

# HEATHROW TALKING TO THE WORLD

## A LANGUAGES AUDIT

**SUMMARY**

March 2005



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The full report and summary are available on-line at [www.cilt.org.uk](http://www.cilt.org.uk) or from  
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## **HEATHROW TALKING TO THE WORLD**

**A study at London's Heathrow Airport of a range of key on-airport work-streams to identify current and future language and cultural skills needs to inform London West Learning and Skills Council and employers at Heathrow of training required to meet skills gaps and skills shortages.**

## FOREWORD

The six boroughs that make up the London West Learning and Skills Council (LSC) area (Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow) form the most diverse sub-region in London, one of the most multi-lingual capitals in the world. Home to Heathrow, the world's busiest international airport and a gateway for London and the UK, west London has a wealth of language skills to be tapped, yet faces challenges in ensuring the effective development of a multi-lingual workforce.

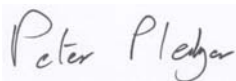
Against this background, working with BAA, we commissioned a major language skills audit in five key frontline work-streams at the airport. The result is *Heathrow Talking to the World*, a report of the survey conducted across the four existing terminals during the second half of 2004 by Regional Language Network London – supported by CILT, the National Centre for Languages.

Communication across language and cultural boundaries is essential to the life of an airport for passengers, employers and employees in the airport's large supply chain

The LSC is responsible for planning and investing in high quality learning that meets the needs of employers, individuals and communities. We will use the report's findings and '*The Way Forward*' to inform decisions about the funding of provision to improve the skills of the current and future workforce.

In the wider context, we are confident that the report has relevance for airports across the UK and for employers with a diverse workforce in other settings and sectors.

We are proud to have taken the initiative to spearhead this work, which has such important messages for all those interested in maximising the effectiveness of communication skills of the workforce. We look forward to working in partnership with employers, community organisations and stakeholders in education and training for London West communities and for Heathrow's competitive advantage now and in the future.



Peter Pledger  
Executive Director

London West Learning and Skills Council

## 1. Background

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Heathrow faces the challenge of remaining an internationally successful global hub in a changing environment. An international gateway, used by over 65 million passengers a year, for many, the airport is their first experience of England and all it has to offer. Heathrow has a unique position. In addition to the passengers using Heathrow, the airport provides services to nearly three times as many people, ranging from business and leisure tourists to asylum seekers; airport visitors to suppliers and employees. All have a wide range of linguistic and communications needs and critical to the continued success of Heathrow is the ability to recruit and manage a workforce that is able to operate in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment, and that can communicate effectively with customers, suppliers and other members of staff.

Services on the airport are provided by hundreds of employers, large and small, who employ some 70,000 people, a number that is forecast to grow by a further 16,000 jobs with the completion of Terminal 5. Many employees are drawn from West London, in particular the communities immediately surrounding the airport, where minority ethnic communities represent over 35% of the population, making it an area of great cultural and linguistic diversity.

And, as highlighted by the Government in their National Languages Strategy, a critical success factor is language:

*“In the global society of the 21st century, language competence and cultural understanding are increasingly important ... Language skills are central to breaking down barriers both within this country and beyond.”<sup>1</sup>*

Against this background, London West Learning and Skills Council wished to understand better the issues associated with the recruitment and development of a diverse workforce and any specific training and support needs to be addressed. *Heathrow Talking to the World* considers the issues involved in workforce development and customer service in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment. It was designed to inform London West Learning and Skills Council and employers at Heathrow of the skills gaps and shortages that exist and to put forward points for consideration in relation to the provision of training and support. It also considers ways of engaging members of the wider community in employment on the airport.

While this project focused on skills development and the associated training and support needs, a number of issues that are outside the remit of the Learning and Skills Council were identified. These have been noted for consideration and action by other stakeholders on the airport and have been included as an integral part of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> National Languages Strategy – DFES 2000

## **2. Methodology**

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The process used in *Heathrow Talking to the World* followed the Specialist Workforce Plan (SWP), a model developed by the former Languages National Training Organisation (see Appendix 1). It was built around questionnaires and interviews with staff from companies across a range of workstreams critical to the operation of the airport. In addition a number of direct observations of the staff / customer interface were carried out to verify the findings from the interviews. Five different workstreams were identified for study and one company from each workstream was involved. The workstreams / companies were airlines (American Airlines), catering and hospitality (Select Service Partners), retail (World Duty Free), cleaning services (ISS) and overall operation of the airport (BAA). In total, 150 staff from the five companies were interviewed and observations were carried out across all terminals covering most hours of operation. Further, a number of organisations ranging from business groups to community organisations providing employment advice and support were also consulted and, in total, 25 such organisations were contacted.

The information gathered via the SWP was supplemented by research into practices adopted in other areas where there is a multi-lingual / multi-cultural work environment and overall the project ran from June – December 2004.

## **3. Key Findings**

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The key concerns for companies operating in a multi-lingual / multi-cultural environment such as Heathrow focus on the need to communicate easily and effectively with customers while addressing the challenges involved in the development of an efficient and appropriately qualified workforce. Specific concerns relate to the communication skills required as well as the recruitment of staff, their training and the provision of day-to-day support and management.

### **3.1 Languages and the Workforce**

Heathrow is used by passengers and other airport users with a wide range of linguistic needs. Consequently, communications within the airport are key and staff have a vital role to play. While staff have specific roles within the airport, any member of staff who is wearing a uniform or high visibility yellow jacket is seen as a “walking information point”. This means that at any time they may be approached by airport users for help and assistance.

Good communications can depend on the ability (or otherwise) of customers and staff to communicate in a common “language” – using both the spoken word and other non-verbal means. While Heathrow is an English-speaking airport used by passengers and other airport visitors, it is staffed by a multi-lingual workforce and staff working on the airport speak a wide range of different languages. In the sample of 150 staff interviewed during the course of this project, 27 different first languages were identified and a total of 45 languages recorded as being spoken.

There is a clear willingness on the part of staff (in whatever role) to use their languages to try and assist customers in whatever way is possible. In the event that they are not in a position to help, they will try and find someone who can communicate with the customer. However, it was noted that there appears to be no central database of information on “where to turn” for help – be it other members of staff, other companies or external interpretation agencies.

Across all five participating employers, staff use their skills in languages other than English to communicate with customers on a frequent or relatively frequent basis. It is worth noting that the level of language skills used ranges from “a few words” to first language fluency. Many staff expressed the view that the effective use of even a limited amount of a language can have a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Part of this willingness to help is also demonstrated by the number of employees who indicated a desire to learn other languages in order to build their own skills and ultimately be able to communicate more easily. Over 50% of staff interviewed indicated a desire to learn other languages, and it is notable that a significant proportion of individuals wishing to learn another language do not have English as a first language.

The key languages to be learned were French, Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese and Arabic but a range of other languages including sign language was requested. Around one sixth of the staff interviewed were keen to improve their English. (It was noted that English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) support is available but either awareness of this is very low or it is considered to be available “in the wrong place and the wrong time”.)

Although outside the remit of this study, a number of comments were made in relation to difficulties passengers have in passing through Immigration. A large proportion of passengers passing through formal immigration controls do not have English as a first language and are seen to be having difficulties in communicating effectively, leading to frustration and confusion.

At the same time as demonstrating a willingness to use spoken language, staff also make every effort to help customers and to meet their needs even when there is no common language or customers are hearing impaired. They adopt coping mechanisms including using an “improvised” sign language and other forms of non-verbal communications. Where staff use “sign” language this often includes taking someone’s arm, moving closer to them and maintaining eye contact to “engage” the other person. Many staff were unaware that such approaches could cause offence in some cultures and were very keen to learn what is / is not acceptable behaviour.

### **3.2 Building and Developing an Effective Workforce**

Employers draw staff from a wide area around Heathrow but, given their commitment to engage and support the local community, there is a focus on recruiting from West London and the communities surrounding the airport. Within these communities, there is a high proportion of residents who do not have English as a first language – a trend that is likely to continue with new arrivals from the extended European community, Africa and Asia. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge to employers. It is an opportunity in that it improves a company's ability to communicate with customers in languages other than English and enhance customer service. It is a challenge in that there is a need to encourage staff from different communities to consider employment on the airport and then to recruit and train in a multi-lingual environment.

#### **3.2.1 Recruitment**

Companies need to recruit staff with the necessary skills to carry out the job and with an ability to communicate in English with both staff and customers. However, there are two factors that are seen to limit recruitment from the local community: the application process, which often requires the completion of a form in relatively complex English, and a lack of awareness of the opportunities for employment on the airport.

It is notable that a number of organisations providing employment advice to local residents, and especially minority ethnic communities, do not know how to access employment opportunities on the airport. There is also concern over the extent to which schools or colleges are aware of the requirements of the different jobs on the airport and especially the importance of language and communications.

#### **3.2.2 Training**

Employers recognise that effective training is a vital part of employee development and can contribute to both employee motivation and good customer service. The main types of training offered by employers are initial induction, specific training to understand the requirements of the job and refresher training on matters such as health and safety and security.

Training is delivered in a number of different ways, including face-to-face sessions in a classroom and computer based training. However, it does not always take account of the linguistic needs of staff nor other skills required, such as computer skills for e-learning. It is generally carried out in English, often using handouts and/or power-point – both of which contain complex language. Further, there is little evidence to indicate that employers test comprehension following training sessions.

### **3.2.3 Day-to-day Staff Management**

Employers engage a very diverse workforce, and it is not unusual to find individuals within work teams speaking a number of different first languages. This presents clear challenges in terms of day-to-day management and communications. For instance, staff briefings are given in English and, although informal interpreting by colleagues does take place, there is usually no check of understanding of the issues raised. Further, attention is not always paid to the delivery of the message and the need to take care over the complexity of English and accents that can distort understanding.

In addition, there is little evidence of formal procedures for briefing staff with hearing impairments.

### **3.2.4 General support**

While informal support networks exist among many of the staff in which individuals communicate in their own first language, there appears to be no formal system for providing linguistic support to an individual who is the subject of disciplinary action and who may well not understand the detail of what is happening.

## **3.3 Communications with Airport Users**

Heathrow is a complex place to visit or transit but a place where good customer service is vital. Whatever the service or product, the key to effective delivery is communication – ensuring that passengers and airport users alike know what is available, when, where and how the different services can be accessed. At the same time, it is important to take account of linguistic needs and any hearing impairments to ensure that services are as accessible as possible. While direct contact with staff as outlined above is critical, there are a number of other ways in which Heathrow “communicates” with its customers: announcements, signs and publicity.

### **3.3.1 Public Announcements**

Although the airport is used by people speaking a wide range of languages, the vast majority of public address announcements are made in English. Many of these, including those relating to security and health and safety issues, are long, complex and difficult to understand. This can present difficulties for people who do not have English as their first language. Failure to understand what is said can, at best, lead to frustration and customer dissatisfaction and, at worst, could put customers who do not understand a safety announcement at some degree of risk. There is also no provision for “announcements” to people with hearing impairments.

### **3.3.2 Signage**

While there are signs welcoming customers to Heathrow, these are in English, as are all directional and other signs in the terminals. The directional signs are designed in accordance with BAA corporate guidelines, and include pictograms as well as text. However, some are thought to be confusing due to the amount of information they contain and the size and colour of the pictograms.

While information is collected on the effectiveness of signs and the ease with which passengers can find their way through the terminal, these surveys are carried out in English and little information is available on the difficulties, if any, experienced by non-English speakers transiting the airport.

### **3.3.3 Publicity**

A key point of contact for many seeking information about the airport and the availability of products and services can be the Internet. Currently, the website offers a wide range of information but is only available in English and thus may not be accessible to a number of people whose first language is not English.

## **4. The Way Forward**

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It is clear from the discussions and observations that were a part of this project that many of the issues cut across company and organisational boundaries. There are a number of situations in which it would be possible to achieve a real impact by combining resources and working together to meet the needs of a multi-lingual / multi-cultural workforce and promote customer service.

While it may not be practical to implement actions on an airport-wide basis, the terminals represent discrete “communities” and would provide considerable support to the development of some of the suggested actions outlined below. These build on the key findings from this project as well as reflecting good practice that has been identified both at Heathrow and in other settings.

### **4.1 Suggested Actions for London West LSC**

The key role to be played by the LSC is to adopt a responsive approach to ensure that staff have the necessary skills to work within a multi-lingual / multi-cultural workforce. This could be achieved through the provision of appropriate training and skills development programmes for the existing workforce and working with other providers who are meeting the needs of the future workforce - such as schools, colleges and community groups. Specific initiatives could include:

- Working with employers to build on the interest of staff in learning other languages, including sign language, to develop the linguistic and communications skills of staff. Opportunities could include both generic and sector specific sessions and could be offered on a terminal-wide basis using shared training resources, with courses being open to staff from all employers in the terminal

- Recognising the need to equip staff with the necessary awareness and skills to communicate with different cultures, work with employers to look at the most appropriate ways of providing cultural awareness programmes and good practice in non-verbal coping mechanisms
- Facilitating the development of training techniques which are less reliant on the understanding of written and spoken English
- Working with employers to develop training in the management of a multi-lingual / multi-cultural workforce
- Systematically identifying good practice in relation to training and facilitating groups of employers and others in sharing this information
- Working through the Education Business Partnerships with local schools, colleges and other education providers to promote the benefits of linguistic skills
- Working with local community groups to raise awareness of the opportunities, skills required, the training and support that is available and the potential for success with the right / on-going training
- Reviewing with employers the ways in which the ESOL provision is currently promoted and delivered to maximise the effectiveness of this programme. If appropriate, consider improving accessibility by moving classes into the terminals

#### **4.2 Suggested Actions for Individual Employers**

Individual employers working on the airport face a number of challenges in recruitment, management and customer service. Many of these centre on the ability of the workforce to be able to communicate effectively in English whilst celebrating the skills of a diverse workforce. At the same time it is important to promote the benefits of working on the airport and routes into employment by working with schools, colleges and community groups. Specifically:

- Recognising the benefits of employing a multi-lingual workforce by establishing and maintaining information on languages spoken by individual members of staff and looking at ways of using these skills both within the company and the wider terminal “community”
- Recognising the difficulties presented by the application procedures and developing ways in which these could be modified to meet the needs of those applying
- Reviewing the ways in which training is delivered to ensure it is effective and understood
- Looking at the business case for language training and the benefits derived from enhanced employee motivation, improved career progression prospects and improved customer service
- Reviewing the ways in which support can be given to staff whose first language is not English, including the possibility of “buddying” systems within staff groups

- Looking at the possibility of providing linguistic support staff in formal proceedings through accessing interpretation services (e.g. by reference to the quality assured BLIS Professionals register maintained by CILT, the National Centre for Languages)
- Working with the local community to ensure that “ways to employment” are understood by potential recruits, including the skills required for specific roles
- Working with schools and colleges to promote awareness of work on the airport and the relevance and importance of languages in the workplace
- Working with local schools to provide work experience opportunities that give a “taste” of employment on the airport and the relevance of languages in the workplace

#### **4.3 Suggested Actions for BAA as Airport Operator**

As airport operator, BAA has a multi-faceted role. Firstly they are an employer in their own right with a diverse workforce. They also fulfil the role of airport operator and facilitator of employer groups across the airport. The actions outlined above in relation to individual employers are relevant for BAA in their capacity as employer. In addition, in their role as facilitator of key groups across the airport, BAA has a role to play in raising awareness of the issues in relation to the recruitment and development of the workforce.

Finally, in their role as airport operator, a number of issues critical to effective customer service were identified – focused mainly on the ability of airport users to understand and communicate in English. Consequently, it is recommended that a number of key aspects of support are reviewed by BAA as airport operator. These include:

- A review of the website and the possibilities of offering certain pages in other languages
- Recognising the need to communicate effectively with customers, especially in a health and safety context, review of public address announcements
- Ensuring that airport users who do not have English as their first language are able to transit the airport easily. This could include:
  - A review of the effectiveness of signs and the ease with which non-English speakers are able to transit the airport
  - The development of leaflets in different languages
  - Touch screens and other technology
  - A review of the availability of information on second language speakers working on the airport

# Appendix 1

## Specialist Workforce Plan: an overview

