

9 - Thinking about language learning and providing language support

AIM: To raise volunteers' awareness of different kinds of learning and how they can make the most of them when providing language support.

When someone mentions teaching or learning we naturally think of the classrooms we have sat in at school or college. What goes on in classrooms is termed *formal learning*; it typically follows a curriculum that is designed to produce specific learning outcomes, and those outcomes are likely to be measured by an exam or some other form of assessment. But we also learn all kinds of things outside educational contexts, and we do so without having to make a special effort. Such learning is *informal*. The space between formal and informal learning is occupied by *non-formal learning*, which is the result of organized activity that does not follow a curriculum or end in assessment of some kind (this is where volunteers have a role to play).

Formal intentional learning and informal incidental learning

The learning that takes place in formal and non-formal contexts is *intentional*; that is, the activities learners engage in are designed to lead to learning. Informal learning, on the other hand, is typically *incidental*, an unintended by-product of our involvement in an activity whose primary purpose is not to learn but to achieve some other goal. Of course, incidental learning also takes place in formal and non-formal learning contexts; and informal learning can arouse an interest that leads to a deliberate intention to learn more. In other words, the boundaries between the different modes of learning are porous.

Motivated learners are interested learners

Motivated learners are ready to invest time and effort in their learning because they are interested and engaged. This is why it is a good idea for the curricula that shape formal language learning to focus on the language that will help learners to meet their immediate communicative needs. It is also why non-formal learning arrangements succeed to the extent that they capture learners' interest and engage their commitment. And it explains why formal and non-formal learning arrangements use many of the same activities, for example: ice-breakers designed to create a common focus in the group and encourage a positive group dynamic; games of many different kinds that involve the use of language; and projects based on handicrafts, sport, music or theatre. This toolkit includes a number of ice-breaking and other activities that provide a suitable focus for non-formal learning (see, for example, Tool 19 *Breaking the ice and building group confidence*, and Tool 57 *Practising language in the real world*).

Volunteers' roles in supporting language learning

Language learning may well not be the first priority of refugees, especially when they are in transit and their final destination is in doubt, but sooner or later they will need to learn the language of their host country. Some countries organize formal language courses in transit and reception centres; others postpone the provision of such courses until refugees have been granted resident status. Depending on your situation, as a volunteer you may be called on to organize non-formal language learning activities or

to support formal language learning that is based on a structured syllabus and may conclude with a test. In either case your efforts will be most profitably focused on engaging learners in language activities without attempting to deal systematically with grammar or other “technical” features of language.

How should I answer questions about grammar?

It is nevertheless likely that some members of your group will ask you questions about grammar. This is entirely natural. After all, knowing some of the rules that govern the way words combine to form phrases and larger chunks of language is a useful aid to all learners, including beginners. The best way of answering these questions is by reference to your own use of the language. Try to give explanations based on examples that are as simple and clear as possible, and don't try to formulate abstract rules.

You may find useful resources in one of the [web directories](#).

Some points for reflection

Here are some points to reflect on when preparing and leading non-formal language learning activities:

- How diverse is the group you are dealing with? Does it comprise speakers of one, several or many languages? If several/many languages, is there an obvious lingua franca? Do all members of the group share the same kind of educational background? If not, will it be possible for those with more education to support those with less, especially those who have not learnt to read and write?
- What is the age range of the group? How many children and adolescents does it include? Is the group large enough to divide into sub-groups according to age? Or would the group prefer activities that involve all age groups, allowing families to work together?
- Whether as a result of their education or their life experience, some refugees will be able to communicate in more than one language. Especially if they already have some proficiency in the language of the host country, they can use their plurilingual repertoires to help other members of the group (see also Tool 11 [Refugees as language users and language learners](#)).
- Whatever activity you are coordinating, remember how important *incidental* learning is in all areas of human life. If your refugee learners are interested and engaged in what they are doing, they are bound to learn something, and for that reason your first responsibility as a coordinator of non-formal learning is to ensure that your learners enjoy themselves.
- It is your role to initiate learning activities, but be ready to let the learners take control if they show signs of wanting to do so, because that will increase their engagement: active learners are motivated learners. Once a positive group dynamic has been established, encourage the learners to say what they are most interested in learning and what they most enjoy doing.

See also section “Key terms” on the LIAM website: www.coe.int/lang-migrants