



APEX ENGLISH

Your voice. Global.

B2 · BUSINESS ENGLISH

UNIT 9 · B9B

Working across cultures

Theme · Remote & Global



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Theme: Remote & Global



Learning objectives

- Adapt your communication style across high-context and low-context cultures without stereotyping.
- Use UNCOUNTABLE and PLURAL-ONLY nouns correctly (feedback, information, staff, headquarters, people) — no 'a feedback', no 'an advice'.
- Build business jargon with common PREFIXES (over-, under-, mis-, re-, dis-, cross-) and SUFFIXES (-able, -ise, -ity, -ness).

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Class Book

Warm-up · The cross-cultural moment you cringe about

Think of a specific cross-cultural work moment (real or observed) that still makes you cringe — a meeting where 'yes' didn't mean yes, an email that landed wrong, feedback taken as an insult. In 45 seconds out loud: what happened, what YOU thought was going on, and what was ACTUALLY going on. Then record a 30-second voice note.

Who was in the room / on the call, and where were they from?

What did YOU expect the response to be?

What actually happened — silence, over-agreement, offence, confusion?

Bonus: what did you learn to say / not say NEXT time?

Lead-in: cross-cultural problem or plus?

Read each cross-cultural situation (1–6). Decide: PROBLEM (a real friction that costs the team) or PLUS (a strength worth protecting).

1. 1. In the Amsterdam office, feedback is given directly in the meeting: 'This slide is confusing — cut it.' The Tokyo team hears this as an attack.

2. 2. The Bangalore team writes long, careful emails with clear context before the ask. The New York team reads to the end and finds them 'clear and easy to action'.

3. 3. In a meeting with the Seoul team, 'yes, we can consider that' means 'no'. The Boston team hears 'yes'.

4. 4. The Lagos office uses a wider register — humour, warmth, personal small talk before business — and the São Paulo team loves working with them.

5. 5. HR pushes a global template where everyone must give '3 improvement points' in performance reviews. Half the office is horrified; the other half thinks it's finally normal.

6. 6. A cross-cultural team knowingly builds a shared 'operating agreement' — how we ask, how we say no, how we disagree — signed by all sides.

followUp: Which of these are happening on YOUR team right now — and which side of the +/- line are they on?

PROBLEM (style mismatch)

PLUS (context helps)

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PROBLEM (indirect misread)

PLUS (trust-building)

PROBLEM (imposed norm)

PLUS (explicit agreement)

Reading: High context, low context, and the middle mile

The most useful frame for working across cultures is not 'us and them' but HIGH-CONTEXT and LOW-CONTEXT. Low-context cultures — much of the Netherlands, Germany, the US Northeast, Australia — expect meaning to sit ON the words. 'Please cut this slide' means please cut this slide. High-context cultures — much of Japan, Korea, India, Brazil, the Arab world — expect meaning to sit AROUND the words. A phrase like 'yes, we can consider that' may, depending on tone and rank, mean 'yes', 'maybe', or a very firm 'no'. Neither side is being difficult; they are running different software.

The trouble starts when one style is treated as the default and the other as the deviation. A New York manager convinced that 'clear feedback is a gift' can quietly humiliate a team in Tokyo. A Delhi lead convinced that 'you never criticise a colleague in front of others' can leave a Berlin engineer completely unaware that their work has serious problems. Both managers are being professional, kind and effective — by the standards of their own culture. The clash isn't personal. It's structural.

Working across cultures at B2 level requires precise nouns. FEEDBACK is uncountable — 'a feedback' is wrong; 'a piece of feedback' or 'some feedback' is right. INFORMATION, RESEARCH, ADVICE, PROGRESS, TRAINING, HOMEWORK, EQUIPMENT — all uncountable in English, whatever they do in your language. STAFF, POLICE, PEOPLE, HEADQUARTERS — plural-only in English, so 'the staff is happy' is wrong; 'the staff ARE happy' or 'the team IS happy' is right. Get these nouns wrong and you sound less senior than you are; get them right and half your English suddenly reads like a native speaker's.

The best cross-cultural teams do not choose one style over another. They make the invisible EXPLICIT. They write a short 'operating agreement' — 'we give improvement feedback in 1:1s, not in group meetings'; 'a written yes is a yes; a verbal yes may be politeness'; 'silence in a thread is not disapproval'. It looks bureaucratic. In practice, it does the job that shared cultural context does for a single-culture team — and it does it without asking anyone to abandon their own norms. Whereas a monoculture runs on implicit rules, a cross-cultural team runs on explicit ones. That's not a compromise; it's a competitive advantage.

1. The most useful frame for working across cultures is...

- (A) Us vs them
- (B) HIGH-CONTEXT (meaning around the words) vs LOW-CONTEXT (meaning on the words)
- (C) East vs West

2. The trouble starts when...

- (A) People from different cultures meet at all
- (B) One style is treated as the default and the other as the deviation
- (C) Meetings run too long

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3. 'A feedback' is wrong in English because FEEDBACK is...
- (A) Plural
 - (B) Uncountable — say 'a piece of feedback' or 'some feedback'
 - (C) Formal only
4. 'The staff is happy' is wrong because STAFF is...
- (A) Uncountable
 - (B) Plural-only — 'the staff ARE happy' or use 'the team IS happy'
 - (C) Formal
5. The best cross-cultural teams...
- (A) Choose one style and impose it globally
 - (B) Make the invisible EXPLICIT — a written operating agreement about how feedback, yes/no and silence work
 - (C) Avoid difficult conversations

Vocabulary in context

Match each cross-cultural term to its plain-English meaning.

high-context — meaning sits AROUND the words — tone, rank, silence matter

low-context — meaning sits ON the words — say what you mean

operating agreement — a short written doc making invisible team norms explicit

cross-cultural — involving people from more than one cultural background

monoculture — a team where everyone shares the same cultural defaults

cultural default — the way YOUR culture assumes things 'should' be done

Vocabulary: culture, prefixes and suffixes in business jargon

high-/low-context — how much meaning sits around vs on the words

direct / indirect (feedback) — explicit criticism vs feedback wrapped in context

hierarchical / flat (org) — a stratified chain of command vs an egalitarian, everyone-can-speak-up structure

operating agreement — written team norms making the invisible explicit

cultural default — the tacit assumption YOUR culture makes about how things ought to be done

code-switching — shifting register fluidly between cultural contexts

over- (overpromise, overwork, over-engineer) — too much

under- (understaffed, underperform, underquote) — not enough

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mis- (miscommunicate, misalign, misread) — wrongly

re- (rework, resend, reprioritise) — again / anew

dis- (disagree, dismiss, disengage) — opposite of / removal

cross- (cross-cultural, cross-functional, cross-border) — across / between

-ability (scalability, accountability, deliverability) — the quality of being ____

-ise / -ize (prioritise, standardise, contextualise) — make ____ / turn into ____

-ness (openness, fairness, tightness) — the state of being ____

-ity (visibility, complexity, granularity) — the state / degree of ____

-less (blameless, dateless, ownerless) — without ____

-friendly (mobile-friendly, timezone-friendly) — designed to work well for ____

practice

Complete each sentence with *ONE* word / phrase.

1. In a ____-____ culture, 'yes, we can consider that' may mean 'no' — depending on rank and tone.

2. We've been ____-staffed on the launch since March — that's why deadlines keep slipping.

3. Every quarter we ____-prioritise the roadmap based on what the market actually did.

4. The ____-cultural team runs on an explicit operating agreement, not on shared assumptions.

5. We need more ____ into the pipeline — leadership can't see what's blocked.

6. Let's ____ the review template so all three offices use the same format.

Practice 2 — collocations & rewrite

Rewrite each sentence replacing the underlined phrase with *ONE* word/phrase from this lesson's vocabulary. Keep the meaning identical.

1. In a <u>culture where meaning sits around the words</u>, silence can often mean a polite 'no'.

2. We need a <u>written document making our team norms explicit</u> to avoid future clashes.

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3. Working on a <u>team with multiple cultural backgrounds</u> requires a high degree of empathy.
4. We must <u>make the review template the same</u> across all our global offices.
5. The whole project failed due to a <u>failure to communicate correctly</u> between the two sites.

Practice 3 — discursive writing (business memo)

prompt: Write an email to your global team proposing the creation of a 'Team Operating Agreement' to improve cross-cultural collaboration.

Use at least FOUR of the target expressions from this unit.

Adopt a professional register: concise, structured, executive-friendly.

Include a clear recommendation or takeaway in the final sentence.

sample: Following our recent project debrief, it is clear that we have a significant style mismatch between our high-context and low-context team members. This has occasionally led to miscommunication, particularly regarding how we give and receive direct feedback. To address this, I propose we draft a formal operating agreement to make our invisible cultural defaults explicit. We need to standardise our expectations for 'yes' and 'no', as well as how we handle silence in Slack threads. This is not about choosing one culture over another, but about building a cross-cultural framework that increases our collective visibility. Despite our different backgrounds, we share a commitment to transparency and excellence. Recommendation: let's dedicate our next monthly retro to brainstorming these norms, with the goal of having a signed agreement by the end of the quarter to guide our future collaboration.

Practice B — Cross-cultural collocations

Match each verb to the noun it most naturally goes with.

- give** — constructive feedback in the 1:1
- escalate** — the issue to the regional head
- adapt** — your communication style
- misread** — a polite refusal as agreement
- standardise** — the review template across offices
- align** — on the operating agreement

Practice C — Fix the countability error

Rewrite each sentence, correcting the uncountable / plural-only noun error.

1. 'She gave me a very useful feedback.'

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2. 'I need an advice about the Berlin restructure.'

3. 'The staff is very happy with the new policy.'

4. 'The police is investigating the breach.'

5. 'We did a lot of researches on the Asian market.'

6. 'The headquarter is in Singapore.'

Practice D — Odd one out

Which item in each group does NOT belong to the same family?

1. high-context · direct feedback · code-switching · runbook

2. misalign · overpromise · undercut · scalable

3. visibility · complexity · openness · reprioritise

4. operating agreement · cultural default · monoculture · MFA



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Grammar focus: uncountable and plural-only nouns + word building

1. Uncountable nouns — no 'a', no plural, singular verb — In English, many abstract or 'stuff' nouns are uncountable — even when they're countable in other languages. FEEDBACK, INFORMATION, ADVICE, RESEARCH, TRAINING, PROGRESS, WORK, EQUIPMENT, SOFTWARE, LUGGAGE, NEWS, ACCOMMODATION, HOMEWORK, TRAFFIC. • 'She gave me SOME feedback / A PIECE of feedback / TWO PIECES of feedback.' • ✗ 'She gave me a feedback / two feedbacks.' • 'The information IS useful.' (singular verb) • 'The news IS good.' (news = uncountable, singular verb)

2. Plural-only nouns — no singular form, plural verb — STAFF, POLICE, PEOPLE, CATTLE — always plural verb: 'The staff ARE happy.' 'The police ARE investigating.' TIP: if this is awkward for you, swap in a singular collective: 'The TEAM is happy.' 'The DEPARTMENT is investigating.' CLOTHES, JEANS, TROUSERS, GLASSES, SCISSORS — always plural: 'My glasses ARE on the desk.' HEADQUARTERS, MEANS, SPECIES, SERIES — end in -s but can take singular OR plural verb depending on sense; NEVER 'headquarter'.

3. Nouns that change meaning between countable and uncountable — WORK (uncountable, activity) vs a WORK (countable, work of art). EXPERIENCE (uncountable, know-how) vs an EXPERIENCE (countable, one event). • 'I have five years of experience.' (uncountable) • 'That was an incredible experience.' (countable) • 'Business is good.' (uncountable, commerce) vs 'She runs three businesses.' (countable, companies)

4. Building business words — PREFIXES — OVER- = too much: overpromise, overwork, over-engineer. UNDER- = not enough: understaffed, underperform, underquote. MIS- = wrongly: miscommunicate, misalign, misread. RE- = again / anew: rework, resend, reprioritise. DIS- = opposite / removal: disagree, disengage, disincentivise. CROSS- = across / between: cross-cultural, cross-functional, cross-border.

5. Building business words — SUFFIXES — -ITY / -ABILITY = the quality of ____: visibility, scalability, accountability. -NESS = the state of ____: openness, fairness, tightness. -ISE / -IZE = make / turn into: prioritise, standardise, contextualise. -ABLE = can be ____: scalable, deliverable, actionable. -LESS = without: blameless, dateless, ownerless. -FRIENDLY = designed to work well for: mobile-friendly, timezone-friendly. Rule of thumb: adding a suffix often shifts word class — verb → noun, adjective → noun, noun → adjective. Get the word class right before you build.

Exercise A — Fix the countability error

Rewrite each sentence, correcting the uncountable / plural-only noun mistake.

1. 'The manager gave me two very useful feedbacks after the presentation.'

2. 'I need an advice on which vendor to choose.'

3. 'The staff is unhappy with the new hybrid policy.'

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4. 'We did many researches before launching in Vietnam.'

5. 'The news about the merger were leaked yesterday.'

6. 'Our headquarter is moving to Amsterdam next quarter.'

Exercise B — Build the word

Complete each sentence using a PREFIX or SUFFIX from the box: over-, under-, mis-, re-, cross-, -ability, -ise, -ness, -ity.

1. The team keeps ___promising deadlines they can't meet — three quarters in a row now.

2. We're ___staffed on the launch — Priya's asked for two more engineers.

3. The whole conflict was a ___communication — one side said 'let's consider it', the other heard 'yes'.

4. Every quarter we ___prioritise the roadmap based on what the market actually did.

5. The steering committee is ___-functional — product, engineering, legal and comms all sit on it.

6. The board wants more visibility into pipeline ___ — can we forecast a €5M quarter with these two reps?

7. We need to ___ the performance-review template across all four offices.

8. The openn___ of the Amsterdam team is one of our strengths — protect it.

Exercise C — Rewrite the cross-cultural line

Rewrite each vague sentence using ONE uncountable or plural-only noun correctly PLUS ONE prefix/suffix word.

1. 'The Tokyo team was not happy about the criticism in the meeting.'

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2. 'We should tell people in a better way that we need to change our plan.'

3. 'The company has offices in many countries and it's hard to see what everyone is doing.'

4. 'Nobody in the meeting really said no, but they didn't do it.'

Listening: three managers debrief a cross-cultural launch

You're the Chief People Officer. Six months ago, three regional managers led the same product launch across their offices — Amsterdam, Tokyo, São Paulo. You've asked each of them for a 90-second debrief on what worked and what didn't. You're listening for: (1) who names their own CULTURAL DEFAULT, (2) who blames another culture, (3) who has actually installed a shared OPERATING AGREEMENT, and (4) who uses uncountable and plural-only nouns correctly (a proxy for their English maturity).

pre

Which manager do you predict will impress you most, and why?

Which cultural DEFAULT is strongest in your own working style — direct or indirect, hierarchical or flat, relationship-first or task-first?

gist

1. Which manager's debrief impresses you most, and why?

2. Which manager's debrief is 'blame the other culture'?

3. Which manager is well-intentioned but leaves no structure behind?

detail

1. What is Sofia's OPERATING AGREEMENT, in her exact words?

2. What is Bram's LANGUAGE error that reveals more than his content does?

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3. What ONE piece of practical wisdom does Haruki articulate that Bram completely misses?

Third listen — self-awareness vs cultural blindness

Focus on HOW each manager talks about their OWN culture.

1. Bram never says the word 'Dutch' or 'Amsterdam' when describing his team's style. What does that omission mean?

2. Sofia says 'we tend to build relationship first, then negotiate — and I know this looks slow to Bram's team'. What move is she making with that language?

3. Haruki has the sharpest cultural insight of the three — but the weakest structural outcome. What's the lesson?

Language from the audio — cross-cultural moves worth stealing

Match each phrase to what it DOES.

"We tend to build relationship first, then negotiate — and I know this looks slow to Bram's team." — names her OWN cultural default AND how it lands with another culture, in one sentence

"A written yes is a yes; a verbal yes may be politeness." — converts an invisible norm into an explicit operating rule — the whole team can now navigate consent

"The Tokyo team just wouldn't tell us what they wanted." — blames another culture for not being like his own — his default is invisible to him

"We gave them a lot of feedbacks and the staff was surprised." — L1-thinking English — 'feedbacks' (uncountable) + 'staff was' (plural-only) — signals cultural AND linguistic monolingualism

"There is often silence that Bram-san reads as disagreement, when it is actually thinking." — brilliant cross-cultural observation — but stays as insight, never gets written into an agreement

"Silence in a thread is not disapproval; give people 24 hours before you read it as anything." — explicit written norm that makes cross-time-zone async trust possible

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Voice A (Bram, Amsterdam): Honestly, the launch worked in Amsterdam. We did what we always do — clear plan, clear feedback, everyone speaks up in the meeting. The Tokyo team just wouldn't tell us what they wanted. We gave them a lot of feedbacks and the staff was surprised, but that's how you improve. The Brazilians were always late — three weeks late on their piece, no explanations. Look, we were the only office giving proper feedback. Culture is one thing, but a deadline is a deadline.

Voice B (Sofía, São Paulo): So — the launch was hard, and I learned a lot. In São Paulo we tend to build relationship first, then negotiate — and I know this looks slow to Bram's team. What actually saved the launch was an operating agreement the three offices signed in month three. One: a written yes is a yes; a verbal yes may be politeness — so any critical decision has to end up in the doc. Two: improvement feedback happens in 1:1s, never in group meetings. Three: silence in a thread is not disapproval; give people 24 hours across the time zones before you read it as anything. All three offices signed off on this. The last three months were much cleaner. We're using the same agreement for the Q3 launch.

Voice C (Haruki, Tokyo): Yes, the launch was interesting. I think there was a lot of misunderstanding at first — but that is normal in cross-cultural work. There is often silence that Bram-san reads as disagreement, when it is actually thinking. In Tokyo, we do not interrupt to prove we are engaged; we wait, and then we speak carefully. This is not disagreement. It is respect. I hope next time we can talk about this more. It was a good experience for the team.

Speaking: solo role-play — 90-second cultural self-portrait

Solo task. In 90 seconds, describe YOUR OWN cultural default at work — as if you were joining a cross-cultural team on Monday. Record a voice note (up to 90 seconds). You MUST include: (1) ONE thing you consider 'normal / professional' that is actually a cultural default of your own culture, (2) ONE uncountable noun used correctly (feedback / information / advice / research / progress), (3) ONE plural-only noun used correctly (staff / people / police / headquarters), (4) ONE prefix or suffix word (miscommunicate / cross-functional / scalability / prioritise), (5) ONE 'operating agreement' rule you'd propose for the team.

Scene: Joining a genuinely cross-cultural team on Monday (recommended)

A: You self-portrait.

B: Imagined listener: a new manager who has never worked with your culture before.

Scene: Onboarding a colleague from a very DIFFERENT cultural default

A: You self-portrait.

B: Imagined listener: the new colleague, over coffee on day one.

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Scene: Explaining your team's cross-cultural agreement to your CEO

A: You self-portrait.

B: Imagined listener: a CEO who thinks 'this is all soft stuff'.

Extra speaking task — 30-second 'one norm we'll write down'

Pick ONE unwritten norm in your team that damages cross-cultural work — and propose the ONE sentence you'd put in the operating agreement to fix it. Record a 30-second voice note. Format: 'Right now, we assume _____. Some colleagues read that as _____. From now on, we agree: _____.'

Writing mini-task

Write a 4-line CROSS-CULTURAL OPERATING AGREEMENT for a team spanning at least three cultures (max 100 words). Each line must be a specific, testable norm — no 'we respect each other'. Cover: (1) how YES / NO is captured, (2) how FEEDBACK is delivered, (3) how SILENCE / delay is interpreted, (4) how DISAGREEMENT is surfaced. Use at least ONE uncountable noun and ONE prefix / suffix word correctly.

Wrap-up

One uncountable noun (feedback / information / advice / news / progress) you'll stop pluralising this week.

One line you'll propose adding to your team's OPERATING AGREEMENT — the invisible norm you'll make explicit.

One prefix / suffix word (miscommunicate / cross-functional / scalability) you'll use in your next status update.

Quiz

1. In a HIGH-CONTEXT culture, meaning sits...
 - (A) ON the words — say what you mean
 - (B) AROUND the words — tone, rank and silence carry meaning
 - (C) In writing only
2. The correct English is...
 - (A) 'She gave me two very useful feedbacks.'
 - (B) 'She gave me two very useful pieces of feedback.'
 - (C) 'She gave me a two feedback.'
3. The correct English is...
 - (A) 'The staff is unhappy with the policy.'
 - (B) 'The staff are unhappy with the policy.'
 - (C) 'The staffs are unhappy with the policy.'

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4. The best cross-cultural teams...
- (A) Pick one style and impose it as 'global standard'
 - (B) Make invisible norms EXPLICIT in a written operating agreement
 - (C) Avoid difficult conversations
5. 'Cross-functional' uses the prefix CROSS- to mean...
- (A) Angry
 - (B) Across / between (functions, cultures, borders)
 - (C) Wrong

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Workbook — home practice



Exercise 1 — Cross-cultural vocabulary

Complete each sentence with **ONE** phrase from the box.

Word bank: high-context · operating agreement · cross-functional · cultural default · code-switching · monoculture

1. In a ____-____ culture, 'yes, we can consider that' may mean 'no' — depending on rank and tone.

2. Every well-run cross-cultural team has a written ____ — feedback, silence and disagreement are all rendered explicit.

3. The launch team is ____-____ — product, engineering, legal and comms all sit on it.

4. Every culture has a ____ — the water it swims in without seeing.

5. She's fluent in ____-____ — direct and precise in Berlin meetings, warm and indirect with clients in São Paulo.

6. A ____ operates on implicit, unspoken rules; a cross-cultural team must codify them.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Exercise 1b — Vocabulary — discursive writing

Write a memo (120–180 words) to Department Heads regarding the challenges and strategies for integrating cross-cultural teams. Incorporate at least four phrases from Exercise 1: high-context, operating agreement, cross-functional, cultural default, code-switching, or monoculture.

type: writing

Use at least 4 target vocabulary items from the unit.

Maintain a formal, inclusive boardroom register.

Use prefixes and suffixes correctly (e.g., 'over-', 'mis-', '-ability').

Structure clearly: Cultural Landscape, Proposed Norms, Leadership Requirements.

model: Subject: Enhancing Cross-Cultural Team Integration To the Department Heads, As we expand our cross-functional teams across Berlin, Tokyo, and São Paulo, we must move away from the assumption that our local cultural default is universal. Operating as a monoculture is no longer viable; we must instead establish a formal operating agreement that codifies how we handle feedback and disagreement. For instance, teams working with high-context cultures must learn to listen for what is not being said, rather than relying solely on direct communication. This requires a high degree of code-switching from our leadership, adapting their style to suit the regional audience while maintaining a consistent strategic spine. By making these unspoken rules explicit, we reduce the risk of friction and ensure that our diversity becomes a source of competitive advantage. Success in Q4 will depend on our ability to bridge these cultural gaps effectively.

Exercise 2 — Fix the countability error

Rewrite each sentence, correcting the uncountable / plural-only noun mistake.

1. 'The manager gave me two very useful feedbacks.'

2. 'I need an advice on which vendor to choose.'

3. 'The staff is unhappy with the new hybrid policy.'

4. 'We did many researches before launching in Vietnam.'

5. 'The news about the merger were leaked yesterday.'

6. 'Our headquarter is moving to Amsterdam next quarter.'

7. 'The police is investigating the breach.'

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8. 'She has many experiences in cross-cultural teams.'

Exercise 3 — Build the word (prefixes & suffixes)

Complete each sentence with the correct prefix or suffix form.

1. The team keeps OVER___ deadlines they can't meet. (verb ending in -ise / -ize)

2. We're UNDER___ on the launch — Priya's asked for two more engineers.

3. It was a total MIS___ — one side said 'we can consider it', the other heard 'yes'.

4. Every quarter we RE___ the roadmap based on what the market actually did.

5. The steering committee is CROSS-___ — product, engineering, legal and comms on it.

6. The board wants more visib___ into pipeline scalab___ — can we forecast a €5M quarter?

7. We need to STANDARD___ the review template across all four offices.

8. The OPEN___ of the Amsterdam team is one of our strengths — protect it.

Exercise 4 — Direct or indirect?

Decide whether each line is a *DIRECT* (low-context) or *INDIRECT* (high-context) way of giving the same message.

1. 'This slide is confusing — cut it.'

(A) DIRECT (low-context)

(B) INDIRECT (high-context)

2. 'I wonder if there might be a way to make this slide land more clearly for our audience.'

(A) DIRECT (low-context)

(B) INDIRECT (high-context)

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3. 'We can consider that.' (spoken quietly, by a senior colleague, at the end of the meeting)
(A) DIRECT (low-context)
(B) INDIRECT (high-context)
4. 'That won't work — here's why, and here's what I'd do instead.'
(A) DIRECT (low-context)
(B) INDIRECT (high-context)
5. 'It would be very interesting to hear other perspectives on this proposal before we move forward.'
(A) DIRECT (low-context)
(B) INDIRECT (high-context)
6. 'No, we shouldn't ship this. Two blockers: X and Y. Owners?'
(A) DIRECT (low-context)
(B) INDIRECT (high-context)

Exercise 5 — Rewrite the operating-agreement line

Rewrite each vague cross-cultural rule as a specific, testable norm.

1. 'We respect each other's cultures.'

2. 'We communicate clearly.'

3. 'We don't misunderstand each other.'

4. 'Everyone speaks up.'

Exercise 6 — Three managers debrief the launch

You'll hear three regional managers debrief the same cross-cultural launch. Decide who should lead the next one.

1. Which manager's debrief impresses you most, and why?

2. Which manager's debrief is 'blame the other culture'?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



3. Which manager has insight but no structure?

Voice A (Bram, Amsterdam): The launch worked in Amsterdam. We did what we always do — clear plan, clear feedback. The Tokyo team just wouldn't tell us what they wanted. We gave them a lot of feedbacks and the staff was surprised. The Brazilians were always late. Look, we were the only office giving proper feedback. A deadline is a deadline.

Voice B (Sofía, São Paulo): In São Paulo we tend to build relationship first, then negotiate — I know this looks slow to Bram's team. What saved the launch was an operating agreement all three offices signed in month three. One: a written yes is a yes; a verbal yes may be politeness — critical decisions land in the doc. Two: improvement feedback happens in 1:1s, never in group meetings. Three: silence in a thread is not disapproval; give people 24h before reading it as anything. We're using the same agreement for Q3.

Voice C (Haruki, Tokyo): There was misunderstanding at first — but that is normal in cross-cultural work. There is often silence that Bram-san reads as disagreement, when it is actually thinking. In Tokyo we do not interrupt to prove we are engaged; we wait, and then we speak carefully. This is not disagreement. It is respect. I hope next time we can talk about this more.

Exercise 7 — Draft your team's operating agreement

Draft a 4-line CROSS-CULTURAL OPERATING AGREEMENT for a real (or invented) team spanning three cultures (max 100 words). Each line must be a testable norm — no 'we respect each other'. Cover: how YES/NO is captured; how FEEDBACK is delivered; how SILENCE is interpreted; how DISAGREEMENT is surfaced. Use at least ONE uncountable noun and ONE prefix/suffix word correctly.

Exercise 8 — Case study reflection: Currentflow launch

Currentflow 3.0 launches simultaneously across São Paulo, Berlin and Tokyo. Tokyo asks to delay by 12h. Three culturally-different launch messages exist. Answer:

1. Do you grant Tokyo's delay request? What do you write to Haruki?

2. How do you resolve three culturally-different launch messages?

3. How do you rotate on-call for the first 24h post-launch without silently punishing Tokyo?

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Answer key — Class Book

Lead-in: cross-cultural problem or plus?

1. → PROBLEM (style mismatch — direct low-context vs indirect high-context; both sides can adapt)
2. → PLUS (high-context writing style genuinely helps async decisions — protect it)
3. → PROBLEM (indirect refusal misread as consent — decisions get made on false agreement)
4. → PLUS (relationship-first cultures build trust faster; async work runs smoother on that trust)
5. → PROBLEM (imposing one culture's feedback norm as 'global standard' — quietly damages the other half)
6. → PLUS (making the invisible explicit — the single most powerful move in cross-cultural work)

Reading: High context, low context, and the middle mile

1. (B) HIGH-CONTEXT (meaning around the words) vs LOW-CONTEXT (meaning on the words)
2. (B) One style is treated as the default and the other as the deviation
3. (B) Uncountable — say 'a piece of feedback' or 'some feedback'
4. (B) Plural-only — 'the staff ARE happy' or use 'the team IS happy'
5. (B) Make the invisible EXPLICIT — a written operating agreement about how feedback, yes/no and silence work

Vocabulary: culture, prefixes and suffixes in business jargon

1. high-context
2. under
3. re
4. cross
5. visibility
6. standardise
1. In a high-context culture, silence can often mean a polite 'no'.
2. We need an operating agreement to avoid future clashes.
3. Working on a cross-cultural team requires a high degree of empathy.
4. We must standardise the review template across all our global offices.
5. The whole project failed due to a miscommunication between the two sites.
1. 'She gave me some very useful feedback.' (or: 'a very useful PIECE of feedback')
2. 'I need some advice about the Berlin restructure.' (or: 'a piece of advice')
3. 'The staff ARE very happy with the new policy.' (staff = plural-only; or: 'The team IS very happy...')
4. 'The police ARE investigating the breach.' (police = plural-only)
5. 'We did a lot of RESEARCH on the Asian market.' (research = uncountable)
6. 'The HEADQUARTERS ARE in Singapore.' / '...IS in Singapore.' (headquarters = plural in form, singular or plural in agreement — but never 'headquarter')
1. runbook — the other three describe cross-cultural communication; a runbook is an incident-response doc.
2. scalable — the other three use prefixes (mis-, over-, under-); scalable uses a suffix (-able).
3. reprioritise — the other three are noun-forming suffixes; reprioritise is a verb formed with a prefix.
4. MFA — the other three are cross-cultural / team-design concepts; MFA is a security term.

Grammar focus: uncountable and plural-only nouns + word building

1. 'The manager gave me two very useful PIECES OF FEEDBACK after the presentation.' (or 'some very useful feedback')
2. 'I need SOME ADVICE on which vendor to choose.' (or 'a piece of advice')
3. 'The staff ARE unhappy with the new hybrid policy.' (or 'The team IS unhappy...')
4. 'We did A LOT OF RESEARCH before launching in Vietnam.'
5. 'The news about the merger WAS leaked yesterday.' (news = uncountable, singular verb)
6. 'Our HEADQUARTERS IS moving to Amsterdam next quarter.' (never 'headquarter')
1. OVERpromising
2. UNDERstaffed
3. MIScommunication
4. REprioritise
5. CROSS-functional

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



6. -ITY (predictABILITY / scalability)

7. standardISE

8. openNESS

1. Model: 'The Tokyo staff WERE UNHAPPY with the direct FEEDBACK given in the group meeting — a classic cross-cultural misalignment.'

2. Model: 'We should RECOMMUNICATE the change of direction more clearly — the last update caused misALIGNMENT across three offices.'

3. Model: 'With HEADQUARTERS in Amsterdam and cross-border operations in six offices, we need more VISIBILITY into what each region is actually shipping.'

4. Model: 'Nobody in the meeting explicitly DISAGREED, but the polite "we can consider it" was misREAD as consent — no PROGRESS has been made since.'

Listening: three managers debrief a cross-cultural launch

1. Voice B (Sofia, São Paulo). Names her own default ('we tend to build relationship first, then negotiate'), doesn't blame the other cultures, and describes a specific OPERATING AGREEMENT the three offices signed in month three — 'a written yes is a yes; a verbal yes may be politeness; feedback happens in 1:1s, not in group meetings'. Uses 'feedback', 'progress', 'information' correctly as uncountable nouns.

2. Voice A (Bram, Amsterdam). 'The Tokyo team just wouldn't tell us what they wanted', 'the Brazilians were always late', 'we were the only office giving proper feedback'. Treats his own low-context, direct style as the neutral standard; every other culture is a 'deviation'. Also makes classic English errors — 'we gave them a lot of feedbacks', 'the staff was surprised'.

3. Voice C (Haruki, Tokyo). Kind, thoughtful, aware of the cultural gaps ('there is often silence that Bram-san reads as disagreement, when it is actually thinking'). BUT — no written operating agreement, no explicit norm about how yes / no / silence work. Six months from now, the next launch runs into the same friction because nothing structural was installed.

1. 'One: a written yes is a yes; a verbal yes may be politeness — so any critical decision has to end up in the doc. Two: improvement feedback happens in 1:1s, never in group meetings. Three: silence in a thread is not disapproval; give people 24 hours across the time zones before you read it as anything. All three offices signed off on this in month three.'

2. 'We gave them a lot of feedbacks and the staff was surprised' — two mistakes. FEEDBACK is uncountable ('a lot of feedback'). STAFF is plural-only ('the staff WERE surprised'). Both errors are typical of a manager who thinks in his L1 and hasn't yet upgraded his B2 English — same manager who assumes his cultural default is the neutral one.

3. 'There is often silence that Bram-san reads as disagreement, when in fact it is thinking. In Tokyo, we do not interrupt to prove we are engaged; we wait, and then we speak carefully. This is not disagreement. It is respect.' — This is a beautifully articulated cross-cultural pattern; unfortunately, Haruki never turns it into a written agreement, so it dies with him.

1. It means his own cultural style is INVISIBLE to him — he experiences it as 'just being professional' or 'just being clear'. Every other culture is marked ('the Tokyo team', 'the Brazilians'); his own is unmarked. That's the definition of a cultural DEFAULT — the water you swim in without seeing it. Until Bram can name his own style as ONE style among many, he'll keep imposing it as 'the standard'.

2. She's naming her own default AND acknowledging how it lands with a different culture — in one sentence. She isn't apologising for it; she isn't imposing it either. She's making it VISIBLE, so it can be discussed as a design choice, not experienced as friction. That's the single hardest move in cross-cultural leadership, and she does it in nine words.

3. Insight without structure evaporates. A cross-cultural team runs on WRITTEN agreements, not on the intuitions of one wise manager. When Haruki eventually rotates out, everything he understood about the silence-vs-disagreement pattern goes with him — because it was never captured in a doc, a norm, a policy. The lesson: turn insight into infrastructure, or watch it leak away one departure at a time.

Quiz

1. (B) AROUND the words — tone, rank and silence carry meaning
2. (B) 'She gave me two very useful pieces of feedback.'
3. (B) 'The staff are unhappy with the policy.'
4. (B) Make invisible norms EXPLICIT in a written operating agreement
5. (B) Across / between (functions, cultures, borders)

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Answer key — Workbook

Exercise 1 — Cross-cultural vocabulary

1. high-context
2. operating agreement
3. cross-functional
4. cultural default
5. code-switching
6. monoculture

Exercise 2 — Fix the countability error

1. 'The manager gave me two very useful **PIECES OF FEEDBACK**.' (or 'some very useful feedback')
2. 'I need **SOME ADVICE** on which vendor to choose.'
3. 'The staff **ARE** unhappy with the new hybrid policy.' (or 'The team **IS** unhappy...')
4. 'We did **A LOT OF RESEARCH** before launching in Vietnam.'
5. 'The news about the merger **WAS** leaked yesterday.'
6. 'Our **HEADQUARTERS IS** moving to Amsterdam next quarter.'
7. 'The police **ARE** investigating the breach.'
8. 'She has **A LOT OF EXPERIENCE** in cross-cultural teams.' (experience = uncountable when it means know-how)

Exercise 3 — Build the word (prefixes & suffixes)

1. **OVERPROMISING** (over- + promise)
2. **UNDERSTAFFED** (under- + staff + -ed)
3. **MISCOMMUNICATION**
4. **REPRIORITISE**
5. **CROSS-FUNCTIONAL**
6. **visibility** / **scalABILITY**
7. **STANDARDISE**
8. **OPENNESS**

Exercise 4 — Direct or indirect?

1. (A) **DIRECT** (low-context)
2. (B) **INDIRECT** (high-context)
3. (B) **INDIRECT** (high-context)
4. (A) **DIRECT** (low-context)
5. (B) **INDIRECT** (high-context)
6. (A) **DIRECT** (low-context)

Exercise 5 — Rewrite the operating-agreement line

1. Model: 'Improvement feedback happens in 1:1s, not in group meetings — and applies equally to Amsterdam, Tokyo and São Paulo.'
2. Model: 'A **WRITTEN** yes is a yes; a **VERBAL** yes may be politeness — so any critical decision has to land in the doc within 24h.'
3. Model: 'Silence in a thread is not disapproval; give people 24h across the time zones before you read it as anything.'
4. Model: 'In cross-cultural meetings, we go round every region for a named question before we go to open discussion — **SO THAT** the low-context speakers don't accidentally silence the high-context ones.'

Exercise 6 — Three managers debrief the launch

1. Voice B (Sofia, São Paulo) — names her **OWN** cultural default ('we build relationship first, then negotiate'), describes a specific written operating agreement, uses uncountable/plural nouns correctly.
2. Voice A (Bram, Amsterdam) — 'Tokyo wouldn't tell us what they wanted', 'Brazilians were always late'. His own low-context, direct style is invisible to him; every other culture is a 'deviation'. Also: 'feedbacks' and 'staff was' — L1 English mistakes.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



3. Voice C (Haruki, Tokyo) — beautifully articulates the silence-vs-disagreement pattern, but never turns it into a written norm. When he leaves, the insight leaves with him.

Exercise 8 — Case study reflection: Currentflow launch

1. Model: Third option. Written release goes out at 21:00 JST from São Paulo comms to the Japanese press list (preserves embargo). Full Japanese launch — video, customer calls, community — runs at 09:00 JST Friday (respects working hours). Tokyo team goes home at 18:00 as usual. Makes the trade-off EXPLICIT rather than imposing one culture on another.
2. Model: HYBRIDISE. ONE global spine (three facts, one boundary, one time commitment — signed by CEO) that lands identically at 12:00 UTC in all three regions. THREE regional wrappers (warmth-first in São Paulo, feature-precise in Berlin, formal in Tokyo) each region owns. Wrappers must not contradict the spine.
3. Model: Follow-the-sun. São Paulo runs 12:00–20:00 UTC → Berlin runs 20:00–04:00 UTC → Tokyo runs 04:00–12:00 UTC. Each handoff = 15-minute video overlap + written status in the shared doc. Nobody works outside normal hours; everybody's normal hours get used.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class
