

... many new people have come to Northern Ireland. ... One of the biggest problems for them is the language barrier – many can't understand and speak English. ... It is very difficult to get necessary information about benefits, legal issues, housing etc. Simple things, such as going to a doctor are not simple because they have to have interpreters. (In emergency cases it is especially difficult.) Helping children with their schoolwork is impossible. Finding a job in a new economic situation is a big achievement. Language problems have also impacted on their mental health and lots of newcomers are experiencing depression. It is not easy to make friends, so many feel very lonely. English-speaking people have treasures in their mouths that are so precious for people who came here recently. Every, even very small, conversation is like an English lesson and an encouragement to learn more.

Aneta Dabek, EMBRACE Development Worker, 2010 [www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/8543\\_Embrace\\_NL\[3\].pdf](http://www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/8543_Embrace_NL[3].pdf)

Many migrant workers already have excellent English. Filipino nurses, for example, have usually been educated through English. Medical professionals from outside Europe must satisfy an English language test before they are able to work here and there are plans to extend this testing to European nationals. Many other new migrants, however, are likely to be working below the level of their educational attainment and expertise because their qualifications are not recognised, or their English is not good enough. Accents and local dialects can add additional communication challenges. There is a less recognised challenge for local English speakers who may be isolated in the workplace, unable to communicate because their colleagues speak other languages.

In some traditional migrant populations, such as the Chinese or Bangladeshi communities, some people (especially in the older generations) may have little English and this makes it difficult to integrate or understand important information.

For some of us we don't speak the same language as our parents – they speak better Cantonese than English and we speak better English than Cantonese.

Young Black & Minority Ethnic Communities in Lisburn, *SE E & L B*, 2010

(See also 'Negotiating Belonging: Discourse on Culture and Language for Migrants from the Global South'. [www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-11/negotiating-belonging-discourse-culture-and-language-migrants-global-south](http://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-11/negotiating-belonging-discourse-culture-and-language-migrants-global-south) )

Researchers listening to the experiences of the Bangladeshi community in 2000 found that a family did not know their 6-year old child was dying until the day he died, because there was no interpreter. N Ireland now has a regional translation service for the health service and the equality obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act encouraged public services to be conscious of the need for improvement.

Minority ethnic groups had difficulty accessing services due to the language barrier – now there are more efforts to inform them of the services available.

*How Public Authorities Provide Services to Minority Ethnic Groups: Emerging Findings Discussion Paper, 2006*

Human Rights Commission researchers looking into homelessness were concerned in 2009 to find that Housing Executive officials still used children as translators, although some realised that it was inappropriate.

'Sometimes there are questions you wouldn't want a child to be asking a mother, if domestic violence or something.'

*No Home From Home, an Investigative Report into Homelessness and People who are Excluded from Accessing Public Funds.*

One of the biggest difficulties is the cost of English classes and their content. Some far-sighted employers run free classes for their employees and local authorities, support organisations, charities and churches also provide language and conversation classes. For most people, however, learning English is expensive and classes are often not available at times that can be fitted in around work. This affects employment potential as well as integration. A report on European workers notes that

Many work irregular hours in isolated locations and cannot access classes in universities or town centres, and work-focused language tuition is most likely to improve labour market prospects.

*The UK's New Europeans; Progress and Challenges Five Years After Accession,*  
2010

For people seeking asylum, language can be a matter of life and death, as it can affect the outcome of their cases.

'I didn't understand the interpreter and because I didn't speak English I couldn't tell anyone. The interpreter wrote down that I was Ethiopian but I'm Eritrean. This has caused me a lot of problems.'

Submission by Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum to the  
Independent Asylum Commission, *Fit for Purpose Yet*

Access to affordable English classes is especially important to people seeking asylum, to assist them in coping with the asylum process and in acquiring the communication skills they need for future integration and employment. People seeking asylum here used to receive inferior treatment regarding support for English language learning compared to those in GB. Following lobbying by support organisations the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) began implementing a pilot scheme in 2012, allowing the small number of people seeking asylum here to access free classes.

In 2016, with the arrival of Syrian resettlement refugees, entitled to free English language support, there was further lobbying and it was agreed that people who got refugee status by application would also be entitled to have their fees paid for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Language) classes. There are also developments in the availability of pre-ESOL classes for people at a very early stage of their learning.

In order to achieve settlement / citizenship, immigrants and refugees must prove that they have a good standard of English and the non-European spouses of UK citizens must also prove that they can speak English before they are allowed to live here.

EMBRACE highlights some free English classes

[www.embraceni.org/category/migrant-support/english-classes/](http://www.embraceni.org/category/migrant-support/english-classes/)

Law Centre NI new, January 2016: 'Minister announces free English classes for refugees in Northern Ireland' [www.lawcentreni.org/news/recent-news/1-news/1278-minister-announces-free-english-classes-for-refugees-in-northern-ireland.html?q=access+english](http://www.lawcentreni.org/news/recent-news/1-news/1278-minister-announces-free-english-classes-for-refugees-in-northern-ireland.html?q=access+english)

Law Centre NI Update, 2011: Access to free accredited ESOL Classes for asylum seekers and refugees [www.lawcentreni.org/component/content/article/63-policy-briefings/806-access-to-free-accredited-esol-classes-for-asylum-seekers-and-refugees.html?q=language](http://www.lawcentreni.org/component/content/article/63-policy-briefings/806-access-to-free-accredited-esol-classes-for-asylum-seekers-and-refugees.html?q=language)

For information and resources for those thinking of volunteering or running an English language or conversation class see [www.embraceni.org/about-us/embrace-toolkit-for-churches/english-language-classes/](http://www.embraceni.org/about-us/embrace-toolkit-for-churches/english-language-classes/)