

Communication challenges in police interactions involving L2 English speakers in England and Wales

The project investigates communication challenges between police and L2-English speakers, identifying main causes to guide training and service improvements, and supporting multilingual communities’ access to justice.

Key details

Lead institution	Nottingham Trent University
Principal researcher(s)	Katherine King katherine.king2023@my.ntu.ac.uk
Police region	East Midlands
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	January 2024
Date due for completion	January 2028

Research context

The study involves a review of academic and non-academic literature, including a critical assessment of current legislative requirements and communication training opportunities provided to police officers.

Through surveys and semi-structured qualitative interviews with speakers of English as a second language (L2 English speakers), language service professionals (interpreters), and police officers, authentic communication difficulties experienced during encounters with the police can be collected and evaluated against the existing international literature and police training measures.

By working directly with L2 English speakers, interpreters and police officers, this project will establish the main causes of communication challenges and provide the foundations for making improvements to services and training. This will better accommodate the multilingual populations of England and Wales and improve their access to justice.

Potential routes to impact include the co-development of an advisory booklet, guidance documentation and continuing professional development workshops, aimed at police officers who regularly interact with English as a second language (ESL) speakers, targeted first at the Midlands forces, with a view to nationwide rollout through the College of Policing and the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

Research methodology

Research data will be collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews with:

- police officers
- interpreters
- L2-English speakers

Surveys will be used to collect demographic information alongside insights into participants' communication experiences in police encounters. Based on survey responses, volunteering participants will take part in follow-up interviews to provide more detailed accounts of their experiences. Interviews will be conducted and transcribed online through MS Teams.

All automated transcriptions will be reviewed and corrected by the researcher to ensure accuracy, and all collected data will be anonymised. Interview transcripts will be analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022) with the support of NVivo software to identify recurring and salient themes related to communication challenges. These emergent themes will then be examined using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

This research will follow van Dijk's understanding of CDA which focuses on 'the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted' (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). As discourse between police and witnesses inherently involves power dynamics (Haworth, 2006), and the L2 English speakers being interviewed by the police are a minority group, the use of CDA is both suitable and necessary to identify underlying causes of the communication challenges between the two parties.

Research participation

Participants in this research are in England and Wales and are:

- current or former police officers
- language services professionals (interpreters)
- L2-English speakers

The work is concerned with all possible contact points with law enforcement in England or Wales, ranging from:

- engagement with digital services provided by forces, for example, websites, social media, text message services
- in-person interactions, for example being interviewed, having witness statements taken

Surveys and interviews will be offered in English. Participants must be 18 years or older.

References

- Braun V and Clarke V. (2022). 'Thematic analysis: a practical guide'. London; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.
- Braun V and Clarke V. (2006). '[Using thematic analysis in psychology](#)'. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3 (2), pp 77 to 101.
- Haworth K. (2006). '[The dynamics of power and resistance in police interview discourse](#)'. Discourse & Society, 17 (6), pp 739 to 759.
- Van Dijk TA. (2015). 'Critical Discourse Analysis'. In Tannen D, Hamilton HE and Schiffrin D. (eds). '[The handbook of discourse analysis](#)'. Wiley, pp 466 to 485.