

12 - Engaging adult refugees as language learners

Aim: To help you to adopt an approach that acknowledges and where possible exploits the adult status of refugee language learners.

Introduction

Handbooks on adult education often talk about the advantages adult learners enjoy:

- They are likely to be aware of their responsibilities in the language learning process.
- They can draw on their background and their existing knowledge and resources, particularly in relation to their experience of communication, and this can be exploited in collaborative learning.
- They are often pragmatic as well as practical, and thus ask questions and try to find coherent answers.
- They are able to analyse topics and contents from different perspectives.

In groups of adult refugees these advantages sometimes apply but often they do not. It is not necessarily possible for refugees to draw on these characteristics because of factors relating to their personal situation, which may be stressful, even traumatic, because of their limited experience of language learning, and in some cases for reasons to do with their lack of educational experience and general lack of confidence.

Suggestions

When planning your language support for adult refugees it may be helpful to bear the following in mind:

Adults have a well-developed personality, as well as an accumulation of life experiences. This may mean that they:

- Resist changes in their values or belief system.
- Consider the views of other people in relation to their own life experiences.
- Want their individual past experience to be acknowledged and exploited.

It is therefore suggested that you

1. Allow enough time for the sharing of perspectives and experience when planning a language activity.
2. Begin the activity very gradually, enabling refugees to develop their familiarity with new expressions and vocabulary and/or new information and give concrete examples (thus avoiding generalizations).
3. Encourage refugees to help each other with new information and new language.

Adults have defined levels of self-esteem. This means that they may:

- Be upset by situations where their self-esteem is undermined, and may become passive.
- Reject the power relationship in language support (*I manage the language activity, you do what I tell you to do*).

- Be cautious, and sometimes diffident, about their relationships and may not fully trust people they have met recently.

It is therefore suggested that you:

1. Always adopt a respectful attitude, avoiding sarcasm, or authoritarian pressure.
2. Avoid activities that involve competition or require refugees to assess each other's language work.
3. Avoid categorical statements, e.g. *you must...*, *that's wrong...*, and use instead expressions such as *So far as I know, ...; ... It's probably best...*

The pressure of time is a factor for adults. This means that they may prefer to:

- Learn what they want to learn, and what is important for them in terms of its usefulness.
- Become impatient or bored with language activities that they do not consider useful.

It is therefore suggested that you:

1. Start from the questions and priorities expressed by learners, and, if possible, decide together with them what to work on.
2. Check which language activities refugees consider useful for their everyday life in the host country and in general for their migration plans.

Remember that, even if adults can take advantage of the learning strategies they have developed in their previous lives, they may still have problems because:

- short-term memory is affected by the stresses of their situation.
- they tire more quickly than younger language learners.

It is therefore suggested that you:

1. Vary materials, and activity types.
2. Help your learners to master some basic terms (e.g. listen, repeat, pairs etc.).
3. Engage with refugees in different ways to encourage:
 - understanding (*Is that clear?; Do you understand?*).
 - sharing of opinions and ideas (*What do you think?*).
 - sharing of personal experience (*Have you ever...?*).
 - activating their learning (*Could you give me an example?; Could you tell Ahmed about it etc.*).
4. Encourage learners to ask questions so as to:
 - attract or keep their attention.
 - reduce potential passivity.
 - reduce the distance between refugees and yourself.
 - help them to memorize language.
5. Summarise or ask refugees at the beginning of a new activity what they learned in the previous language activity, and what they thought of it, asking questions such as '*What new expression did we learn for....?*'; '*Did you find the role play useful?*' etc.