



# Speaking with service users for whom English is a second language.

MIGRATION POLICY SCOTLAND GLASGOW CLYDE COLLEGE

## Speak slowly and clearly. Separate individual words

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

## Use short sentences, especially when giving instructions

Identify the most important bit of information and convey it as simply as possible. Don't worry about being blunt - if said with a smile and a friendly tone of voice, short and simple instructions are easier to understand.

|   |                                                                                                                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ✗ | "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."                                                           |



## Avoid complex grammar and phrasing

If you can use a single word to convey the same meaning, that's usually much better.

|   |                                                                                            |
|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ✗ | "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." |

## Avoid more informal, regional or colloquial language

A more neutral or standard equivalent might be easier 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 |

## It's OK to use English that is not completely 'correct' if that helps understanding

Remember that the main aim of your interaction is to be understood, not to correct or improve the service user's English.

**Illustrative Example:** "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 the person you're speaking with hasn't understood, 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' could be described as 'Money from the government'

This is especially important when speaking about systems or concepts that someone from a different country might be less familiar with.

## Don't forget body language

Tone of voice or facial expressions can help someone understand if the message is positive or negative. Accompanying speech with miming simple actions or scenarios can sometimes help make a message clearer.

## 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, try writing it down for them. Images are also useful - a Google image search can be a quick way to explain a word or concept.

