



Tips for Speaking with Someone Who Is Learning English

- **Try to communicate the best you can.** When someone is learning a new language, the ability to understand comes prior to being able to speak the language. The new learner can probably understand you more than you may realize, but he or she may not yet be able to express their thoughts verbally. Your communication may not be perfect and may involve writing things down, using Google Translate, or hand gestures. New learners really appreciate when they are given opportunities to practice, and try to speak. For simple things, interpreters may not always be necessary.
- **Speak at an even pace.** All people tend to speak their first language very quickly without realizing it. When you are speaking with someone who is learning English, find a good pace for their level. Just be aware of your speed, don't speak so slowly that they cannot follow you or so quickly they get lost. Encourage them to tell you when they don't understand you or, when they need you to slow down. For new learners, trying to follow a conversation with more than one speaker is often a challenge.
- **Telephone communication.** Speaking on the phone is difficult for most new English learners as there are no visual clues. Keep your telephone conversation very short, clear, and specific. If a learner calls you for information, keep the conversation short and clear. It is best to avoid 'small talk' on the phone.
- **Repeating.** It is natural to keep repeating something when someone doesn't understand but, it is not always helpful. Rather than repeating the same thing over and over, try using a different word or a way of expressing the same idea.
- **Be mindful of the expressions and idioms.** Examples of idioms are: "beats me", "Come rain or shine", and "I am in a pickle." Depending on the learner's level of English, idioms can be confusing. When someone is learning a language they can take things very literally, therefore idioms make no sense. Either avoid using idioms or if you use them, explain them.
- **Be aware of phrasal verbs.** Phrasal Verbs are two-word expressions that can be very confusing to learn, and are not in the dictionary: Examples: stand up, sit up, sit down, and lie down. Just be aware when you use them and ensure you have been understood.
- **Humor.** The use of humor is a wonderful way to communicate and laughter is always welcome. But, remember humor is cultural, and some learners may not understand that you are joking; Sarcasm, which Canadians tend to use readily, can be especially difficult to translate or to explain to new English learners.

 403-320-1589

 LBranner@LFSfamily.ca

 lethbridgeimmigration.ca

 1107 2A Ave North, Lethbridge

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- **Avoid asking... Do you understand?** If you say “Do you understand?” Chances are, you will get “yes” no matter if they have understood you or not. Who wants to admit they don’t understand something? Instead, ask the learner to repeat the instructions/information back to you. Then, you will have a better idea of what they have understood. Ask again if need be.

Example:

You: Your doctor’s appointment is at 4:00 tomorrow. I will pick you up at 3:45.

Learner: OK.

You: Just so I am clear, what time am I picking you up tomorrow?

Learner: At 4:45.

You: I will meet you at your house at 3:45, your doctor’s appointment is at 4:00.

- **Use correct grammar.** Say all the words in a sentence. It is not as helpful as one might think to “simplify” what you are saying, especially if it is not grammatically correct.

Example:

You might say, “Do you want to go for lunch with me?”

Avoid incorrect versions like “Me go lunch you come too?”

If you are speaking or writing broken English, you are modelling and teaching broken English. If a learner continually hears language used correctly on a consistent basis the chances of him or her learning it correctly is greater.

The words ‘a’, ‘an’, and ‘the’ are called articles. English is one of the few languages in the world that contain articles in the way we use them. The majority of new English learners struggle with them. They are not that important, but if a learner never hears them in use, it will be harder for them to understand how they are used later on.

- **Find a healthy balance between not correcting and over-correction.** The general rule is: can the learner make themselves understood? It doesn’t need to be perfect. If you are constantly correcting every little mistake a learner makes, he or she could lose confidence. If you don’t correct them at all, then he or she could continue bad habits. An easy way to correct a learner is to mimic the sentence back to them but say it correctly, as part of the conversation.

Example:

Learner: “I go to the park yesterday”.

You: “Oh, you went to the park yesterday. How was it?”





Things to Remember about Communicating with New English Speakers

- When we can't understand someone, some common things often just happen because we are human—please become aware of them and avoid them if possible.
 1. We tend to speak louder. Unless the learner has a hearing impairment, this is not necessary. The opposite can also be true when a new English learner is really trying and isn't being understood. Their voice may have a tendency to escalate, they keep repeating things or they may get frustrated when they can't express themselves the way they want to. Don't take it personally.
 2. We treat them as if they are not very smart. You may be speaking with someone who has a PhD!
 3. Even though they are adults we speak to them as if they are children. They are just adults learning a language; they bring a lot of learned experience! Please note, any learning materials designed for children are not appropriate to use with adult learners.
- Remember that it takes time to learn a language. Some learners may seem like they are not progressing or learning English very quickly, but it is just taking longer. Everyone learns in their own way and time span. It is estimated that it can take between 5 and 12 years for a learner to become fully fluent in a language. Of course, there are many contributing factors when it comes to language learning.
- Adult learners, who did not have an opportunity to go to school when they were a child, or their education was interrupted, may not be literate in their own language. Therefore, those folks tend to have a harder time navigating a new language, simply because they don't have the experience with learning compared to those who have had more education. A little more patience and understanding is required.
- When people arrive to a new country they are not only learning a new language, everything is new. They are adjusting to a new culture, new ways of doing things and there are many things to do! Even though we may think language learning should be their priority we sometimes forget that newcomers can often feel overwhelmed with many other settlement issues and tasks.
- Adults tend to learn a language at a slower pace than children do. Be careful when asking a child to interpret for you. Although convenient, it can change the power dynamics and relationship between parent and child. If the information that needs to be relayed is really important or if it is something that would normally be discussed adult to adult, find an adult interpreter to assist.
- When you are using an interpreter, address the learner directly. Avoid having the conversation with the interpreter.



Tool Kit

These tools may or may not be comfortable or appropriate for all learners, yet may be a great relief to others and may assist greatly with communication. Keep trying to find things that work!

- Slide a plain piece of paper or card stock inside a sheet protector, and you have an instant “whiteboard”. Use a dry-erase marker to draw pictures or write a word they aren’t hearing you say. Or, you can ask a learner to write their name on the whiteboard instead of asking them to spell it over and over. Just erase what information you gathered. You aren’t wasting paper and it is quick, discrete, and confidential. There are reusable notebooks, like Wipebooks for example, that can be used for the same purpose.



- If it is an appropriate environment, create sticky notes with the English word for an item on it and place it on the item (for example, ‘desk’) so they can see it. Learning a language involves repetition and frequency.
- Use a picture dictionary or have pictures of things that you might find helpful on hand. Sometimes a picture is better than translating the word. Or, if you use you can use a search engine to find a word, perform a search function so that the learner can see it.
- Smartphone apps such as TextNow are free, do not show your personal cell number, and utilize Google Translate, allowing you to send a text to a learner in their first language. They are able to respond with their text translated into English.
- Actions such as learning a few words in their language, or if you are a business, having signs or information translated in other languages, can go a long way to help intercultural communication.

Thank you for your efforts to help make newcomers feel more welcome!