



COUNTRY  
NAVIGATOR

A person wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a blue baseball cap is seen from behind, standing on a grassy hill. They are making a heart shape with their hands against a backdrop of a blue sky and a distant horizon. A semi-transparent dark blue box is overlaid on the lower right portion of the image, containing the title text.

# **HOW TO COMMUNICATE WHEN SOMEONE DOESN'T SPEAK YOUR LANGUAGE**

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of hosting a refugee is that of communication. How do you make someone welcome if you don't have a shared language? This short guide is intended as a starting point – you will eventually find out what works best for you, but we hope this sets you up in the right direction.

## tone, speed and volume

It's really hard to slow down your speech, so rather than slowing down, try adding pauses – nothing too dramatic, but just an occasional silence. If you're asking the person a question, give them longer to answer – they may need time to think a bit more.

Make sure you don't just speak louder. It makes you sound more aggressive and doesn't help them understand.

The most important part is to smile lots, make eye contact and keep your body language open. Don't stand too close and avoid physical contact. With children, try to get down to their level.

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## WORDS AND VOCAB

Many people will have some words, remembered from school. Try to connect the senses – if you're talking about food, get the food out and show them as you talk about it.

Make lots of small talk – talk about the weather, and what's going on around you. Ask lots of open questions – who, when, why, what, where – and then wait for the answer. If the person is struggling, but keen to keep the conversation going, make suggestions. Point and ask, naming an object. Be curious and try to learn their language as well – share the burden of communication, by getting them to tell you their word for it, particularly for food.

Involve children – if you have children, they can sometimes find it easier to establish contact and are less embarrassed about making mistakes.

If the person just doesn't understand what you're saying, try simplifying. Rather than a whole sentence, try and find the single word or short phrase and an action that corresponds to what you need. Rather than saying, 'Would you like a little bit of something to eat anytime soon?' you could say, 'Hungry?' or 'Food?' or even show them what you are intending to prepare.

Make sure you reduce the amount of slang and informal language and keep your sentences short and simple. If something has more than one name for it (i.e., your local shop could be 'Morrisons', or 'the shop' or 'the corner shop', or 'the off license' or 'the offie' – try to ensure you always refer to it by the same name.

If they almost understand, but not quite, write it down. Many people may never have spoken to a native speaker before so have never heard English outside of the classroom.

And don't forget, if you have a phone, you have a translation device! Download the Google translate app – even if you can't read the word, you can show them!

This [website](#) has some very basic Ukrainian phrases which may be useful – it's not part of Country Navigator, so we have no control over the content.

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## **POLITENESS**

Ukrainians are quite direct and can seem blunt. They don't tend to use please and thank you as frequently as native English speakers, but this is not a lack of courtesy.

Be prepared for long periods of silence – trauma can have that effect on people and give them the space to speak when they are comfortable.

## **CHECKING YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

Two contradictory pieces of advice here:

Firstly, rely on your instincts – if you are unsure as to whether you have understood properly, ask questions to clarify, don't assume. Similarly, if you think the other person hasn't understood you properly, try saying the same thing in a different way or get them to repeat it back to you.

However, don't assume that because someone nods or says yes, that they understand. A smile is not a sign that they know what's going on. Look for other signs to confirm that the message has got through – are they relaxed, or are they looking at someone else to try and get a hint? Is the reaction to what you said the one you expected? That is often the best sign that there has been a misunderstanding.

Be prepared to be patient and be prepared to get it wrong. When you do have a misunderstanding, don't make a big deal about it – if appropriate, treat it with humor and try again.



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## IF ALL ELSE FAILS....

There are more Ukrainians in the UK than you might expect, and many big towns and cities have Ukrainian communities. Try asking neighbors, community centres and on social media what support there is locally – there are lots of organizations offering free linguistic support. If your guest is likely to be with you long term, most local authorities run English language courses – either free or very low cost – which may be a good way to get started.

