



Getting hold of the right end of the stick

Five ideas for improving communication with customers from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB)

These suggestions are based on avoiding some of the features that learners of English find difficult. Native speakers use these features all the time and they give spoken English its rhythm, flow and life. Taking care to avoid them when you are dealing with NESBs does not mean you have to alter your everyday style of speaking and nor does it mean using baby-talk.

It would be both difficult and unnatural to stick to all these suggestions all the time, but if your customer does not understand you, consider whether the reason was the complexity of the way you spoke, or simply the grammar you used. Try conveying the same information in a simpler way and if you are completely stuck, write it down.

Keep it simple

One idea/instruction/suggestion/question per sentence

Are you just staying in Christchurch or are you living here?

better, How long will you be in Christchurch?

Keep sentences short and simple

It is a condition of joining the library that you present ID

better, you must show ID to join the library

Avoid relative clauses

This is the card which you must bring each time you visit the library

better, bring this card each time you come to the library

Use sentences that go subject-verb-object, avoiding the passive voice

Proof of address will be required

better, you must bring proof of address

Speak slowly and clearly but don't shout

Not speaking fluent English does not equal deafness or stupidity

Avoid humour

It is unlikely to be worth the effort!

Avoid negatives

Avoid negative questions where the answer could be yes or no

Aren't you going to take this book after all?

better, are you going to take this book?

Avoid negative words and ideas such as unless, without, except, excluding, despite, cancel, reject, delete, remove, until

Don't come in to pick up your reserve until you receive a notice in the mail

better, we will tell you when your reserve is ready

Avoid phrasal verbs

These consist of verb + one or two prepositions, they are extremely common and are notoriously difficult to master:

Set off, hand out, hold on, hold up, wrap up, come across...

better, depending on context, start, give, wait, delay, return, finish, find...

Avoid idiom

At the end of the day

The tip of the iceberg

The wrong end of the stick

To stick religiously to a policy

The physical

Eye contact will help tell you if you are being understood

Point, to underline words such as *I, you, upstairs, downstairs*

Use props, eg a library card, a book, a pen

Don't fill in the gaps with waffle

Face the person you are talking to

Don't talk to the computer

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