

13 - Acquiring a very elementary ability to use a new language

Aim: To explain what is involved in acquiring a very elementary ability to use a new language so that volunteers can plan or adjust their language support activities to match the needs of the refugees they are working with.

The information provided here will help you to select appropriate scenarios, situations and functions in conjunction with Tools 24 *Identifying refugees' most urgent needs*, 31 *Selecting situations to focus on in language support – a checklist* and 32 *Selecting communicative functions that are useful for beginners – a checklist*. If some refugees in your group have a command of the target language that is more than elementary, it may be necessary to provide different activities for different individuals or subgroups with different levels of proficiency.

For complete beginners, the main objectives are to be able to:

- understand a few common colloquial expressions that are regularly used in communication situations.
- use some of these expressions in social interaction.
- introduce themselves, talk a little about themselves, their families and life stories and answer factual questions about their nationality, age or marital status, for example.
- put the same kinds of questions themselves, either to someone who is not a total stranger, or where the conversation is quite predictable.
- participate, at least to some extent, in an ordinary conversation with people who speak slowly and clearly and are cooperative and helpful, using simple utterances (one or two words) in the target language, as well as their first language or any other languages they know.

Language skills to be acquired

At this initial stage, the aim is to learn:

- a disparate set of words as well as a limited number of expressions encountered in recurrent ordinary situations.
- a few simple words and expressions enabling learners to give basic information about themselves and their everyday needs.
- some polite forms required for everyday social interaction such as: “Good morning”, “Good evening”, “Goodbye”, “Please”, “Excuse me”.
- something about the different forms of words (morphology) and of their different combinations (syntax).

The different language skills that very elementary learners need to help with

Understanding the spoken word (listening)

The aim is to enable refugees to understand:

- spoken public announcements (timetables, times of departure/arrival, etc.).

- predictable instructions/directions.
- standard recorded messages.
- repetitive types of information (weather reports, teacher's instructions).

particularly when the acoustic quality is good (i.e. there is an absence of noise, music etc.), the messages are pronounced slowly and clearly and/or are accompanied by illustrations (maps, diagrams, pictures) or a written text, and are repeated.

Understanding the written language (reading)

The aim is to enable refugees to:

- recognise the most common names, words or expressions that they encounter in their daily lives: signs, written instructions (with symbols, pictograms), prices, timetables, etc.
- identify and understand figures, proper names and other visually striking information in short texts.
- be able to identify the purpose of certain everyday texts (from their appearance, typography, location, etc.) and to anticipate their content to some extent.

Talking with someone (oral interaction)

The aim is to enable refugees to interact orally, but on the assumption that successful communication between native and non-native speakers at a very elementary level means that “native speakers” need to engage in repetition (at an appropriately slow pace) and reformulation.

Writing to someone

The aim at this very first level is for refugees to be able to:

- copy words or short texts, write down figures and dates, etc.
- write a simple informative text relating to day-to-day activities (e.g. messages, greetings), possibly containing some personal details.