

Let's Understand Each Other

A simple guide to communicating
with service users who speak
English as a second language.



This handbook aims to increase the confidence of frontline staff in communicating with service users who speak English as a second or additional language. We hope it will help with building relationships of trust and overcoming some of the challenges of providing support and the barriers to accessing support experienced by migrants.

This handbook and other resources are the result of a project led by Migration Policy Scotland which aims to counter financial disadvantage among migrant households in Scotland. Other resources include:

- A wall poster with quick hints and reminders for speaking with service users
- Guidance for those involved in offering Financial Health Checks, on how to make these work well for migrants (with or without recourse to public funds)
- Service maps to help people who have moved to Scotland, or to a new area within Scotland, find out where to get help if they are struggling financially.

The handbook was co-produced with Glasgow Clyde College and we are very grateful to Eleanor Chapman, ACE Student Support Officer for her contribution.

For more information about the project and links to other resources please visit our webpage: <https://migrationpolicyscotland.org.uk/project/financial-disadvantage-among-migrant-households/>

This project was funded by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust.

About Migration Policy Scotland: Migration Policy Scotland offers a home for open dialogue and informed response to migration. We harness insights from lived and learned experience to drive work that is grounded in the realities of migration in Scotland.



Contents

About this handbook	4
Overcoming language barriers	5
Spoken communication	6
Using translation and interpretation	8
Making your written resources more accessible	10
Summary	11
Resources	12

About this handbook

This handbook provides general information and simple strategies for overcoming language barriers in spoken communication. It also offers advice around using interpreters and machine translation. Finally, there are some tips at the end about making written information more effective for audiences with varying degrees of literacy and levels of English.

Alongside this handbook we have produced a wall poster which can be used as a handy 'quick guide' to speaking together (either face-to-face or by phone).

Learning a new language can be a long and difficult process. It involves learning not only new words, but learning and adapting to new behaviours, cultural practices, systems and concepts. This learning doesn't only take place in English language classes, it also happens in everyday interactions with colleagues, employers and support services. These interactions might be fumbling, glitchy or frustrating, but they might also give way to 'aha!' moments of understanding and connection. They are a means not only of facilitating someone's access to crucial support, but also a significant part of developing everyone's confidence and ability using language(s) in a new place or with new people.

We hope that this handbook will be helpful in planning your service interactions with service users who speak English as a second or additional language, but also that the quick guide will act as simple reminders you can keep to hand or put on your wall.



You can download a copy of the handbook and poster for printing here: <https://migrationpolicyscotland.org.uk/project/guides-for-accessible-intercultural-communication/>

There will be many situations when it is necessary and appropriate to seek the services of professional interpreters. This guidance offers some suggestions and advice about working with informal interpreters, but it is not intended to act as an alternative to professional interpretation where this is required. Instead, the guide is intended to help you recognise when an interpreter is required, and when you can adopt various strategies to communicate across a language barrier yourself.

A customer journey mapping exercise¹ – walking through all the steps of interacting with your service 'in the shoes' of a particular user group – can be a very useful tool for identifying specific communication challenges or barriers that might be experienced by people with limited confidence or fluency in English. In the future, it is hoped that this handbook might be improved with case studies of communication issues that different services have experienced, but for now, the handbook offers some more general tips for overcoming language barriers.



¹<https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/external-affairs/customer-journey-mapping/>

Overcoming language barriers

People who move to Scotland from other countries whether for work, study, to join family or seek protection have a great diversity of language abilities and needs. Many are fluent in several languages. Some speak English well but with different accents and may be less familiar with Scots terms or Scottish accents. Others may struggle with literacy in any language. They also have very varied backgrounds and circumstances, including in their reasons for and experiences of moving to Scotland and the UK, their level of previous education and literacy, the length of time they have lived in the UK and their familiarity with British systems or habits.

A person's language 'ability' can also be shaped by their current emotional or physical state. It is a lot harder to effectively communicate in a language you are less confident in if you are hungry, anxious, or if you have had negative experiences of not understanding or being misunderstood in the past.



Spoken communication

Whether speaking to someone in person, online or on the phone, remember to speak slowly and clearly, possibly separating individual words more than you might normally.

✗	Don't	Won't	Cannae	DWP
✓	Do not	Will not	Cannot	Job centre

Use shorter sentences than you might do normally, especially when giving instructions. Identify the most important bit of information and convey it in the simplest terms possible. While this might feel blunt or rude, if said with a smile and a friendly tone of voice, simple instructions are more likely to be understood.

✗	"My colleague's the one to talk to but she's nipped out, would you mind just waiting a little bit until she's back from her break?"
✓	"My colleague can help. She is not here now. Wait here, fifteen minutes."

Try to avoid complex grammar and phrasing. English has lots of phrasal verbs – verbs that are made up of several different words whose individual meanings are different to the meaning of the combined phrase – and they are especially difficult for English learners to understand. Substituting them for single words where possible can make a difference.

✗	" Pick up the form from reception, have a go at filling it in and hand it back in to me"
✓	" Collect the form from reception. Try to answer the questions. Then, bring it here to me".

The English that many people learn in English language classes or via films, TV, or the radio, is not always (rarely!) the language that they hear around them on a day-to-day basis. It is not always possible – or necessarily desirable – to change your own accent and learning how people actually speak on a day-to-day basis in a particular place is an important and often enjoyable part of learning a new language. However, being aware of regional, colloquial or idiomatic language, and reaching for a more 'neutral' or 'standard' equivalent might make it easier to be understood. Below are just some examples you might think about if someone is struggling to understand.

✗	In a bit	Keep me in the loop	Where do you stay?	Wee
✓	Soon	Tell me what happens	What is your address?	Small

Sometimes it might even be easier to understand if you use English that is not absolutely 'correct'. That's ok. The main aim of your interaction is to be understood, not to improve the service user's English in this instance.

“ I was helping someone fill out a form and needed her address history. I asked, 'What was your previous address?' She only understood the word 'address', and said, 'Address me?' I nodded and said, 'Address you before,' with a jerk of my thumb over my shoulder to indicate the past. ”

Take time to explain the meanings behind words. If you think the person you are speaking with hasn't understood, you could try using a different word, explaining a word using simple language, or giving an example.

- *If a person hasn't understood 'daily', try 'every day', or even, 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday'.*
- *'Rent' could be explained as 'Money that you pay for your house'*
- *'Benefits' as 'Money from the government/state'.*

This is especially important when speaking about systems or concepts that a person might be less familiar with.

Don't forget to use body language. A lot can be expressed or made clearer through nonverbal communication, though be aware that the meaning of gestures and even facial expressions can vary across cultures. Tone of voice or facial expressions can help

someone understand if the message is positive or negative, while accompanying speech with miming simple actions or scenarios can sometimes help make a message clearer.

And finally, don't be afraid to get creative. Try using images, technology or just writing a word down. If someone is struggling to catch a word you've said several times, you could try writing it down for them. Images are another useful way to explain new words or concepts – especially if they are hard to explain or define without using the word itself. A Google Image search can also just be a lot quicker.

Many of the suggestions in this section are also relevant to other kinds of communication, whether working with an interpreter, using technology or for written communication. Read on for more ideas and tips.

“ A service user from a rural background in Sudan couldn't understand why he was getting letters about rent arrears or what he had to do about it. His housing association were able to get an interpreter on the line, but even when trickier words like 'arrears' or 'tenancy agreement' were translated into Arabic, he still didn't understand. It was the *systems the words referred to*, not the words themselves, that were unfamiliar and confusing. You may need to take time and provide a longer explanation, even if the words themselves have been translated. ”



Using translation and interpretation

Sometimes, especially when communicating something particularly complicated or important, the tips and ideas above won't be enough to be sure that you've understood or been understood sufficiently. In such instances, it might be appropriate to use an interpreter (professional or informal) or a machine translation tool (such as Google Translate). This section offers some advice and suggestions for this.

The first thing you will need to know is which language you need interpretation or translation from/into. A language identifier, used to identify which language(s) a person speaks, can be found at the end of this document, but please keep in mind that this relies on literacy, not every language is listed and there can be a lot of variation in some languages. For example, someone who speaks Iraqi Arabic won't necessarily understand Moroccan Arabic, and not everyone will be able to understand or use Modern Standard Arabic, a formal, standardised version of Arabic used as a lingua franca. A good rule of thumb is to double check that a service user is happy with the interpretation service and let them know that they can request an interpreter who speaks their dialect if needed.

Human interpreters

Friends and family members who are happy to interpret offer a very important source of support to people who are less confident communicating in English. However, it is important to remember that interpreting well is a difficult task requiring years of training, and there are important issues you need to consider when using informal interpretation.

This is especially so when talking about something sensitive or confidential (like health or domestic abuse), complicated (like welfare rights and the benefits system) or when it involves an important or consequential decision.

A service user from Eritrea, fluent in about 5 languages but with very basic English, and with limited literacy in all her languages, was nearly denied continued housing support from the local authority, because her teenage son, who had been trusted to interpret the conversation, declined an offer of permanent housing on his own initiative, rather than interpreting the offer for his mother.

Machine translation

Machine translation tools (like Google Translate) have got a lot better in recent years and are an incredibly useful tool for many people trying to communicate across language barriers. They are, however, fallible, and often struggle to effectively translate, in particular, nuance, context or idiomatic language. Many of the same tips and advice for spoken communication apply here as well – keep sentences short, vocabulary simple, be aware of language that might be idiomatic and concepts that might not be universal. In all cases, slow down and take time to negotiate a process of translation with the person you are supporting. Don't assume the machine translation is accurate, keeping checking they have understood and be ready to laugh together if the machine makes silly mistakes!

A helpful tip can be to double-check machine translations by using the 'swap languages' button. This will translate the translation back into English. Seeing the reverse translation can help you understand potential inaccuracies or ambiguities.



To use the “swap languages” function, you will need to click this icon:

Click this icon once and you will see the translation translated back into English again. This is the reverse translation.

I tried to help a Pashto-speaking client using a translation app and I typed in ‘your universal credit has been sanctioned’. When I checked the reverse translation, it said ‘your international credit has been approved’. That was the opposite of what I wanted to tell them!



In the example above, the app produced a misleading translation because “sanctioned” has multiple meanings in English. If this happens, you might need to take extra steps to make sure the service user understands.

You can also try clicking on the translation itself to see if there are any alternative translation options. This may give some other possible ways the translation might be understood (or not). It can help you to understand whether some words have multiple meanings and to decide whether:

- You need to double check how something has been understood
- You need to offer more explanation of a concept or word
- You need to find different ways to communicate what you mean.



If service users aren't comfortable with writing, the Google Translate phone app has a microphone button.

You can use this to record speech which the app will then translate for you.



You can also use translation apps and machine translation tools to check whether information you are providing in writing (through texts, emails or printed information) is likely to translate well. This will help you to understand what your service users will see if they use an app like Google Translate to understand your written information. If you use the Camera icon in the app, this will show you instantly how your writing is translated into many other languages.

Making your written resources more accessible

Accessible written resources explaining clearly how a service or procedure works, detailing what it offers and what its limitations are, and giving simple instructions about how it can be accessed can be of great value to advisors, support staff and service users, whether they are confident using English or not.

Much of the guidance for producing easy-read documents and service-maps for people with learning disabilities¹ can also be applied to making written communication more accessible for people with limited reading comprehension in English. Videos and animations can also be a helpful tool.

Some key points (many of which are similar to advice for spoken communication) are:

- Use simple language and short sentences and avoid jargon or technical terms
- Try not to overwhelm readers with unnecessary information
- Make sure that all acronyms and abbreviations are explained and do not assume prior knowledge of how a system works or how universal it is

Visual aids can also be a useful way of conveying a message to people with low literacy skills in any language.



- Flowcharts can be useful tools for explaining processes or eligibility
- Pictures can be used as 'visual headlines' – for example, a picture of a house might let people know that a piece of information relates to housing, while a symbol of coins or the '£' would be a useful accompaniment to the word 'funding'. (See the Resources section at the end of this handbook for an example, generously shared by Citizens Advice Bureau in Dumfries.)
- Several pictures can be combined to make new meanings, or to add nuance or context

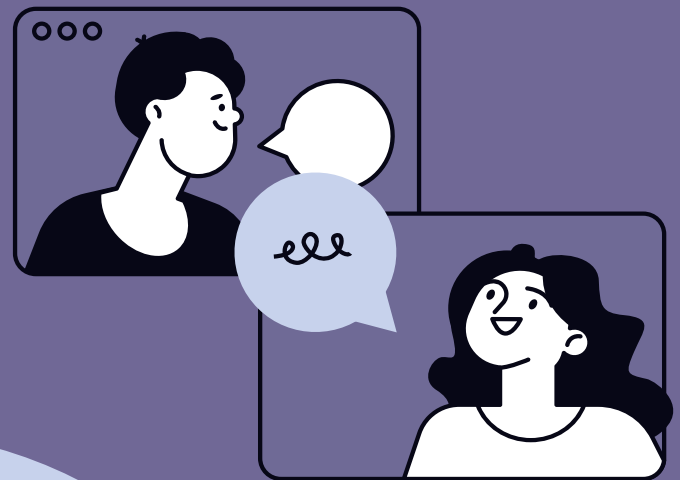
'Many people in the area said they were worried about their homes being burgled.'  (This picture shows a burglar, but does not show people worrying about being burgled.)	'Many people in the area said they were worried about their homes being burgled.'  (This picture shows someone saying they are worried about being burgled.)
---	---

(Source: UKAAF, Guidance for producing easy read documents)

¹ See for example, <https://www.ukaaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/G030-UKAAF-Easy-Read.pdf>

Summary

At its core, effective intercultural communication relies on patience, empathy and creativity. It is also important to be aware and questioning of the sorts of language and communication styles used and the assumptions they might rest upon – in terms of how accessible your words or grammatical structures are, but also how universal or ‘taken-for-granted’ the concepts, systems or practices they refer to are.



Resources

Language Identifier



DUMFRIES & GALLOWAY
CITIZENS ADVICE SERVICE

LANGUAGE IDENTIFIER

WE USE LANGUAGE LINE ON THESE PREMISES AND WILL TRY TO ACCOMMODATE ALL LANGUAGES.

Unë flas shqip	Albanian	Nalobaka Lingála	Lingala
አማርኛ አገልግሎት	Amharic	Aš kalbu lietuviškai	Lithuanian
أنا أتتكلم العربية	Arabic	Jas zboruvam makedonski	Macedonian
Ես հայերեն եմ խոսում	Armenian	Saya bercakap Bahasa Melayu.	Malay
Mən azərbaycanca danışırım	Azeri	我会说中文	Mandarin
আমি বাংলা বলি	Bengali	मी मराठी बोलतो	Marathi
Govorim bosanski/hrvatski.	Bosnian/Croatian	Би монголоор ярьдаг	Mongolian
Говоря български	Bulgarian	म नेपाली बोल्छु।	Nepali
ကျွန်တော် မြန်မာစာ ပြောတတ်ပါတယ်။	Burmese	Mówię po polsku	Polish
我識廣東話。	Cantonese	Eu falo português	Portuguese
我说汉语	Chinese	ਮੈਂ ਪੰਜਾਬੀ ਬੋਲਦਾ ਹਾਂ।	Punjabi
Mluvim česky	Czech	ژده پښتو خبری کوم	Pushto
Jeg taler dansk	Danish	Vorbesc românește.	Romanian
Ma räägin eesti keelt	Estonian	Я говорю по-русски	Russian
من فارسی صحبت می‌کنم	Farsi	Говорим српски	Serbian
Je parle français	French	Ndinotaura chiShona	Shona
: მე ვლაპარაკობ ქართულად	Georgian	මම සිංහලෙන් කතා කරනවා	Sinhalese
Ich spreche Deutsch	German	Hovorim po slovensky	Slovak
હું ગુજરાતી બોલું છું	Gujarati	Waan ku hadlaa af-Soomaali.	Somali
Ina jin Hausa	Hausa	Hablo español	Spanish
אני מדבר עברית	Hebrew	Ninazungumza Kiswahili.	Swahili
मैं हिंदी बोलता हूँ	Hindi	Nagsasalita ako ng Tagalog	Tagalog
Beszélek magyarul	Hungarian	நான் தமிழ் பேசுகிறேன்	Tamil
A mụ na-asụ Igbo	Ibo	ฉันพูดภาษาไทยได้	Thai
Saya berbicara bahasa Indonesia	Indonesian	నేను తెలుగు మాట్లాడగలను.	Telugu
Мен қазақша сөйлеймін	Kazakh	Türkçe konuşuyorum	Turkish
Mvuga ikinyarwanda	Kinyarwanda	Meka Twi	Twi
저는 한국어를 합니다	Korean	Я розмовляю українською	Ukrainian
Ez bi kurdî diaxivim	Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji)		Urdu
من به کوردی قسه دهکم	Central Kurdish (Sorani)	Men o'zbekcha gapiraman	Uzbek
Es runāju latviski	Latvian	Tôi nói tiếng Việt	Vietnamese
		Mo sọ Yorùbá	Yoruba

Disclaimer: Organisations creating their own materials are responsible for ensuring that all translations have been accurately reproduced.

Resources

Visual aid for advice work



WHAT CAN WE HELP WITH?

PLEASE POINT TO THE RELEVANT ENQUIRY



ENERGY



HOUSING



DEBT



ENERGY VOUCHER



EMPLOYMENT



FOOD PARCEL



BENEFITS



IMMIGRATION

Disclaimer: Organisations creating their own materials are responsible for ensuring that all translations have been accurately reproduced.

Let's Understand Each Other | 13

Migration Policy Scotland is a Scottish registered charity SC050761

(c) Migration Policy Scotland

STA0525228644-001