

## Activity 1: Communicate if You Can<sup>1</sup>

**Time:** 30 minutes

**Materials:** Pen/pencil, paper

**Objective:** To experience what it is like when you cannot make yourselves understood.

### Procedure:

- Choose a partner. Try to choose someone you do not know very well.
- One of you is Partner A. The other is Partner B. Decide who is who.
- You are not allowed to speak aloud.
- Partner A: Think of an important fact about yourself that Partner B would not likely know. Do not share your fact. Try to communicate your message using gestures or drawings. Do not write words or numbers.
- Partner B: Write down what you think the message is that Partner A is trying to show you. Do not use any gestures or ask Partner A any questions about the message. Make sure Partner A does not see what you are writing down.
- Write how you felt during this exercise. Partner A: Write about how you felt when you were trying to convey your message without using any verbal language. Partner B: Write about how you felt while trying to interpret the message.

### Discussion:

- Join the rest of the participants in your group.
- Partner Bs: Read your interpretation of the message. Partner A: Tell the group the real message. Do this until all partners have presented.
- Partner Bs: share with the group how you felt while trying to interpret the message.
  - How did you feel when trying to interpret your partner's message?
  - What strategies could you have used to help Partner A better relay the message?
- Partner As share with the group how you felt when trying to convey the message.
  - Did you feel frustrated or helpless?
- How could this activity help you relate to parents who lack proficiency in English?

Ideas for messages are:

During my vacation I went to...

A strange thing happened in my class the other day...

It makes me laugh when...

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<sup>1</sup>This activity was adapted from the *Communication Game*. The original activity can be viewed at: [http://www.everythingsl.net/downloads/communication\\_game.pdf](http://www.everythingsl.net/downloads/communication_game.pdf)

## Activity 2: The Many Varieties of English

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Materials:** Pen/pencil, “What is English?” handout

**Objectives:** To stimulate your thinking about what Standard English is. To create an awareness that some students communicate in a version of English at home that is different from the Standard North American English that is most often spoken in Canadian schools.

**Procedure:** Raise your hand if you are fully proficient in English. Take a look at the “What is English” handout. These are examples of an English Creole that is spoken in Trinidad and Tobago. What do you think the meaning of these words and phrases is?

### Answer Key: What is English?

English Creole	Standard North American English
1. Yuk expekin ah flood or wha?	Aren't your pants too short?
2. Boy stop flingin meh grip so.	Don't throw my luggage like that.
3. Yute-man, fly de bonnet nuh!	John, lift the hood of the car.
4. Meh belly gripin meh.	I have a stomach ache.
5. He doh have no broughtupcy.	He doesn't have any manners.
6. AH! You still alive gyul?	Girl, I haven't seen you in a long time.

### Discussion:

- How would you define “Standard English?”
- How can you find out about the languages spoken at home by your students and their families?
- How might the language spoken at school be different from the language spoken at home, even for those families who are proficient in English?
- How might the difference between the variety of English used at home and that used in the school affect students and families when communicating with school personnel?

## What is English?

What do you think the meaning of these phrases and words of English Creole spoken in Trinidad and Tobago are?

Write your translation in Standard North American English (SNAE) in the space provided.

English Creole	Standard North American English
1. Yuk expekin ah flood or wha?	
2. Boy stop flingin meh grip so.	
3. Yute-man, fly de bonnet nuh!	
4. Meh belly gripin meh.	
5. He doh have no broughtupcy.	
6. AH! You still alive gyul?	

### Discussion:

- How would you define “Standard English?”
- How can you find out about the languages spoken at home by your students and their families?
- How might the language spoken at school be different from the language spoken at home, even for those families who are proficient in English?
- How might the difference between the variety of English used at home and that used in the school affect students and families when communicating with school personnel?

### **Activity 3: Taking Action**

**Time:** 30 minutes for reading and discussion, one week for action plan

**Materials:** Pen/pencil, “My First Year Teaching” and “Action Plan” handouts

**Objectives:** To discuss issues surrounding language barriers parents face from a teacher’s perspective. To complete action research to try to find out more about resources available to help you communicate and build stronger relationships with parents.

**Procedure:** Read the story “My First Year Teaching.” Discuss the questions below. Complete the “Action Plan” project with a partner. Meet after one week and discuss . the resources and information you collected with the group. Create a resource binder filled with all your resources to be used in your school.

**Discussion:**

- Have you ever had a similar experience to the one that the new teacher in the story described? If so, please share your story.
- What are some additional strategies and resources the new teacher could have used to communicate with her students’ families?
- If language is a barrier in communicating with your students’ families, what could you do?
- What are some other issues you have encountered in trying to communicate with parents?
- What did you think of Mark’s suggestions?
- Do you think the strategies presented in this scenario could work in your school? Why or why not?
- Can you think of other suggestions that could work in your school?

## My First Year Teaching

Read the following story written by a new teacher and discuss the questions that follow.

I just started my first year teaching, and I am really excited about my new fourth grade class. The students are amazing and are all very different in terms of personality and culture. In fact, I have 13 different languages represented in my one class alone! I really want to build relationships with my students' families but I'm finding it difficult to get in touch with some of the parents to talk about how their children are progressing in class.

I've tried to send notices, but I'm not sure whether they are reading them. I've also phoned a few parents, but I just end up talking to either one of my students or an older brother or sister. Actually, at the parent-teacher interviews, one of my students came along and translated everything. They are great students, but how am I supposed to know if they are really translating everything?

Initially, I was too nervous to talk to anyone about this, but I decided to talk to Mark, a teacher with more experience. I had always heard that his class was just as diverse as mine, and thought that he might have some good tips for me. He made me feel much better when he said that he had similar experiences with his students' families. Mark ended up giving me some great tips!

First, he mentioned that I need to find out exactly what languages my students speak at home with their parents. The more I know about them, the easier it will be to help. Second, Mark suggested that I contact the SWIS (Settlement Workers in Schools) representative assigned to our school. The SWIS worker assigned to assist newcomer families in our school is multilingual and well-versed in how schools and families can effectively communicate with one another. Mark also told me to look at some of the resources that have been developed by different provincial and federal agencies. One resource that he directed me to is "A Newcomers' Guide to Education in Ontario," online at [www.settlement.org/edguide](http://www.settlement.org/edguide). This resource has a series of handouts on key school topics in 18 different languages!

He also told me about Christine, a fellow teacher, who is Chinese-Canadian. According to Mark, Christine is fluent in Mandarin and has done some translating for a few of the teachers when they needed to meet with Mandarin-speaking parents. I never even thought of asking anyone in our school to do that. Another piece of advice Mark gave me was to try to get some of the parents to come in for a cultural night so they can meet more people who speak the same language. This way parents can meet, build relationships, and learn from each other about the school and its practices and policies.

I am curious to see if these approaches work just as well for me.

**Discussion:**

- Have you ever had a similar experience to the one that the new teacher in the story described? If so, please share your story.
- What are some additional strategies and resources the new teacher could have used to communicate with her students' families?
- If language is a barrier in communicating with your students' families, what could you do?
- What are some other issues you have encountered in trying to communicate with parents?
- What did you think of Mark's suggestions?
- Do you think the strategies presented in this scenario could work in your school? Why or why not?
- Can you think of other suggestions that could work in your school?

## **Action Plan**

Become an action researcher! In pairs or individually, find out what languages your students and families speak. What resources can you find about in these languages? Look in your local library or browse the Internet to see what is available.

What resources are available within the school community that you can utilize to learn more about the languages of your students and how you can better communicate with your students' families?

Think of some of the human resources that you already know about in your school setting – bilingual teachers/parents, settlement workers – and build on these relationships. Ask them about language resources that they may know of and any ideas they may have to create stronger ties of communication.

Meet back together in a week to discuss your findings.

Create a school resource binder with all of the information you discovered so everyone can take advantage of the information.

## **Activity 4: Creating Language-Friendly Resources**

**Time:** 30 minutes

**Materials:** Pen/pencil, “A Language-Friendly School” worksheet

**Objective:** To create a list of suggestions to help modify school-related language so that it is more easily understood by immigrant families.

**Procedure:** Complete the “A Language-Friendly School” worksheet individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Sample answers have been provided.

## A Language-Friendly School

This worksheet lists common approaches used by schools to get parents involved in the education of their children.

Individually, in pairs, or in small groups, try to think of practical suggestions to modify the approach to help parents who have low levels of proficiency in English.

<b>Common approaches to parent involvement</b>	<b>Suggestions to modify approaches to make them more easily understood by English language learners</b>
School to home communication -newsletters -notices -report cards	
Volunteer opportunities	
Parent teacher conferences	
School wide events	

## Sample Answers: A Language-Friendly School

Common approaches to parent involvement	Suggestions to modify approaches to make them more easily understood by English language learners
<p>School to home communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-newsletters</li> <li>-notices</li> <li>-report cards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flyers and newsletters are often the least effective means of communication. Be as personal as possible. Face-to-face contact is always easier because some parents may not be literate in their first language.</li> <li>• Recruit bilingual parent volunteers through a school newsletter (with a survey to identify potential volunteers). They can help with phone calls and other contacts with parents who speak little or no English.</li> <li>• Use simple printed or typed messages on flyers. Try to avoid cursive writing, as it's not always taught in other countries.</li> </ul>
<p>Volunteer opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try the “bridge parents” strategy – finding one or two parents in each major language group and asking them to help reach into their own language group. Give each “bridge parent” a list of all the parents (names, phone numbers, addresses) in the district who speak their particular language and ask them to be the leader and perhaps even a translator for that group.</li> <li>• Contact ethnic or religious organizations such as Russian churches and Muslim community organizations to recruit bilingual volunteers to help communicate with families learning English.</li> <li>• Create a bilingual welcoming committee at school made up of parents, staff and community members.</li> </ul>
<p>Parent teacher conferences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find out the interpreter’s schedule. Communicate that information to parents.</li> <li>• If you have basic information that will be shared with every parent, see if you can get it translated ahead of time so parents can have some familiar information before going in.</li> </ul>
<p>School wide events</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personally invite newcomer parents to help in some way or to attend an event. At every school event share information about upcoming events, such as summer school or parent conferences.</li> </ul>

## **Activity 5: Personal Reflection**

**Time:** 15 minutes

**Materials:** Pen/pencil, “Personal Reflection” worksheet

**Objective:** To assess how open and welcoming your school is to newcomer parents.

**Procedure:** Complete the “Personal Reflection” worksheet. If you disagree with any of the statements, take some time to brainstorm how you might be able to help newcomer parents get more information.

