

# Online interpreters on call help expats navigate pandemic

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When Samuel Gonzalez, a Spaniard living in suburban Qingpu District, wanted to know about the COVID-19 pandemic situation in his community, he could not communicate with the neighborhood committee because of the language barrier.

However, he made a call on the “Trans On” application.

With help from an online interpreter, he learnt from the neighborhood committee that their residential compound had just been downgraded from a “locked-down area” to a “controlled area” and he could walk around within the compound.

Gonzalez, who has been working at an international school in Shanghai for three years, said he can speak a little Chinese but there are words that are difficult for him, and his accent may also hinder people from understanding him.

After his colleagues recommended the “Trans On” app, he tried it and was surprised at its efficiency.

“You just call and get someone like your personal assistant,” he said. “That was really astonishing. If it’s in a situation that you don’t know, you are nervous to communicate and using your native language is extremely important.”

Gonzalez said he would try to use it in other situations in the future, such as talking with taxi drivers, having had such difficulties in the past.

He has shared the app with some other international friends in the city as the app can provide free interpretation services in multiple languages.

The 24/7 on call interpreter

volunteer services are provided by a team under a campaign initiated in mid-April by the School of Foreign Languages of Tongji University.

“During the pandemic, we’ve heard touching stories of local residents sharing vegetables and other daily necessities with foreign neighbors, but there are also others who were isolated in their apartments and could not communicate with volunteers and medical staff because they couldn’t speak Chinese,” said Xu Wensheng, one of the initiators and a professor at the university.

“We translators and interpreters have been thinking what we can do to help society when Shanghai exercised the lockdown. Therefore, we decided to launch the Any Call volunteer interpretation project.”

The team then worked together with a local technology company to deliver free interpretation services on the company’s “Trans On” app, which used to focus on online interpretation services for video meetings, to people in need.

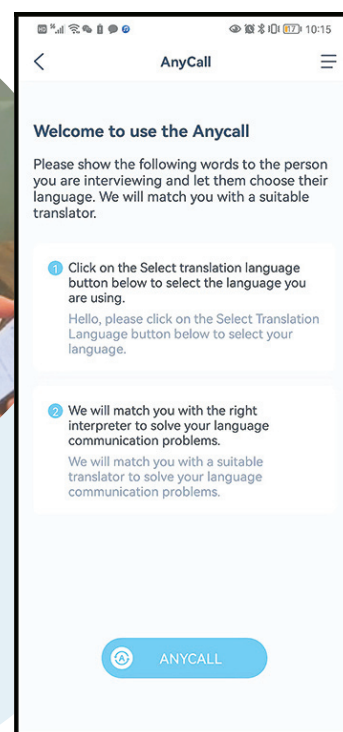
It began with seven language options — Chinese, English, German, French, Japanese, Korean and Spanish — and later added Russian, Vietnamese, Portuguese and even Cantonese.

Users can click the ANYCALL button at the bottom of the page, select a language, choose or describe the category of difficulties facing them, and wait to be connected with an interpreter.

The project soon won support from foreign language education and research institutions in 15 other local universities, such as Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, East China Normal University and Shanghai International



Samuel Gonzalez uses the “Trans On” app to communicate with the neighborhood committee staff. — Ti Gong



Users can click the ANYCALL button to ask for help via the app.

Studies University.

More than 300 teachers, students and professional and part-time interpreters registered on the app and submitted applications to become a volunteer. The vast majority registered for Chinese-English interpretation.

The applicants include Chinese students from Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Wuhan, Chengdu and Nanjing, and students from other countries, including Japan, South Korea, Russia, Tunisia and Egypt, as well as Chinese and foreign teachers working in different institutions, according to Xu.

The applicants received training on the art of speaking and typical pandemic-related occasions and terms. Instruction manuals and other documents were prepared and translated into different languages by volunteers, too.

“They stand by during their spare time and serve dozens of people each day,” Xu said. “Most help-seekers had

Some of the volunteers who provide the interpretation service.



day in the past few days.

“It’s interesting that many users just called to check if the service is really available, and they are surprised and happy to find that it’s real and free of charge,” she noted.

“Most of the calls I have received were foreigners who were anxious after being locked down for long and were eager to know the latest pandemic control policies, while some had problems in getting a nucleic acid test code,” Chen pointed out.

“I helped them get the answers from community workers and volunteers. I feel proud and happy that I can help them solve their problems.”

Tian Baozhu, a graduate in business administration from East China Normal University who now works for an Internet company, also joined the team in late April.

She said that she helped some Frenchmen and Africans in her community to know the policy for dog-walking, and recommended the app to them so that they can get help when she is unavailable.

“I feel happy to be able to help others,” she said. “And I also found the app is helpful. If I encounter difficulties when traveling in other countries in the future, I’d like to use it too.”

difficulties in communicating with neighborhood committee staff, volunteers, group-buying organizers and deliverymen.”

He added that the app is now being promoted in local communities to help people needing interpretation services, and has been well received.

Chloe Chen, an English major at Shanghai International Studies University in her junior year, is one of the volunteers. She said the project has been popular among her classmates.

“The project enables us to make our contributions in a safe and comfortable way because we don’t have to go to the front line or wear protective gears,” she said. “So I registered for it as soon as I learned of the project from my teacher.”

Chen, who began to provide services during breaks on May 6, helped six or seven people a