What cultural differences can you spot between Jackie and Susie in this conversation? You will find answers to this question in the text and materials below.

New Zealanders often speak and interact in an informal, casual way.

One reason for this informal way of speaking is that Kiwis value equality in society. They find it important that everybody gets treated the same, whether they are a student or a professor, an employee or a CEO. The rich and powerful are not seen as "better"; they are simply seen as 'better off', that is, as having an advantage, which, however, doesn't make them deserving of

more respect or privileges. To read more about New Zealand culture and beliefs, please read our project "[Understand New Zealand's cultural values](#)".

Everyone is on a first-name basis

This egalitarian attitude also shows in the way Kiwis speak. New Zealanders don't like "to put on airs", even in the language they use. For example, you can hear all Kiwis, from children to politicians, use words that we marked as informal in our Survival Dictionary, such as "heaps" or "Good on ya!". Another example is that Kiwis – including the Prime Minister – often address each other by their first name or even by a nickname. In the case study above, Professor Smith asks PhD student Jackie to call her Susie. She uses informal language like *G'day* (Good Day) and *cuppa* (cup of tea or coffee), and she invites Jackie to a café to create a more relaxed, informal atmosphere.

Have a look at this episode of the animated series *Lifeswap* by Steffen Kreft and Connor Williams: [Just Sharon](#). In the video, German exchange student Jörg is surprised by the lack of formality in New Zealand. (You can find more information on *Lifeswap* and all episodes on the website of the Goethe Institut New Zealand: [Lifeswap Series](#).)

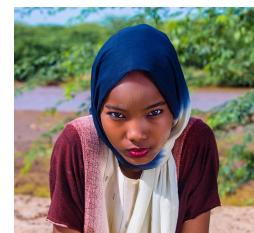
"[In New Zealand,] everyone is on a first-name basis. The plumber will arrive and say something like 'Well, John (or Ann), what's the problem?' It is not a case of being familiar, but of not standing on ceremony."

Culture Smart! New Zealand, page 54

Some international students might consider the use of the first name for teachers or older people to be impolite or disrespectful, but in the New Zealand context it isn't. Politeness does not follow the same rules around the world but can differ from culture to culture and also from group to group. In New Zealand, politeness and respect are expressed in other ways than by stressing social hierarchy. For example, Kiwis use "please" and "thank you" a lot. They apologise frequently, even if they are not at fault, and they engage in friendly small talk before getting down to business.

"My teacher says: 'Call me Alice.' But I call her 'teacher'. Everything else feels wrong. I cannot call my teacher by her first name. That's so rude! She is the teacher!"

Sahra, high school student from Somalia



Informality in the classroom

Many international students report finding the interactions between students and teachers perplexing. Kiwi students and teachers often casually chat and laugh together. This is due to a general egalitarian attitude: education is seen as a collaborative process. Students and teachers work together as – somewhat unequal – partners to develop ideas and to build knowledge. Secondary teacher Susan summarises this teaching style in New Zealand in a 30-second video by *Think New - Study with New Zealand*: [What is the teaching style at New Zealand schools?](#)

In New Zealand, students also tend to ask many questions in class. They debate and disagree and even point out when the teacher has made a mistake. International students report – often with astonishment – that this behaviour is even encouraged and rewarded with positive feedback and good grades.

Students asking questions and expressing their own ideas in class are not seen as disrespectful in New Zealand (as long as it is done in a friendly, polite way). Teaching and learning follow a Western tradition that encourages students to inquire and to challenge authority and old ideas. If you want to learn more about education in New Zealand, have a look at our project [“Understand New Zealand’s education system”](#).

Please note that formality depends on the particular context and situation. Sometimes, international university students might miss the mark and be too informal. For your students, here is a printable introduction to communication etiquette at university and other tertiary institutions in New Zealand: [How to communicate at tertiary institutions](#).

Some simple rules

As the example around communication at tertiary institutions shows, formality and politeness can be tricky, and they depend on the particular context and situation. If international students are unsure how to behave, the following three rules might come in handy (click on each rule to access more information):

1. **Observe other people.**
Observe other people around you and follow their example.
2. **Err on the side of politeness.**
Err on the side of politeness and formality. It is better to come across as a bit stiff and overly polite than to appear rude.
3. **Ask.**
New Zealanders are generally happy to help and answer questions. If you don’t know how to dress for an event or how to behave in a particular situation, ask a Kiwi.

Swearing

One example where these rules apply is swearing. New Zealanders tend to use more swear words than other nationals. The SBS Cultural Atlas explains: “... it is normal to hear people cuss at some point during a conversation. Television programmes are less censored as well, thus mainstream society is largely desensitised to many words that foreigners may find vulgar” ([Cultural Atlas – Communication – Swearing](#)).



While swearing is somewhat normal in New Zealand, caution is recommended. For example, in more formal settings and when talking to older New Zealanders, curse words might be seen as highly offensive. International students should observe their environment carefully before using “colourful language”.

Formality in Māori contexts

Different rules of politeness can apply when students find themselves in Māori-medium and

Māori-cultural contexts. For example, a (first) visit to a *marae* (a Māori communal ground) and its *wharenuī* (meeting house) follows a set protocol. Usually, international students will receive instructions before visiting a *marae*. If not, they should inquire about the protocol. To learn more about Māori cultural values, including protocol, have a look at our project “[New Zealand – A country with more than one culture](#)”.



Additional resources for you and your students

Here are a few additional resources that you and your students might find helpful to learn more about politeness and formality in New Zealand:

- SBS Cultural Atlas: [New Zealand – Communication](#)
- SBS Cultural Atlas: [New Zealand – Etiquette](#)
- Lifeswap animated video: [Just Sharon](#) (can also be found on Vimeo)
- Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand: [Manners and Social Behaviour](#)

5. Kiwis are possibly a bit indirect

New Zealanders can be somewhat indirect communicators, especially when making a request, expressing disagreement, or being critical. Students from more direct cultures might find this challenging. While they feel that a critical statement is focused on the issue at hand, a Kiwi might take their criticism as a personal attack.

As part of a small nation of only five million, where everybody you meet seems to be a friend's cousin, Kiwis try to maintain positive relations. They try to avoid conflict and direct confrontation. So, instead of giving orders such as “Open the window, please!”, they tend to prefer asking more indirect questions like “Could someone open the window, please?”. Rather than saying a clear “No!”, Kiwis might say things like *not sure*, *probably not*, or *yeah, nah*. Conversations are frequently sprinkled with words like *maybe*, *somewhat*, or *possibly* to “soften the blow” of a demand or critical point. And rather than saying *you* when giving instructions, they might say *we* or *someone*.

Kiwi indirectness is humorously explained in this animated *Lifeswap* video (YouTube): [The tea towel stinks](#). Another helpful resource that you might want to recommend to your students is this short interactive communication test provided by Immigration New Zealand: [Worktalk – Test your communication skills](#).

Please note that communication styles can be perceived differently by students from different cultural backgrounds: Students from cultures with generally more indirect communication styles might find that New Zealanders can actually be quite direct. By contrast, students used to very direct communication might be puzzled by the vague and roundabout way of expressing disagreement or criticism in New Zealand.

6. Repair strategies: What can students do if they don't understand?

Students preparing to study in New Zealand – whether in the country or online – might ask you for advice about how to deal with language problems. The most valuable tip for international students with comprehension problems is: Ask! New Zealanders are usually very open and friendly, and they are happy to help. In New Zealand education institutions, teachers want to know when students don't understand, and they see it as their job to answer questions and help students.

It is not seen as problematic or shameful to ask questions in New Zealand. Jessica from Colombia describes her experiences with helpful Kiwis in a short video: [Do New Zealanders help international students?](#)

For more tips on what international students can do if they don't understand, please see (and share with your students) this printable cheat sheet: [What can I do if I don't understand?](#)



7. Test your knowledge: A case study

Here is a case study to test your knowledge. It is based on the experiences and questions of real international students in New Zealand. However, names in all our case studies are fictional. In some cases, we have combined stories reported by several students to create one relevant case study.

Before looking at the suggested answer, please think about what advice you would give the student. Then compare your answer with the provided response. Please note that there are many ways of solving the described issues and that the answer provided here for each case study is just one of many possible responses.

Case study: "I don't understand what my lecturer is talking about"

Dae-Hyun, a university student from South Korea, asks you for help:

"I am taking a pretty difficult class at university. I have a lot of problems understanding what the lecturer is talking about, but I don't want to ask - especially in front of the whole class. I also have a tutorial every week with a PhD student as my tutor. We do a lot of practical work, and we discuss the homework. I usually don't say much in the tutorial. I wait what the other students say and write down their answers. I am ashamed, and I don't want the teachers and the other students to know that I understand so little."



What can I do? I might fail this class if I don't find a way to understand things better!"

What advice would you give Dae-Hyun?

Suggested answer:

Dae-Hyun, let me start by giving you this handout with some strategies that you can use to deal with communication problems: [What can I do if I don't understand?](#) Now, let's look at some useful strategies. The most important thing is to ask! You can talk to your lecturer and to the tutor. In New Zealand, teachers want to know when their students don't understand the class content. They see it as their job to help. If you feel embarrassed, you can talk to your teachers after class or you can send them an email. However, it is likely that other students are also struggling and are too shy to ask. They will likely be grateful if you step up and ask in class. You could also ask your lecturer if you could record the lesson so that you can listen more than once. And you could meet with other students and compare notes and discuss things that they didn't understand. If the lecturer has asked you to do readings before the lesson, you should make sure to read them. You could even ask for additional materials to prepare before class. If you already know something about the topic of the upcoming lesson and the vocabulary that will be used in class, it will be easier for you to understand the lecture. Another idea: you can make an appointment with learning support services. All tertiary institutions offer such support.

Maybe you struggle with the Kiwi accent. You will get used to it soon. In the meantime, if you want some extra practice listening to Kiwi English, you can:

- Listen to *ESL News New Zealand*, that is, current news read slowly and clearly by a Kiwi, using simple vocabulary: [ESL News](#).
- Watch Kiwi TV for free on demand: [TVNZ on Demand](#). Make sure that you choose something local.
- Watch New Zealand films with Kiwi actors, for example: *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (comedy), *The Changeover* (fantasy thriller), *What we do in the Shadows* (horror mockumentary), *Pork Pie* (comedy), *Housebound* (horror), *The Dark Horse* (drama), *Whale Rider* (drama), or *My Wedding and other Secrets* (romantic comedy).
- Listen to audiobooks read by New Zealanders: [RNZ - Audiobooks for Teenagers](#).

8. Summary

In this project, we have discussed how New Zealanders talk and what comprehension problems international students might encounter when they arrive in Aotearoa. We have highlighted important words frequently used in New Zealand – some are British, some are exclusively New Zealand English, and some are Māori. We have outlined how and why Kiwi pronunciation (and intonation) is different from other English accents.

We have also discussed some cultural "language behaviours". More specifically, we have explained that Kiwis are often fairly informal. They use relaxed, casual language even with their teacher, professor, or their boss, and they often address other people – even the Prime Minister – by their first name. However, they still have their own ways of expressing politeness and

respect, and international students should be aware of those. New Zealanders are also somewhat indirect and often talk in a “roundabout” way when they want to make a request or want to point out a problem.

We introduced some helpful resources and tips on what students can do if they don't understand New Zealanders – at home, at school, in the shop – or if they feel that they themselves are not understood. Finally, we provided a case study for you to test your knowledge on how to support students struggling with the Kiwi language and the ways New Zealanders interact.

Heoi anō tāku mō nāianeī - that's all for now!

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