

14 - Diversity in working groups

Aim: To raise awareness of how differences between individuals in a group can impact on the preparation and provision of language support.

All of us have experience dealing with or being part of mixed groups. Among the spectators at a football game or the audience in a theatre, people share a particular interest but they are very different in many other respects.

When you are supporting the language learning of refugees, it is important to keep in mind that refugees are a very diverse group of people with different social, educational and cultural backgrounds, and they also have different attitudes and ambitions as far as learning a new language is concerned. It is important to provide opportunities for refugees to identify what they want to learn and how, to enable them to learn at different speeds, and to use different activities and approaches to language learning.

Diversity in everyday life

In a hotel in a big city you will find many guests who speak different languages, require different sorts of advice or information, and are obliged to follow the same regulations regarding check-in and check-out times, smoking in the hotel, using WiFi and so on. The reception staff in the hotel will use different languages, point out places on maps, use gestures or make notes in order to ensure that each individual guest has the necessary information. In spite of all the differences represented by the guests as well as among the hotel staff, everybody has to understand and follow the same rules and conventions.

Thinking about your group of refugee learners

The table below lists some of the main characteristics of mixed groups of learners. Think about the refugee group that you have met or will be supporting and decide which of the following factors will impact on what you do and how you will do it. If you think that any factor will be particularly important you should put a double tick (✓✓) to highlight this.

Characteristics		This factor is relevant to me (✓) or (✓✓)	I need to think about how I will manage this (?)	Notes to myself
1	A wide range of ages in the group			
2	Men and woman, perhaps some with children			
3	People who feel optimistic about the future alongside people who feel depressed			
4	People who are very keen to learn, as well as those who believe they are not capable of learning a new language			
5	People already familiar with the new language, as well as people who do not know a word of it			

6	People who have never learned to read and write, as well as people fluent in reading and writing, at least in their own languages			
7	Some people who start to speak without worrying about making mistakes, and others who remain silent until they are sure how to pronounce a word correctly or how to form a correct sentence			
8	People who are competent in more than two languages, as well as those who have never learned another language			
9	Highly educated people, as well as people with little or no formal education			
10	People with different preferences about how they like to learn			
11	Different expectations among the group with regard to my role			

The impact of diversity on a learning group

There are some differences within groups which may have a direct influence on the language learning support you provide.

For example, items 5, 6, 7 and 8 above all refer to having existing knowledge or skills. Refugees with previous experience of formal learning, particularly language learning, will have valuable learning strategies that they can apply to the new challenge. If they are given a form to fill in, they will realise that they don't need to understand every word in order to make some sense of it. They may well use their phone or a dictionary to help them find the meaning of any new words and they may also feel less self-conscious or anxious about asking for help.

In such cases, it may be necessary to identify learning activities at different levels of difficulty in order to deal with a range of skills and confidence in a group. Refugees with some prior experience in (language) learning are often keen to make quick progress and will try to use new words and phrases, whereas refugees with little or no previous experience of formal education and/or language learning will need more time, support and opportunities for repetition.

There are some differences in diverse groups which do not have a direct impact on language learning but may nevertheless influence behaviour or lead to different attitudes towards working together in a group. For example, items 1, 2, 3 and 4 may influence whether people in a group like to communicate and interact with one another or not. These factors may influence your decisions about how you divide individuals into sub-groups for particular activities, or what you ask individual members of the group to do.

Difference is not a problem. You can exploit it

Differences are not an obstacle to working and learning together. For example, differences can be used effectively to get stronger participants to support those who have more difficulty learning. By establishing a supportive environment, you can get everybody to contribute to this support according to their individual abilities. For example, a refugee who seems to be facing a very big language-learning challenge may be able to draw pictures very well. Another may enjoy singing.

Some ideas for you to consider

Look at the following guidelines for working with diverse groups and consider which would be applicable in your situation:

Suggestions	✓
<p>Encourage refugees to recognise and build on the things they have in common: refugees will all be fluent in at least one language. During their journey, they have had to manage situations without necessarily being able to speak any or much of the language needed at the time. They will all have valuable past experiences and skills, which can be used to learn the new language. You can also suggest they try the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> producing a language self-portrait (see also: Tool 38 <i>Plurilingual portrait: a reflective task for refugees</i>) using nonverbal activities (gestures, mimes) 	
<p>Use the skills of some refugees to support others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Think of pairing people up so that someone who already has a little of the new language can work with someone who is new to the language. Ask people to give each other feedback focusing on the positive, e.g. what has been achieved. Encourage refugees to share their skills within the group (e.g. describing or explaining something of shared interest, singing a song, reciting a poem, etc. 	
<p>Make sure that everyone learns something new:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor responses to your input and ask further questions or provide further stimulus if this seems appropriate, or go back a few steps for participants who may be struggling. Something new: For some refugees, this may be one word, for others a sentence, and for others an expression. Understanding, learning and remembering just 6 words in a new language in a session is quite an achievement! Demonstrate that communication can be effective with just one word. For example, 'sorry?' can convey meaning just as effectively as 'I'm sorry but would you mind repeating that?' Help everybody to see and hear what he or she has learned by, for example, summarizing the points focused on during the session using images or props, asking refugees to do a short role-play using the target language, a quick quiz etc. 	
<p>Create a purposeful, relaxing, learning environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share information about yourself. Encourage real, meaningful communication between participants and yourself. Ask people how they like to be addressed, check the pronunciation of their names and use their names. Invite refugees to choose how they would like to learn and who they would like to work with. They are all equals and can all learn from each other. 	

Your ideas and experiences:

A note on different learning preferences

People may have preferences about how they like to learn, particularly if they have had previous experience of formal learning. For example, some people may prefer to hear an instruction, others to read it and others to follow instructions in a diagram. Using a wide range of stimuli, different activities and resources will maximise the impact of learning opportunities, help to engage people in learning, and reduce any possible barriers.

Using the Toolkit to plan

This toolkit offers a variety of approaches which will help you to choose activities. See [Preparation and Planning](#).