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**Language in the construction industry:  
Communicating with second language speakers**

Report produced  
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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Rationale and project aims</b> .....	1
<b>2</b>	<b>Research method</b> .....	1
2.1	Profile of individual participants and organisations .....	2
<b>3</b>	<b>Background to the industry</b> .....	2
<b>4</b>	<b>The Health and Safety at Work Act</b> .....	3
<b>5</b>	<b>Recruitment of second language speakers into the building industry</b> .....	4
5.1	Patterns of recruitment by ethnic minority .....	4
5.2	Contractor interviews with new recruits .....	4
<b>6</b>	<b>Induction</b> .....	5
6.1	Examples of spoken English .....	6
6.2	Examples of written English .....	6
6.3	Using Health & Safety booklets .....	7
6.4	Checking understanding.....	7
6.5	The use of videos to aid induction.....	8
<b>7</b>	<b>Communication on site</b> .....	8
7.1	The role of the supervisor .....	9
7.2	The operatives' attitude to Health & Safety .....	10
7.3	Method statement and risk assessments.....	10
7.4	Videos used during toolbox talks.....	11
7.5	Site signage, posters and notices.....	11
7.5.1	Site signage.....	11
7.5.2	Posters and notices.....	11
7.6	Summary of good practice .....	12
7.7	Language in context .....	14
<b>8</b>	<b>Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS)</b> .....	14
8.1	The health & safety test and second language speakers .....	14
8.2	Hiring an interpreter.....	14
8.3	Using an interpreter to sit the health & safety test .....	15
8.4	The Health and Safety Testing in Construction handbook .....	15
8.5	Availability .....	16
<b>9</b>	<b>Providing information in other languages</b> .....	16
9.1	Translation.....	17
9.2	Providing information in spoken language .....	17
<b>10</b>	<b>The Health &amp; Safety Executive</b> .....	18
<b>11</b>	<b>Role of the unions</b> .....	19
<b>12</b>	<b>English language provision</b> .....	19
12.1	Operatives' attendance at English language classes .....	20
12.2	On-site English language classes .....	20
12.3	Construction-specific language training .....	20
12.4	Funding for English language provision.....	21
<b>13</b>	<b>Implications which go beyond the confines of this study</b> .....	21
<b>14</b>	<b>Overview of recommendations</b> .....	22
<b>15</b>	<b>Acronyms and glossary</b> .....	25
<b>16</b>	<b>Footnotes</b> .....	26



# 1 Rationale and project aims

For some considerable time there has been a shortage of labour in the UK construction industry and to alleviate this shortage an increasing number of workers are being recruited for whom English is not their first language. This project was instigated by CITB-ConstructionSkills and the Construction Confederation following dialogue with CILT, the National Centre for Languages. It was sponsored by the Sector Skills Development Agency, CITB-ConstructionSkills, DTI and London Central LSC to investigate the effect of the introduction of this group of workers. Its aim was to find out how native English speakers and second language speakers communicated in the workplace, to identify good practice and suggest how the construction industry might promote operational communication. The field work took place particularly in the context of health & safety.

Construction employers and those that support them such as the CITB-ConstructionSkills, the Construction Confederation and the Health & Safety Executive form the main audience for this report but, since it will also be of interest to providers and funders of training provision, we have given explanations of building terms in a glossary in section 13.

This report consists of two parts:

- ◆ sections 1-4 provide background information to the project
- ◆ sections 5-13 consist of our findings and recommendations

Recommendations and examples of good practice are included in the body of the text. In addition, the recommendations are collected by sector at the end of this document.

## 2 Research method

The research was carried out between January and June 2003 and covered the following activity:

Site visits which consisted of observations and interviews with managers, supervisors and workers in small, medium and large companies. We also recorded interactions between native English and second language speakers. These were subsequently transcribed and analysed.

- ◆ The very great pressure of work and time on people in the construction industry made it difficult to arrange site visits and group meetings. This was particularly true for medium and small sites. That is why discussions and interviews were informal and generally held with up to three people at a time.
- ◆ Meetings and phone calls with other personnel such as health & safety officers, staff administering the CSCS Health & Safety test, NVQ assessors, staff in FE colleges, the voluntary sector, Trade Unions, TUC, CITB-ConstructionSkills, Health & Safety Executive and ethnic minority groups.
- ◆ Desk research on regulations, documentation and procedures used in the building industry as well as a general check to establish what other research had been done on communication with other language speakers<sup>1</sup>.

Please note that, since the sample of building sites was chosen randomly, this report cannot claim any statistical validity. Nevertheless, various trends are apparent and are highlighted in the report.

## 2.1 Profile of individual participants and organisations

- ◆ A total number of 25 companies were contacted
- ◆ We, the researchers, made 17 visits to nine sites
- ◆ Face-to-face interviews were held with seven managers, eleven supervisors, five foremen and 32 operatives. All were male.
- ◆ Of the 55 people interviewed, the following did not speak English as their first language: three supervisors and one foreman; two operatives who were from Africa (Nigeria and Ghana) and the rest from Eastern Europe (Lithuania, Ukraine, Albania, Kosovo, former East Germany, Poland, Rumania and Slovakia). Two thirds of those interviewed had learnt English prior to coming to the UK. In addition, most East Europeans interviewed could communicate in other European languages. Some had previously worked in other jobs (eg pub, fish and chip shop, restaurant) and had picked up English there before getting a job in construction.
- ◆ We also consulted eleven local community groups representing people from Bangladesh, Cyprus, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, Uganda and Yemen.

## 3 Background to the industry

The UK construction industry consists of 175,000 construction firms which employ 2.1 million people<sup>2</sup>. While the size of companies varies tremendously, the level of fragmentation is considerable with the large majority of firms employing fewer than ten people. A major site is normally managed by a main contractor who subcontracts with smaller specialist firms, who in turn may sub-contract, and so on, resulting in many different tiers of sub-contracting. Turnover of labour is high and even those who remain with one company frequently move site as they complete their phase of the work.

Statistical analysis indicates that construction workers are at a higher risk of accidents than any other sector of industry. For example, they are six times more likely to be killed at work than other workers<sup>3</sup>.

There is ample evidence that the building industry faces a labour shortage for many trades and the CITB-ConstructionSkills Market Assessment estimates that by 2006 the industry will require an additional:

- ◆ 66,000 carpenters and joiners
- ◆ 37,000 electricians
- ◆ 30,500 bricklayers
- ◆ 30,000 plumbers
- ◆ 23,500 painters and decorators
- ◆ 9,000 plasterers

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<sup>1</sup> Two studies were identified: *The Communication Problems experienced by Workforce on-site, and their possible Solutions*, a study which was set in the construction industry in South Africa and which was carried out by Jane English (Journal of Construction Research vol 3, no 2 (2002) pp 311-321). The second study was *English as a Key Communication Skills in the Workplace*, an unpublished study carried out by Philida Schellekens for the Languages NTO in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The information in this section is derived from the CITB's Market Assessment.

<sup>3</sup> HSE MISC 09/02.

To meet this need for additional labour the building industry has increased its intake of workers from abroad, particularly from Eastern Europe. These foreign workers are of vital importance for the construction industry and will be needed to fill labour and skills shortages for the foreseeable future. That is why employers need to make the most of the skills of this section of the workforce and make sure that communication with them is effective.

Although we were unable to establish what number of second language speakers work in the construction industry, what languages they speak or where they are deployed, CITB-ConstructionSkills staff estimate that 20% in London and the South East fall in this category. Nor have we been able to find verifiable evidence which proves or disproves whether the need to communicate with people whose first language is not English contributes to the occurrence of accidents. (For discussion on this aspect, see section 10.)

CITB-ConstructionSkills and contractors should collect data on the number of second language speakers working in the building industry, the languages they speak and where they are deployed.

When HSE investigates accidents, the organisation should consider whether difficulty communicating with other language speakers was a factor.

## 4 The Health and Safety at Work Act

Before we move on to discuss our findings and recommendations it is important to set communication on site in context. The Health & Safety at Work Act (1974) states that the general duties of the employer to his employees include:

“The provision of such information, instruction, training and supervision as is necessary to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety at work of his employees”.

Secondly, the 1994<sup>4</sup> and 1999<sup>5</sup> Regulations require effective communication between the main contractor and workers on site where necessary for reasons of health and safety. And last, the guidance that accompanies the 1999 Regulations states that:

‘Information [on health and safety risks] can be provided in whatever form is most suitable in the circumstances as long as it can be understood by everyone. For employees with little or no understanding of English, or who cannot read English, employers may need to make special arrangements. These could include providing translation, using interpreters, or replacing written notices with clearly understood symbols or diagrams.’

The requirement to provide information on health & safety risk and the guidance on how this information might be transferred to second language speakers make demands on all partners in the building industry. It also provides an important context for this report.

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<sup>4</sup> Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 1994, Reg 17.

<sup>5</sup> Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999, Reg 10.

## **5 Recruitment of second language speakers into the building industry**

Among the sample of companies surveyed, we found two patterns of recruitment of second language speakers. Many had little English when they began construction work as labourers. Once they had improved their English on the job they then progressed to trade work if they already had that skill. In the case of East Europeans managers reported that this was most likely to be carpentry. Some also learnt a skill on site, like the labourer for a scaffolding company who was in the process of completing his NVQ 2 qualification at college, paid for by the company. Those with sufficient English might also progress to the role of ganger or even foreman or supervisor, liaising between the English speaking staff and the workers whose English was less good. On the other hand, many without a trade remained as labourers.

The second route into construction consisted of sub-contractors bringing in foreign workers with specialist skills for a specific job. One such sub-contractor employed a full-time professional interpreter to support the workers; another used a bilingual manager. We also found two subcontractors which were respectively French and German-based and whose staff consisted of foreign language speaking management and a mixture of foreign language and English speaking workers.

### **5.1 Patterns of recruitment by ethnic minority**

The number of second language speakers and community groups consulted for this study is too limited to derive from them any statistical validity in terms of ethnicity and participation in the workplace. However, it was clear that the people of ethnic minority origin working in the building industry were mostly foreigners who were in the UK for a limited period; and that, apart from the Turkish community, they did not include people from established communities living in the UK. When these community groups were asked why their number working in the building industry was so low, their representatives reported that the communities did not know how to get into construction. This is an area to be explored further as many members of these minority communities were born in the UK and speak English very well.

The HSE is in the process of consulting with some of these groups and efforts are now beginning to be made to inform local communities of employment opportunities in the industry, not least the CITB-ConstructionSkills 'STEP into Construction' programme which is aimed at encouraging ethnic minorities to enter construction.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and construction companies should continue to target the settled UK minority ethnic groups for employment in construction and to evaluate the effectiveness of measures such as CITB-ConstructionSkills' current work with contractors, for example, 'STEP into Construction'.

### **5.2 Contractor interviews with new recruits**

According to all but one supervisor and site manager, workers needed a minimum of English to meet safety requirements. On the other hand, some managers would make an exception if another worker already on the team spoke the new recruit's language. There was also evidence that the level of English demanded of second language speakers depended on the scarcity of labour. For example, a site manager who had no shortage of labour would screen out second language speakers whose English was poor. Another site manager was willing to employ a good carpenter with poor English but not a labourer, since he had no shortage of labourers.

When asked how supervisors tackled job interviews with second language speakers they reported that the methods used were essentially the same as those used for native English speakers, apart from the techniques identified in bullet points 2 and 3 below:

1. asking questions such as: *What do you do? Where have you worked? Who with?*
2. .giving an instruction (eg *Pass me the fire bucket*)
3. asking a short general question (eg *How's the weather?*)
4. looking at the writing on the security pass application form and asking questions if doubtful, while being careful not to penalise literacy difficulties
5. interviewing a new applicant without slowing down or adjusting one's language

Some managers thought that all workers should have enough English to understand emergency procedures and warning shouts before they came on site. Others used the site induction to cover general emergency procedures. We wonder whether this should not also include training to understand shouted warnings such as *Look out! Below! Duck! etc.* Since CITB-ConstructionSkills is now in the process of developing an induction pack which will capture key instructions and signs encountered on a British construction site, it will be useful if this includes a list of the most commonly used warning shouts.

We found that the level of English which is needed to work reasonably safely depended on four factors, identified in the box below. We advise that contractors bear these in mind when deploying new staff.

Before interviewing new recruits, contractors/site managers should establish:

- the prior work experience of the applicant
- the nature of the work
- whether people who speak the same language are already part of the team
- the language awareness of the supervisor or foreman

Supervisors should use this information to define the level of English needed for the job.

Supervisors should decide at what stage to familiarise workers with language for emergencies.

## 6 Induction

Once the individual has been recruited, it is the responsibility of the main contractor to provide all new operatives with a general site induction before they go on site. When we observed these inductions being delivered we found a wide variety of practice. For example, the oral presentation might be supported by the use of maps and diagrams, posters, lists on flipcharts, and/or a video. These support materials were more likely to be used on a large site.

There was also evidence that a wide variety of language was used during induction. We found really clear use of English but also complex language, slang and technical vocabulary. This in itself is not wrong. However, the use of complex language can form a significant barrier to understanding and can affect communication with native English speakers as well as second language speakers. We found examples of both complex spoken and written English during induction:

## 6.1 Examples of spoken English

*Regulations require that we separate pedestrians from vehicles  
Everybody should have been familiarised who is using the cradles.  
This upper ground floor is very congested and we're reallocating it to be used*

These might be rephrased as follows:

- ◆ *We have to divide pedestrian access (that is, for people who are on foot) from vehicle access (such as for cars and lorries)*
- ◆ *You must know how to use the cradles before you use them.*
- ◆ *The upper ground floor is full of equipment and workers. We are clearing this floor so that your gang can use it.*

## 6.2 Examples of written English

The need for simple English applies not only to spoken language, but also to any written support materials such as posters used during induction. Below are some examples of written English:

*First aiders can be recognised by a white cross.....*

*Copies of training certificates must be logged with [the main contractor] before you go out on to site.*

These might be rephrased as follows:

- ◆ *First aiders have a white cross (on their helmet).*
- ◆ *Take copies of your training certificates to [the main contractor] before you start work.*

It is obvious that it makes everybody's life easier if managers use clear language when communicating with their workforce. Since obscure language can affect communication with native English speakers as well as second language speakers, any measures to promote clear and simple English will benefit both groups. It was heartening to see that there were managers who could see the value of this approach. We think that it should be possible to build on this interest by providing language awareness training.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should ensure adequate provision for language awareness training to construction managers and supervisors.

## 6.3 Using Health & Safety booklets

Some companies did not just deliver the induction orally, they also provided their own health & safety booklet. In the case of one main contractor, the booklet formed the basis of the general site induction; or a sub-contractor might produce a booklet to support the trade-specific induction for their own workers. We found that the language of the booklets varied from clear to opaque:

*You must wear steel toecap boots on site.*

*X is committed to protecting the environment and requires that consideration is given to anything that may adversely affect it before, during or upon completion of the contract.*

The first example is a model of clarity and succinctness. The second is hard to understand for any reader.

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We found that managers delivering induction used a mixture of useful techniques:

- ◆ The supervisor explained the rules in clear English and backed these up with a set of instructions written in simple English.
- ◆ Operatives received a booklet with cartoon drawings which helped to explain what the workers needed to do.
- ◆ One company provided a useful document which clearly identified the company's responsibilities towards the workers in terms of COSHH and risk assessment:

### Control of Substances Hazards to Health - COSHH

When materials are used on site the Company must find out if they present a risk to you. The Company must carry out assessments of the materials and provide written reports on each material. Copies of the reports are held on site and at Head Office. The Site Agent or Gangerman will know where copies of these reports are held on site.

### Risk Assessment

Before any work begins on site, the Company must carry out an assessment of the risk the work may present. We must say what risks or dangers may occur. We must also say how we will remove the danger. If we cannot remove the danger, we must say how we will limit the risk or how the work can be done in a safe way. We must provide these assessments in writing. Copies of the reports are held on site and at Head Office. The Site Agent or Gangerman will know where copies of these reports are held on site.

Extract from SAFETY BOOKLET - O'Keefe Construction (Greenwich) Ltd

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## 6.4 Checking understanding

At the end of induction, all operatives are required to sign a statement that they have received and understood the induction. But only two contractors tested the understanding of their new operatives following the induction. This carries the risk that operatives sign that they have understood the information provided when in reality they have not. .

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Some contractors took active steps to check operatives' understanding of the induction before they were asked to sign the agreement that they had understood. This could be done by asking questions orally or by giving the operative a written test. If required, this could be done with the support of an interpreter.

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## **6.5 The use of videos to aid induction**

While the inductions which we observed were delivered orally, videos could provide a powerful tool to aid induction. For example, workers could watch a video before they go on site for the first time and familiarise themselves with the language used to describe health & safety. This could be before they attend the 'live' induction. We assume that site-specific information would still need to be presented orally. On a more general point, the use of video may be helpful not just for second language speakers but also to aid the standardisation of induction training across different sites.

While a site induction video 'Don't Become a Statistic' is available, there was no evidence that this was being used in the field.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and HSE working with CILT should be requested to review CITB-ConstructionSkills existing site induction video to ensure that it uses clear, simple English and consider the option of voice-overs in the most commonly used languages on site.

If site managers or contractors use a general site induction video they should make sure that they:

- continue to provide site-specific information during induction
- check the workers' understanding of both general health & safety principles and site-specific information.

## **7 Communication on site**

Most supervisors said that, given the choice, they would prefer to work with native-English speakers as the extra time needed to communicate with second language speakers created additional pressures on their time. Some also mentioned additional stress from operatives' lack of experience and the fact that the greater the number of languages on site, the harder it was to communicate. At the same time nearly all supervisors said that the shortage of labour meant they had no choice but to employ foreign workers, and many praised the attitude, eagerness to work and quickness to learn, of the East Europeans in particular. As some pointed out, their operatives were often highly qualified professionals in their own countries – a company director, dentist, teacher and so on. Some also commented that their foreign workers worked harder than their English counterparts and that this could offset the time spent in providing additional support.

The example below gives an idea of what can be done to recruit and retain workers.

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One company specialising in housing and commercial refurbishment never refused to employ someone because of a lack of English. Provided a worker was willing to learn, they kept him on and trained him up. If not, they let him go. They used a second language speaking supervisor where possible and considered it their job to teach their workers English. For example, they spoke simply and began by teaching basic building vocabulary, demonstrating how the work was done. The supervisors on this company's 30 sites were careful to keep new employees with low levels of

English away from possible dangers such as electric cables or falling bricks, and would watch them closely. Workers were found by word of mouth and began as Grade 1 labourers, progressing to Grade 2, when they were taught general trades. Those that stayed became good at English and could progress to become supervisors. Four supervisors and one contract manager were second language speakers, proof that this method works.

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## 7.1 The role of the supervisor

When we observed communication between English speaking supervisors and second language speakers we found that **the role of the supervisor was crucial**. Those who were most successful in communicating with their second language operatives accepted the fact that this needed extra time, particularly with new workers.

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These are the strategies the supervisors used for effective communication:

- ◆ Use simple language so that the second language speaker can understand
  - ◆ Demonstrate tasks and actions
  - ◆ Use gesture to clarify meaning
  - ◆ Check back for understanding after an instruction or explanation has been given
  - ◆ Encourage the workers to ask questions
  - ◆ Use workers with the most English to support those with little English
  - ◆ Give instructions the day before, orally and in writing, so that the workers have time to work out what needs to be done the next day
- 

Simple language eases communication, saves time and contributes to a safer working environment. Here is an example of actual language used on site. Jon, a supervisor from Time Construction, explains how he wants sets of twelve boards moved up through a security door and then onto the floor. In extract 1 Jon is talking to two Lithuanian labourers who do not speak much English:

Jon

One at a time, go in, and I'll show you where we put the boards....Your end up, up, your end down ... like this. That's it. Keep it over here – and then we get twelve, twelve boards, yeah?

**Workers**

**Yeah**

Jon

Then we close the doors – security – then we go, six in,

**Workers**

**...six**

Jon

...six out ..Six in, six out. Then twelve in again. Shut doors. These doors can stay open.

**Workers**

**Yeah**

Jon

Right?

---

In extract 2 Jon repeats the instructions to Marcin, the foreman, whose first language is Polish but who speaks good English :

Jon

Explain to them: the silver door must be kept shut. They've just brought the timber up and that silver door, I come down and the doors were left open. What I've said to them: twelve boards in, six and six, up, twelve boards in, six and six up. The other lads tried to get more than six in and they were struggling and breaking the corners of the boards and all that lot. So they're better off with six and doing more journeys.

Jon gets his message across in two ways. When he is talking to the Lithuanians he uses simple English. He shows the workers where he wants the boards to go, repeats instructions and checks that the workers have understood. When he talks to Marcin in extract 2 his language is much more complex and faster. Jon feels that he does not need to check back as he knows that Marcin can understand.

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## **7.2 The operatives' attitude to Health & Safety**

A number of curtain wallers from Eastern Germany said that there were fewer rules in Germany and that these were not so strictly enforced. As a consequence health & safety rules were the most difficult aspect to get used to when they began work in this country. While many managers found no difference in attitude between British workers and those from abroad, three managers had also identified the impact of different national approaches to health & safety. They felt that those who had worked in construction in their own countries were more likely to cut corners with British health & safety rules than those who had not. One supervisor said that for this reason he preferred to work with those new to the industry since they were easier to train.

Construction companies, their managers and supervisors should be aware that health & safety procedures vary from country to country and that operatives may need additional guidance to follow UK practice.

## **7.3 Method statement and risk assessments**

Method statements and risk assessments (including COSHH) form an important part of the implementation of health & safety. The contents of these documents are normally explained orally but they are hard to understand in written form as they cover instructions aimed at the contractor, subcontractor and operatives. It would help greatly if these were presented as separate documents.

(Sub)contractors should:

- identify those parts of the method statement and risk assessments (including COSHH) which relate to operatives
- produce the text aimed at operatives as a separate document and write it in clear English
- check that operatives have understood the information ie that they know how to work safely before they sign the document.

## 7.4 Videos used during toolbox talks

Part of the training for workers, particularly on health and safety, consists of toolbox talks given by supervisors. Where videos were used as a tool for dissemination these often contained complex language. For example, a video on the use of gloves used vocabulary such as *lacerations*, *substances*, *punctures*, *suitability*, *durability*, *recognise and eliminate*, and *minimise handling*. This type of language forms a barrier for all workers. Native English speakers and second language speakers alike would benefit from a commentary in clear and simple English.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should:

- review the complexity of the language used in toolbox talk videos and simplify language as necessary
- consider producing training videos in clear, simple English with voice-overs in the most common languages used on site

## 7.5 Site signage, posters and notices

### 7.5.1 Site signage

We found two types of signage on site. Signage is generally pictorial, eg the sign indicating that ear protection must be worn. This is assumed to be self-explanatory and certainly none of the supervisors had thought to check that these signs were understood. Yet the meaning may not be familiar to operatives who are new to the industry and supervisors reflected that they should check the understanding of signage. It appears that supervisors were not aware that the 1996 EC Safety Signs Directive<sup>6</sup> in fact requires employers to explain unfamiliar signs to their employees and to tell them what to do when they see a safety sign.

Not all signage was pictorial, however. We found word-signs on most sites (and indeed, one site used only these). Some examples:

*No access for unauthorised persons*

*Hard hats must be worn during strip out works*

*The use of radio/mobile phones is strictly prohibited in this vicinity*

The last example has unnecessarily complex wording.

### 7.5.2 Posters and notices

Larger sites often had notices and posters at or near the site entrance. These were used to provide up-to-date information and, when hand-written, were usually written in capital letters, for example:

*WORKING AT VARIOUS LEVELS WITHIN STAIR CORES.*

*TOWER CRANES OPERATING OVER HEAD*

Although people often write text in capital letters because they are under the impression that this makes it easier to read, research evidence shows that this is not the case. Text written in capitals is harder to read than in lower case. Compare the examples above with the text below:

*Working at various levels within stair cores.*

*Tower cranes operating overhead*

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<sup>6</sup> The Health and Safety (Safety Signs and Signals) Regulations 1996 brought into force the EC Safety Signs Directive (92/58/EEC). This aimed to standardise safety signs across all the member states of the European Union.

Construction firms should:

- produce a stock of commonly-used site notices in lower-case print, and where possible as picture signs
  - use a slot-board to display these notices
- if posters and notices need to be hand-written, write text in lower-case 'printed' lettering

## 7.6 Summary of good practice

It is difficult to avoid the conclusions that:

- ◆ success with second language workers on site is greatly affected by the attitude, language awareness and managerial skills of supervisors
- ◆ poor communication impacts on health & safety and effectiveness at work.

You will find below an overview of the communication skills which supervisors and others can use to communicate effectively.

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Useful strategies for effective oral communication:

- ◆ Speak in short and simple sentences.
- ◆ Separate instructions clearly.
- ◆ Give instructions in the order in which they have to be carried out, e.g. '*First do x, then do y*' not '*Before you do y, do x*'.
- ◆ Use simple vocabulary eg, '*cut*' rather than '*laceration*'.
- ◆ Use technical language commonly used in the building trade eg terms like '*toe-boards and crank bar*' but remember that you may have to explain what these words mean.

- ◆ Demonstrate tasks and actions, and use gesture to clarify meaning.
- ◆ Explain commonly used slang e.g. ‘*guy, gear, dodgy*’.
- ◆ Avoid idiom and slang such as ‘*We are dumping on the welders*’ or ‘*I wasn’t born yesterday!*’
- ◆ Avoid irony and jokes as it takes an advanced level of language skills to understand these.
- ◆ Use active language such as ‘*You must wear a hard hat*’ rather than ‘*Hard hats must be worn*’ because in the second example it is not clear who should carry out the action.
- ◆ If the worker doesn’t understand, first repeat your sentence using the same words. If this does not work, re-phrase.
- ◆ Check back for understanding after you have given an instruction or explanation.
- ◆ When checking back, ask open questions like ‘*So how many doors do you need to hang today?*’ rather than a closed question, such as ‘*Do you understand?*’ because operatives may answer ‘*Yes*’ when in fact they have not understood.
- ◆ Be aware that operatives may find it hard to tell you that they have not understood what you said. This may be because they are afraid of losing their job; or because they come from a culture where it is impolite to say ‘no’.
- ◆ Encourage operatives to ask questions.

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Useful strategies for effective written communication:

All instructions for spoken communication above apply. Written language is almost always more formal than spoken language, so make sure that you pay attention to the following in particular:

- ◆ Use plain English wherever you can. In particular avoid complex language such as ‘Unprotected exposure to the inhalation of hardwood has been known to cause nasal cancer’.
- ◆ Write messages and notices in lower case, so ‘Tower cranes operating overhead’ rather than ‘TOWER CRANES OPERATING OVERHEAD’.
- ◆ Use the active rather than passive construction for example: ‘You must record all accidents in the accident book’ rather than ‘All accidents must be recorded in the accident book’.
- ◆ Give instructions the day before in writing so that the workers have time to work out what needs to be done the next day.

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Only a few supervisors who participated in this project used these skills and techniques. That is why we recommend training in these aspects.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and main contractors should ensure adequate provision for language awareness and communication skills training to site managers and supervisors.

## **7.7 Language in context**

There is one more observation to be made on language use in the building industry: the English used is not uniform but varies depending on the task. For example, the level of language required to understand written health & safety instructions found in method statements and the Health & Safety Test handbook (see below) is likely to be the most demanding. It is also important to remember that most operatives do not have to read much English at all on site. As far as spoken English is concerned, the language used during induction will be the most difficult to follow. On the other hand, communication at work is likely to be the easiest to understand. Since the language used on the job is the most relevant for health & safety we recommend that any criteria set for recruitment and language training concentrate on this aspect.

## **8 Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS)**

The CSCS scheme was introduced in 1995 with the aim of improving health, safety and occupational competence in the construction industry. CSCS cardholders must pass the CITB-ConstructionSkills health & safety test and demonstrate their occupational competence. The Major Contractors Group, which encompasses the UK's 20 largest construction companies, has stipulated that by the end of 2003 everyone working on their sites must hold a CSCS or affiliated card. It is the aim of industry to have a fully qualified workforce by 2010.

### **8.1 The health & safety test and second language speakers**

Sub-contractors expressed concern that, for operatives whose first language is not English, the process of acquiring the CSCS card may well prove to be a major barrier to work. For example, the manager of a medium-sized company with 40% second language speakers said that his company now turned away some applicants with a low level of English because of the new CSCS requirement and client pressure.

### **8.2 Hiring an interpreter**

Second language speakers are allowed to have an interpreter when they take the health & safety test but it was not at all clear to (sub)contractors how to arrange this facility; nor who was responsible for the hiring and payment of the interpreter. The latter problem may be caused by the wording on the application form: "If your first language is not English please advise of your preferred language for your test (we will contact you to make arrangements)." The contractors understood this to mean that CITB-ConstructionSkills would arrange the interpreter whereas in fact the employer needed to book the person. Contractors also reported that it was not always possible to find a qualified interpreter, eg for Lithuanian.

We understand that a new policy will be introduced in January 2004: CITB-ConstructionSkills will arrange and pay for an interpreter through an agency which will be able to supply interpreters in any language.

## 8.3 Using an interpreter to sit the health & safety test

The skills of the interpreter were also questioned. For example, one contractor mentioned an unexpectedly high failure rate among his employees who had entered for the test and who had had the support of an interpreter: 28 had failed out of a total of 30 Indian entrants, all Punjabi speakers, whereas he would have expected a failure rate of perhaps five or six. We wonder whether the quality of the interpreting played a part in this high failure rate. A third manager reported that a Swahili-speaking worker had failed the test because he had been unable to understand the interpreter's Glaswegian accent.

These instances give cause for concern about the availability of qualified interpreters for some languages. There is also the question whether the interpreters had sufficient knowledge of construction terminology.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and CILT should consider commissioning training for interpreters in the domain of construction language.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should monitor the pass/fail rate of various target groups and take remedial action to eliminate any unfair barriers.

## 8.4 The Health and Safety Testing in Construction handbook

The Health and Safety Test handbook provides both the knowledge required for health & safety on site and forms an important tool to prepare for the health & safety test.

The lay-out of the handbook is admirably clear, with questions and multiple-choice answers in one column, and correct answers with explanation at the side. However, while the handbook fulfils its technical purpose of providing information on health & safety, the language used is often complex and forms a major barrier to understanding for native English and second language speakers alike.

Two examples:

*Where tipping into an excavation is necessary, what TWO methods could be used to prevent the vehicle getting too close to the edge?*

*What piece of equipment would you use to find out whether a section of solid wall that you are about to drill into contains electric cables?*

We believe that these can be simplified without loss of meaning:

- ◆ *You have to tip into an excavation. The vehicle must not get too close to the edge. What TWO ways are there to do this?*
- ◆ *You want to drill into a section of solid wall. There may be electric cables in this section. How can you find out?*

CITB-ConstructionSkills has recently acknowledged this problem.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should make it a priority to rewrite the Health & Safety Test handbook in simple English.

Once the handbook has been written, CITB-ConstructionSkills and CILT should assign the text to a language specialist for scrutiny and, if necessary, simplification of language.

## 8.5 Availability

Although candidates can have access to the Health & Safety Test handbook at any time, in practice they do not get their own copy before they apply to sit the health & safety test. Considering its length of 278 pages plus appendices, we were concerned that second language speakers (and native English speakers with poor reading skills) do then not have sufficient time to study it. Secondly, the current third edition of the handbook (revised in 2002) consists of a main section on general health & safety requirements to which specialist sections have been added, eg for plumbing and electrical installation. As a result, the handbook was daunting for those operatives who were not fluent readers (which could apply to native English and second language speakers). CITB-ConstructionSkills has recently acknowledged this problem and is in the process of redesigning the Handbook.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should make it known to the construction industry that the Health & Safety Test handbook can be bought at any time and regardless of when the candidate intends to take the test.

## 9 Providing information in other languages

We found two opposing views on the use of translation and/or interpreting into other languages. The first view was that English is the language used on site and that operatives should communicate in English at all times. However, by no means all supervisors held this view and in any case disallowing the tools of interpreting and translation does not follow the guidance to the 1999 Health & Safety at Work Regulations:

‘For employees with little or no understanding of English, or who cannot read English, employers may need to make special arrangements. These could include providing translation, using interpreters, or replacing written notices with clearly understood symbols or diagrams.’

As the Health & Safety Executive has pointed out, simply avoiding employing foreign workers might appear to be the easiest way of achieving compliance with the 1999 Regulations. However, this is not the intention of the Regulations and employers should bear in mind that this approach could lead to them breaching the 1976 Race Relations Act. Any exclusion from employment on the basis of English language skills would need to be wholly justifiable on health and safety grounds - in practice this is likely to be rare.

## 9.1 Translation

Most contractors valued the use of translated materials. They saw it as a particular priority to have the Health & Safety Test handbook translated into the most commonly used languages on site. Several firms have apparently already taken action themselves: they have translated either the whole handbook or parts of it into various languages, including Portuguese, Russian, Punjabi, Gujerati and Urdu. We should stress that, if companies decide to have materials translated into other languages, they should seek permission from the copy-right holders and make sure that the translations are of suitable quality. For example, the relative of an administrative employee had translated a text for the workers. Unfortunately they were unable to understand this translation, though it was not clear whether the original English text was to blame or because the translation was faulty.

It is also important to bear in mind that it will be impossible to translate the Health & Safety Test handbook into all languages, which is why a plain English version will continue to be important for those whose languages are less common.

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*Some measures already taken by construction firms:*

- ◆ *ranslate parts of Health & Safety Test handbook, own company safety booklet and method statements into the most commonly spoken languages*
- ◆ *replace written signs by picture signs*
- ◆ *translate other site signs into languages used on site*

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CITB-ConstructionSkills should arrange for the Health & Safety Test handbook to be translated into the most common foreign languages used on site, when the handbook has been re-written in simple English.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should make site managers aware that they can refer to CITB-ConstructionSkills, CILT and professional bodies for advice on the quality assurance of translated texts.

## 9.2 Providing information in spoken language

Even when simplified as much as possible, the language used may be too complex for second language speakers when they first arrive on site. That is when special arrangements are needed. Supervisors used several methods to overcome communication problems. They commonly used other operatives to transfer the information into the worker's first language. This was most likely to be a foreman or an operative who had sufficient command of both English and the other language. We also came across a bilingual manager who had acted as the interpreter for induction. He had become so familiar with its contents that he took over the delivery in the other language with agreement from the contractor's health & safety manager. It is important to note that we found only one case of a professional interpreter employed on site.

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Some supervisors objected to any use of the first language on the basis that this hindered the learning and practice of English. A second objection was that using an interpreter increased the time taken to get information across, for example while delivering the induction. However, using an interpreter to explain health & safety procedures could save lives. And in any case, contractors agreed that the need for interpreting decreased over time because the longer the workers had been on site the more their command of the English language improved.

This leaves a concern about the use of operatives who act as informal interpreters but who themselves have a limited knowledge of English. Our study covered only a limited sample of sites but nevertheless we found no evidence that the informal interpreters gave faulty information which contributed to or caused accidents. Supervisors and managers believed that the system of using other language speakers to support new workers worked well, with work on site as the ultimate check of adequate understanding. The absence of statistical information to prove or disprove that this approach is unsafe is a real problem and we strongly recommend further research on this.

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Managers and supervisors indicated that the following sequence made for the best introduction of new workers to their new workplace:

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Step 1 | Pair a newcomer with little English with someone with the same language and better English |
| Step 2 | The newcomer learns the job and improves his English                                       |
| Step 3 | Pair him with an English speaker to improve his English further                            |
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Site managers should make sure that whoever interprets the induction is competent to do so. This means that the person includes all information and gives an accurate rendition. If necessary, employers can refer to CITB-ConstructionSkills and CILT for advice on the quality assurance of interpreting.

CILT should monitor the safety implications of using fellow workers as informal interpreters.

## **10 The Health & Safety Executive**

It strikes us that health & safety inspectors can play an active role in ensuring that workers whose first language is not English receive adequate information on health & safety. This could include the promotion of language awareness among HSE own staff as well as company supervisors and managers.

Secondly, the 1995 Regulations<sup>7</sup> require of contractors that they report accidents to the HSE. In turn the HSE investigates a sample of these and collates statistical data. It appears that the written employer reports on the cause of accidents are brief and do not require information on communica

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<sup>7</sup> Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995.

tion difficulties. It would be useful if the HSE could consider the possible links between difficulty with communication and the incidence of accidents.

The HSE should establish whether there is a causal link between poor communication and the occurrence of accidents.

The HSE should consider providing language awareness training for their inspectors.

The HSE should signpost access to information on how to communicate effectively with second language workers.

## 11 Role of the unions

The second language speakers interviewed for this study indicated that there were few contacts between the unions and themselves. Just three operatives seemed to understand the concept of a union and only one was a member. The union reps whom we encountered in turn reported that there had not been much contact with second language speakers working on site. The implementation of the Employment Act 2002 is in its early stage of development and, it is hoped, will make a significant impact on the engagement between union reps and second language speakers. The Act gives statutory recognition to union learning reps to promote learning in the workplace and includes not just provision for native English speakers but also for second language speakers, for example in negotiating time off to learn English and advice on where to go. One recent development which is popular with second language speakers is the establishment of Union Learning Centres, two of which have been set up on London construction sites in conjunction with an FE College.

The unions should:

- provide training for their learning reps in how to include second language speakers in their Union Learning Fund activities
- make sure that their learning reps include second language speakers working in the building industry as part of their targets for basic skills development

## 12 English language provision

The more English language teaching relates to the needs of participants, the more effective and motivating the learning will be. While some of the tutors made great efforts to provide suitable language learning activities, we found that they did not necessarily have the information and materials they needed. As a result, the tutors often spent an inordinate time creating their own subject-specific materials. It would be extremely valuable if major contractors and CITB-ConstructionSkills were to work with colleges to develop an ESOL syllabus and materials for construction.

## 12.1 Operatives' attendance at English language classes

Of the 22 operatives who were interviewed for this study and who had come to the UK as individuals rather than as a company team, about a third had attended UK English language classes in the past. Of these, two had been to private colleges and the rest to further education colleges. The length of study varied from three days to three years. Only one operative was on a course at a private language school at the time of interview.

As to the reasons why only a minority had ever attended English language classes, some operatives had not felt the need to or would feel too tired to attend after work. But more importantly, operatives and managers had no information on what provision might be available near the site or the workers' home. Clearly, information on English language provision needs to be made available.

## 12.2 On-site English language classes

We identified six on-site English language classes which main contractors had organised in partnership with three local further education colleges. Classes were generally held once a week, and were usually held after work in the operatives' own time. Attendance varied but in one large company where workers were paid to go, attendance was 100%. Progress was reported as good. For example, participants in one English language class had made enough progress in their ten-week course to be ready for the CSCS touch-screen test, and were about to begin vocational training.

Interestingly, the tutors of four language classes had found that operatives did not just want language for construction. The learners were already more or less familiar with health & safety regulations and what they wanted was language for social interaction in the workplace. This included greetings, being able to chat about what they had done the previous night, and so on. The managers commented that, having had this training, relations between the native English and second language speaking workers improved.

## 12.3 Construction-specific language training

Further education colleges provide English language classes at various levels. These were normally not work related, let alone industry-specific. Since there is demand for provision for people working in the construction industry, colleges near major construction sites should explore the potential to deliver industry-specific language training.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and partners should work together to develop a framework for English language training which makes use of existing resources such as health & safety materials, CSCS Health & Safety Test handbook, method statements and risk assessments, posters, signage, and videos.

Language training for the construction industry should cover the following:

- The language used in the context of health & safety in general and the Health & Safety Test handbook in particular
- Language used to warn workers of danger
- Technical vocabulary and trade jargon for tools and equipment
- Frequently used language for example, verbs like *set* and *set out* or *run* and *run out of*

- Idioms e.g. *He's tied up at the moment* which do not make sense when taken literally
- The language needed for social interaction.

Main contractors should consider offering English language classes on site.

Where learning centres are attached to large projects, these should offer provision for ESOL.

## 12.4 Funding for English language provision

At the moment foreign workers who are temporarily based in England and come from outside the EU are required to pay fees to attend provision. However, the advent of the Sector Skills Councils and their greater say over LSC budgets should enable the CITB-ConstructionSkills and partners to direct funding to foreign workers in the construction industry.

The local LSCs should:

- use their workforce development advisers to establish links between the LSC, local colleges and construction sites.
- consider using workforce development funding to provide English language training for construction workers whose first language is not English.

Sector Skills Councils and LSCs should use sector skills agreements to deliver provision for second language speakers working on building sites.

Contractors should post information about local English language provision on site.

## 13 Implications which go beyond the confines of this study

This study has aimed to investigate the communication between second language speakers and native English speakers in the construction industry. While the recommendation above on the use of sector skills agreements applies primarily to the construction industry, the principle may have a wider application to other sectors.

Sector Skills Councils and LSC should consider using skills sector agreements to deliver provision for second language speakers in sectors other than construction.

Secondly, since the London area was the focus for this study, recommendations on national funding and policy structures apply to England only. However, these may also be of use in the other countries.

The funding bodies and policy makers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland may find it helpful to consider the findings and recommendations produced in this report within the context of their national strategies.

# 14 Overview of recommendations

## Recommendations for construction firms

Before interviewing new recruits, contractors/site managers should establish:

- ◆ the prior work experience of the applicant
- ◆ the nature of the work
- ◆ whether people who speak the same language are already part of the team
- ◆ the language awareness of the supervisor or foreman

Supervisors should use this information to define the level of English needed for the job. Supervisors should decide at what stage to familiarise workers with language for emergencies

If site managers or contractors use a general site induction video they should make sure that they:

- ◆ continue to provide site-specific information during induction
- ◆ check the workers' understanding of both general health & safety principles and site-specific information.

Construction companies, their managers and supervisors should be aware that health & safety procedures vary from country to country and that operatives may need additional guidance to follow UK practice.

(Sub)contractors should:

- ◆ identify those parts of the method statement and risk assessments (including COSHH) which relate to operatives
- ◆ produce the text aimed at operatives as a separate document and write it in clear English
- ◆ check that operatives have understood the information ie that they know how to work safely before they sign the document.

Construction firms should:

- ◆ produce a stock of commonly-used site notices in lower-case print, and where possible as picture signs
- ◆ if posters and notices need to be hand-written, write text in lower-case 'printed' lettering

Site managers should make sure that whoever interprets the induction is competent to do so. This means that the person includes all information and gives an accurate rendition. If necessary, employers can refer to CITB-ConstructionSkills and CILT for advice on the quality assurance of interpreting.

Main contractors should consider offering English language classes on site.

Contractors should post information about local English language provision on site.

Where learning centres are attached to large projects, these should offer provision for ESOL.

## **Recommendations for CITB-ConstructionSkills and partners**

CITB-ConstructionSkills and contractors should collect data on the number of second language speakers working in the building industry, the languages they speak and where they are deployed.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and construction companies should continue to target the settled UK minority ethnic groups for employment in construction and to evaluate the effectiveness of measures such as CITB-ConstructionSkills' current work with contractors, for example, 'STEP into Construction'.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should monitor the pass/fail rate of various target groups when they take the health & safety test and take remedial action to eliminate any unfair barriers.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should ensure adequate provision for language awareness training to construction managers and supervisors.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and HSE working with CILT should be requested to review CITB-ConstructionSkills existing site induction video to ensure that it uses clear, simple English and consider the option of voice-overs in the most commonly used languages on site.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should:

- ◆ review the complexity of the language used in toolbox talk materials and simplify language as necessary
- ◆ consider producing training videos in clear, simple English with voice-overs in the most common languages used on site

CITB-ConstructionSkills and CILT should consider commissioning training for interpreters in the domain of construction language.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should make it a priority to rewrite the Health & Safety Test handbook in simple English. Once the handbook has been written, the text should be assigned to a language specialist for scrutiny and, if necessary, simplification of language. CITB-ConstructionSkills should also arrange for the simplified Health & Safety Test handbook to be translated into the most common foreign languages used on site.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should make it known to the construction industry that the Health & Safety Test handbook can be bought at any time and regardless of when the candidate intends to take the test.

CITB-ConstructionSkills should make site managers aware that they can refer to CITB-ConstructionSkills, CILT and professional bodies for advice on the quality assurance of translated texts.

CITB-ConstructionSkills and partners should work together to develop a framework for English language training which makes use of existing resources such as health & safety materials, CSCS Health & Safety Test handbook, method statements and risk assessments, posters, signage, and videos.

Language training for the construction industry should cover the following:

- ◆ the language used in the context of health & safety in general and the Health & Safety Test handbook in particular
- ◆ language used to warn workers of danger
- ◆ Technical vocabulary and trade jargon for tools and equipment
- ◆ frequently used language for example, verbs like *set* and *set out* or *run* and *run out of*
- ◆ idioms e.g. *He's tied up at the moment* which do not make sense when taken literally
- ◆ the language needed for social interaction.

### **Recommendations for HSE**

When HSE investigates accidents, the organisation should consider whether difficulty communicating with other language speakers was a factor.

The HSE should consider providing language awareness training for their inspectors. The HSE should signpost access to information on how to communicate effectively with second language workers.

### **Recommendations for other partners**

CILT should monitor the safety implications of using fellow workers as informal interpreters.

The unions should:

- ◆ provide training for their learning reps in how to include second language speakers in their Union Learning Fund activities
- ◆ make sure that their learning reps include second language speakers working in the building industry as part of their targets for basic skills development

Sector Skills Councils and national LSC should use sector skills agreements to deliver provision for second language speakers working on building sites.

The local LSCs should:

- ◆ use their workforce development advisers to establish links between the LSC, local colleges and construction sites.
- ◆ consider using workforce development funding to provide English language training for construction workers whose first language is not English.

Sector Skills Councils and LSC should consider using sector skills agreements to deliver provision for second language speakers in sectors other than construction.

The funding bodies and policy makers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland may find it helpful to consider the findings and recommendations produced in this report within the context of their national strategies.

## 15 Acronyms and glossary

CITB-ConstructionSkills	Construction Industry Training Board, DB, CIC, CITB NI, working in partnership as the Sector Skills Council for Construction
CILT	The National Centre for Languages
COSHH	Control of Substances Hazardous to Health
CSCS	Construction Skills Certification Scheme
DTI	Department for Trade and Industry
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
HSE	Health & Safety Executive
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
TUC	Trade Union Congress
UCATT	Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians
bilingual	able to use two languages with equal fluency
foreman	takes instructions from the site manager and supervises gangs of operatives
ganger	takes instructions from the foreman or site manager and leads a team of operatives
interpreter	a person who is qualified to interpret between two languages
labourer	an unskilled operative
language awareness	an awareness of language use and of what second language speakers find difficult, together with an understanding of how to adjust language to the needs of the listener.
method statement	statement of how work is to be carried out and responsibilities of contractor, sub-contractor and operative
operative	a worker below the level of supervisor i.e. a tradesman or labourer
risk assessment	consideration of possible risks to health and safety arising from work on site and instructions on how to manage risk
second language speaker	a person who speaks English as a second or additional language
site manager/supervisor	manages a sub-contract on site
tradesman	an operative who is skilled in a particular trade e.g. carpenter, plumber

## 16 Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Two studies were identified: *The Communication Problems experienced by Workforce on-site, and their possible Solutions*, a study which was set in the construction industry in South Africa and which was carried out by Jane English (Journal of Construction Research vol 3, no 2 (2002) pp 311-321). The second study was *English as a Key Communication Skills in the Workplace*, an unpublished study carried out by Philida Schellekens for the Languages NTO in 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> The information in this section is derived from the CITB's Market Assessment.
- <sup>3</sup> HSE MISC 09/02.
- <sup>4</sup> Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 1994, Reg 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999, Reg 10.
- <sup>6</sup> The Health and Safety (Safety Signs and Signals) Regulations 1996 brought into force the EC Safety Signs Directive (92/58/EEC). This aimed to standardise safety signs across all the member states of the European Union.
- <sup>7</sup> Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995.

# NOTES

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