This programme was first broadcast in 1999.
This is not an accurate word-for-word transcript of the programme.

You’re listening to “First Sight, Second Thoughts” from the BBC World Service, the series which views life in Britain through the eyes of her immigrant population.

Maya : When I first came here British English was so difficult for me because in, Japan, basically we use American English at school.

Frank: When I came for the first time into this country, only two words I used to know, only: “Good Morning” and “My name is…”

Well my nephew was, he was I think, seven years old and I used to learn from him actually. I tried to copy him what he was doing.

Presenter: Voices of immigrants facing one of the challenges of life in a new country. In "First Sight, Second Thoughts" we get an insight into life in Britain as seen through the eyes of her immigrant population. People who’ve come here from all over the world share their personal experiences - their "first sight" of life in
Britain and their "second thoughts" as they got to know it … for better or for worse. The theme for today's programme is "Coming to Terms with English."

Presenter: Immigrants have come here from very different cultures and countries and for many different reasons - economic, political and personal. But what many do have in common is that English is not their first language, and even if it is, they still face the challenge of trying to understand the wide range of accents spoken in Britain today. So how do such people actually come to terms with using English every day? Let’s meet some of them and learn about the issues through their own words.

Insert 1

My name is Maya Yoshida, I originally come from Japan. I first came to London five years ago as a tourist and I felt really comfortable to be here. So after I went back to Japan, I decided to come back here to live. When I first came here, British English was so difficult for me because in Japan, basically, we use American English at school. So, I couldn't understand English at all and of course I couldn't understand TV, especially soap opera like 'Eastenders' (laughs). Actually, I haven't done anything special to learn English since I came here, but I try to ask friends when I found any difficult words or difficult phrases.

Presenter: Maya mentioned “Eastenders” there which is a very popular television soap opera set in the East End of London. Most of the characters in Eastenders have Cockney accents - a bit like this:

"Do what mate? Leave it out - you’re having a laugh, aren’t you? And even British people sometimes find it difficult to understand Cockney!" Now imagine
someone speaking to you like that all the time, but a lot faster! OK, let’s meet someone else…”

Insert 2
My name is Mr Frank Ndjukende. I come from the Republic of Congo. When I came, at the time, it was Zaire. So, I live here in England almost ten years now and, when I came over I was young, nearly 22. I couldn't even speak to anyone. Only two words I used to know, only: “Good Morning” and “My name is…” because I learn it at school. I met a friend, yeah, a woman. She's from Wales and she helped me a lot. She was like my teacher from school in the evening and we used to play a lot of ‘Scrabble’. That's why I improved my English.

Presenter: So Frank’s English really has improved since the days when he could only say “Good morning” and “My name is….” Like Frank, I also enjoy playing “Scrabble” which is a word game played on a board. You earn the most points by creating long words, using the most difficult letters - such as ‘Q’ and ‘X’. And of course, only English words are allowed!

[Now] how does an immigrant handle a more official situation when he or she isn’t fluent in English?

Insert 3
So hello. My name is Ana Silvia Rodriguez. I am Mexican. I have lived in England for the past twenty years. I came with my husband who is English so it was easy for me. He spoke fluent French and Spanish so we communicated in Spanish but it wasn't until my first child was born that I really needed to speak English fluently because at the hospital you had to speak to doctors, to nurses, and you had to be understood and that was very difficult. Sometimes I wanted to fight for the things I believed in and it was very difficult not to have the language. So, when I had my second child I made sure I knew all the language, all the words that I was going to need in order to say, "Yes please, I need this. No, I don't want that".

Presenter: As the next part of Ana’s story shows, unfortunately, immigrants who don’t speak English fluently can sometimes encounter unfair treatment. Ana refers to this as “institutionalised racism” which she felt she encountered in a hospital.

She needed some stitches after the birth of her first child…

Insert 4

One very traumatic experience I had when I first arrived in England was the birth of my first child. In some ways it was a very happy event but in another way I came across some form of institutionalised racism. The doctors and the nurses in the hospital where my child was born did not understand my identity. I was different, I spoke with a different accent, and decisions were made for me and it was just humiliating the way that I was treated. For example, the student doctors that were sewing me up afterwards were chatting away and laughing. I had just had a twenty two hour labour and delivery and they just were totally insensitive to my feelings. And I shouted at them and I said, you know, "Are you having a good time down there?" Because I was really very upset. But it was very difficult without the language to express my needs. When my second child was born, things had changed a great deal. And so I knew more about my own rights even if I still spoke English with a foreign accent. So the second time around it was a lot easier.

Insert 5

My name is Renate Thornton. Originally I'm coming from East Prussia - now Kalinigrad. Being a refugee, we moved right across Germany and then ended up in Munich and now I'm living in Leeds. I attended a language course in 1963 in Brighton and met my ex-husband there, and 1964 I came to Britain.
When I was in Germany, yes, I learnt English at the grammar school and then later in the Commercial school where the English consisted of the business language. So, ordinary English like: "Can I have some potatoes?" - this daily vocabulary was totally lacking. I could listen to the news, I could read the newspapers but these polite phrases just weren't taught really…. "Don't mention it" - I didn't know that! These little things I picked up by going along then.

**Presenter:** Ah yes, “don’t mention it” - a nice, polite little phrase. And really, the best time to use “don’t mention it” is if someone has thanked you for something. Instead of replying with ‘my pleasure’, ‘no problem’ - you could use “don’t mention it” instead. But not all immigrants pick up such polite expressions - in fact, they find themselves learning what our next speaker calls ‘factory-type English’…

Insert 6

My name is Rajinder Dulai. I came from Punjab in India and I came into Britain on 16th December 1977 and landed at Heathrow airport, terminal three. In India I didn't take English studies seriously at all which (laughs) I regretted when I came over here to England. The whole atmosphere there wasn't really geared for learning English. That was never a priority really. Well my nephew, Jatinder, he was, I think, seven years old and I used to learn from him actually. I tried to copy him and also I joined evening classes for learning English then I picked up a few bits and pieces from general use of English. I couldn’t carry on learning English on a continuous basis because of my job. And also in that factory there wasn't a great need because I was working predominantly with Indian people. When I changed my job, then my job was with an Englishman and that really helped me. That forced me to learn English. But that was more sort of factory type English, more sort of swear words and that sort of thing.

**Presenter:** We’ve heard the personal stories of immigrants from Japan, Congo, Mexico, and Germany. They all faced the challenge of coming to terms with English as it’s spoken in Britain.
Here are some of the methods that they found useful to make progress: asking English-speaking friends about words and phrases they didn’t understand. Watching or listening to television and radio to get used to hearing different British accents. Playing word-games, to help build vocabulary and improve spelling - and as in Frank’s case, to improve their social lives! And - like Ana - preparing for more formal situations, such as housing, money matters or health, by learning the words and phrases required to express their needs and opinions. And finally, building vocabulary by listening to the words and phrases used by children. Most of these methods can be used by learners of English wherever they are, so if you’re a student of English why not try them!