

10 - What is involved in providing language support for refugees?

Aim: To encourage volunteers to think about the language support needed by refugees and how it can best be provided.

Introduction

Refugees need elementary knowledge of the languages of the countries they are passing through as well as the countries where they are settling. But regular language courses with trained teachers are often not available or are too expensive. Volunteers can provide essential help with the new language by organising language support.

If you have never helped people learn a foreign language before, it is important to prepare yourself mentally to take on this role.

Teaching versus providing language support

Some people who are not trained language teachers may be concerned about offering refugees help with a new language. It is important to remember that the task is not to “teach” but to give support with the language. In fact, there are some advantages in not being a trained teacher when you are offering refugees help with language:

- You do not need to stick to a course programme or aim for a particular level: the only concern is with the language needs of the participants.
- You do not have to teach grammar because the aim is not for refugees to learn the target language correctly for an exam, but to give them an introduction to it related to their situation. Grammar may be helpful at times, but it is not the main purpose of the exercise. Useful expressions and vocabulary are more important. Some refugees, especially those who are well educated, may ask questions about grammar. If that happens you should stress that you are not a teacher and possibly ask for time to consult somebody else, look up information or, better still, help them to look it up themselves.

The role of volunteers

As a volunteer supporting language learning of refugees you can play a very useful role:

- You can be the person who explains things and provides information. You know how things work in the country and what language is needed for particular situations: formulaic expressions are important in everyday language use (*what's that called, how much does it cost, where can I find...*).
- With the aid of language, you can be the person who introduces refugees to the way things work. Learning vocabulary, doing things or, if permitted, visiting places together (excursions, walks in town, handicraft projects, musical events) are valuable features of language support for refugees (see also Tool 56 [Planning language support activities in the community](#)).
- You can be the person who acts as a communication partner – with time and patience and the readiness to listen to them individually.

- You can be the person who acts as a language model when it comes to repeating and practising useful words and expressions.
- You can offer praise and positive encouragement when there are language and other difficulties.

Some points to note

- Learning the target language is probably not refugees' main problem or goal. Other matters are likely to be more urgent and important for them.
- There may be issues that affect refugees' attendance, punctuality and the ability to concentrate, learn and remember.
- Refugees have very diverse previous experience, levels of education and literacy, social status, and familiarity with languages.
- Find out what language(s) the refugees want or need to learn and provide plenty of opportunities for them to practise using it/them.
- Refugees' first language(s) should be valued, and they can be encouraged to offer language support to one another.
- Find out about the language skills the refugees already have and acknowledge these.
- Some topics are best avoided unless they are raised by refugees themselves, e.g. conflict, asylum and, perhaps, families. If that happens, the concerns should be responded to sensitively but not be part of group discussions.
- Your role is to help with language and not to teach it, so listen to the refugees you are supporting and take the lead from them about what they want to learn or practise, and how they wish to do this.
- Do not try to give professional legal, medical, financial or other specialist advice - direct refugees for relevant professionals.

(See also Tool 11 *[Refugees as language users and learners](#)*)

Dos and Don'ts

The following table lists some Dos and Don'ts which may be helpful when providing language support for refugees. Decide which are « Dos » and which are « Don'ts », and indicate why.

		Do	Don't	Comments
1	Speak as little as possible yourself.			
2	Allow refugees who have the same linguistic background to help each other in their common language.			
3	Put pressure on the refugees you are supporting to be on time, to listen carefully, to speak clearly etc.			
4	Be patient and allow refugees enough time to think and discuss with each other.			
5	Stop the use of other languages that refugees know.			
6	Correct every mistake in the target language, especially pronunciation.			
7	Use as much visual material as possible (graphics, pictures, real objects etc.).			
8	Use games, icebreakers and activities outside the classroom.			
9	Allow the refugees to finish speaking. Do not interrupt them because of "errors".			
10			

There are no absolute right or wrong answers to the above because sometimes what to do and what to avoid depends on the situation and the group. You can compare your responses with the following comments which correspond to the numbers above:

1. *Speak as little as possible*: if somebody wants to learn the language it is important that he or she has as many opportunities as possible to speak it himself/herself. However, someone with a good command of the language is also an important 'model' when language learners need to hear the pronunciation of words, the stress and intonation of a sentence or question, or understand what a new word or expression means. So it depends on the situation and your aims whether you speak a lot or whether you give the refugees opportunities to speak, which should happen as often as possible.

2. *Allow participants who have the same linguistic background to help each other in their familiar languages:* This is very important. Languages are often the only ‘thing’ refugees can bring with them, their own languages are “islands of security” in a country where they do not understand the language. So you should allow the use of their languages even though this may be difficult for you, because, unless you know this language yourself, you won’t understand and will not feel in control. But you should always show an interest in their languages, by, for example, asking them to give examples of words and expressions equivalent to those in the target language etc.
3. *Pressure:* refugees have experienced more than enough pressure on their journeys and they are still under pressure because of their uncertain futures and current circumstances, so it is important that they do not see learning a new language as an added pressure that might involve sanctions. Your support activities should be an invitation to enter the world of the new language and enjoy it.
4. *Be patient and allow the participants enough time to think and discuss with each other:* Bearing in mind the difficult living conditions of many refugees, and the urgency they may have felt during their journeys, a supportive and patient approach is really important.
5. *Stop the use of other languages:* other languages (e.g. the languages of the refugee’s families) are a bond with the home country and culture, an important part of personal identity and a source of security. The first language can be helpful in learning a new language.
6. *Correct every mistake:* on the one hand, refugees may sometimes expect you to correct their mistakes because you are seen as ‘an expert’. Also, fairly correct pronunciation may be important to avoid misunderstandings and enable other people to understand what they are saying. On the other hand, you are not a teacher and you do not have to ‘give marks’. Corrections may result in refugees keeping quiet to avoid making mistakes, and they may lose confidence as a result. Refugees will probably have had plenty of experience of being corrected by others, so it is important to strengthen their self-confidence, to show them that they can communicate successfully in the target language even if they make mistakes. Sometimes corrections are necessary, but the focus should be on supporting effective communication and not on correctness.
7. *Use as much visual material as possible:* This will help refugees to expand their vocabulary and feel that they understand.
8. *Use games, icebreakers and activities outside the classroom:* adults generally do not want to be treated like children, so be careful with games. However, the situation for refugees can be stressful, and they may be very anxious about whether they can manage in their new situation and the new language. Any activity which helps to make the situation and relieve tension is useful.
9. *Allow refugees to finish speaking. Do not interrupt them because of “errors »:* not interrupting is a sign of respect. Refugees may have experienced many situations where people did not listen to them and did not treat them in a respectful way, so it is important that you don’t interrupt them. If correction is needed this can be done after they finish, or later.

See also *Refugees need language – how can volunteers give support?* by Hans-Jürgen Krumm (in English, French and German: www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants)