

Communicating with New Language Learners

When 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 realize and will appreciate opportunities to practice, and try to speak. Communicate the best you can, and an interpreter may not always be required.

Tips:

- Speak at an even pace and use correct grammar.
- Phone conversations are often more difficult without the aid of visual cues. Keep phone conversations short, clear and specific.
- Try using a different word or way of expressing the same idea rather than repeating the same thing over and over.
- Avoid the tendency to speak louder when someone does not understand.
- Speak to the new learner in an age-appropriate way. Avoid speaking to an adult as if they are a child, or not very smart.
- Address the learner directly, rather than the interpreter, and be very careful when asking a child to interpret for you.
- It can be helpful to ask the new learner to repeat information back to you, rather than asking "Do you understand?"
- Expressions, idioms and acronyms may be confusing or taken very literally. Examples of idioms are: "beats me" "I am in a pickle." Be aware when you use them and ensure you have been understood.
- Find a balance between correction and over correction. The rule of thumb is: Can the learner make themselves understood?

Toolkit:

Different tools will be useful for different learners. Keep trying to find what works best!

- Whiteboards for drawing pictures or writing words.
- Sticky notes placed on items with the English word.
- Picture dictionary or Google Images.
- Apps such as "Text Now" and "WhatsApp" allow you to text a learner in their first language and translate their response to English.
- Actions such as learning a few words in their language, or having signage translated in other languages can go a long way to help inter-cultural communication.

Be patient with yourself and the new learner. Remember, it can take between 5 and 12 years to become fully fluent in a language!