

34 - Handling initial meetings with refugees: some guidelines

Aim: To offer guidance to volunteers on how to interact with refugees during initial meetings with them.

For your language support to be effective, it is important for you to find out about the language and literacy skills of the refugees you are working with, as well as their language learning priorities. Here are some guidelines for you to consider.

Make sure that whatever you do is friendly, supportive and strengths-based, and that the process of identifying language and literacy skills doesn't seem like an exam or leave people feeling that they have failed in some way.

Start with a simple conversation

It's always good to start with a simple conversation. Then, if you have time and it feels appropriate, you could ask refugees to do some reading and finally some writing. Do the writing last as this is the skill some people feel the most self-conscious about.

It is important to remember that many refugees:

- can speak several languages (i.e. they are plurilingual).
- may be able to speak a language but not write it.
- may have had very little or no formal education, and so may feel uncomfortable answering questions about their education.
- may not have had schooling in their first or main language.
- may have a highly-developed level of literacy in their own language, but may be new to the script of the target language.
- may be highly qualified professionals.

Do not make any assumptions

It is important **not** to assume literacy, school/educational experience, qualifications or work experience, so phrase your questions sensitively. For example, you can ask *'Did you go to school?'* before asking any further questions about schooling. If people have had some formal education, it may have been at primary school level or maybe interrupted secondary education. You can ask *'How many years did you study at school?'* or *'At what age did you finish school?'* and then decide whether to ask about school certificates, higher education/university or degrees.

Respect privacy

Decide what is appropriate to ask refugees while respecting their privacy and not compromising their status. For example, asking refugees if they plan to stay in the country they are presently in, whether they are looking for work or whether they want to learn the language of that country, could compromise them. If in doubt, don't ask! It's also important that you give people plenty of time to answer, and also to ask their own questions.

Speaking and listening in the target language

If you share a language with the refugee you are meeting, use that language to aid communication. For example, in the shared language you can start by explaining what you are doing and why. If you don't share a language, and the refugee is a beginner in the target language, keep everything as short and simple as possible. You may need to use simple gestures, or to repeat or rephrase what you say.

Hello! I'm _____ I'm a volunteer. I want to help you with (target language).

Start with a few very simple questions then develop the conversation when you find out how much the refugee can understand and say. Ask one question at a time. It can help to use yourself as an example:

My name is _____. And you? What's your name?

I come from _____. Where do you come from?

I speak _____ and a little _____. Which languages do you speak?

Using pictures to support communication

If you are still not sure of the refugee's speaking and listening skills in the target language, you can use some simple pictures of everyday life. Put the pictures in context and ask open-ended questions to encourage more communication, this helps to find out about the refugee's competences in the target language. For example:

This is a market/school etc. What can you see? What's happening in this picture?

What are these called in (target language)?

Can you tell me about/describe _____?

Finding out about immediate priorities

Now ask refugees a few simple questions about themselves and their language learning priorities. To help with this, you can use pictures. The pictures should show basic everyday needs such as food, clothing, health and medication, information and advice, education and training etc.

Checking availability

It's a good idea to check refugees' availability and whether they need any particular support to attend language activities. For example, some parents/carers with children may only be able to attend if there is childcare available or if their children can stay with them.

Using pictures

You will be able to find many images in newspapers and magazines to build up your own image bank. This will be a very useful resource. However, only use online pictures (photos, images) which are free to download and share; sometimes pictures are free but it is necessary to register before downloading them.

For beginners, use real objects or pictures which have only one subject so that there is no doubt about meaning.

Keep the intercultural dimension in mind and try to avoid using images which may offend or alienate refugees from other countries and with different cultural and religious backgrounds.

See also Tool 22 *Selecting pictures and 'realia' for language activities* for more information about finding and using pictures and real objects.