

20 - Organising writing practice at elementary level

Aim: To offer suggestions about how you can organise writing practise during your language support activities even when refugees have a low level of competence in the target language, with a few examples.

The importance of writing simple messages

Refugees often need or want to write simple messages in their new language for practical or personal reasons. This is challenging for beginners and those with a low level of literacy or who are unfamiliar with the Roman script. Refugees may need to write or reply to a text message (SMS) or e-mail in the new language on their mobile phone, especially when making arrangements to meet someone, cancelling an appointment etc. They may need to leave a handwritten message for someone at the place where they are living. Of course, it is very likely that they will need to fill out a form, for example when dealing with applications for welfare benefits, for library or club membership, and so on.

Organising writing practice

The first step is to find out whether refugees can already read and write in the new language and/or in other languages. If the level of literacy is very low, special practice will be needed.

If they have difficulty writing the Roman script but can write their names, ask them to practise reading and completing a simple 'form' with basic information such as

- First name.
- Family name.
- Nationality.
- Address.

You can change the content and order of items to include, for example, date of birth, occupation etc.

If a computer is available ask refugees to practise filling in similar forms (created by you) on the screen using the keyboard, and then saving or sending it. This will help develop familiarity with different fonts.

Real-life practice

1. Send a very simple text message to the refugees: e.g. "*Hi Kadir. The meeting is at 4 pm.*"; "*There is no class tomorrow*"; "*Hi Fatima. Can you buy some milk for me?*"; etc. (you will first need to request their phone numbers – they may not all wish to give them to you, or exchange messages with you – don't insist).
2. Ask refugees to copy out these simple messages in handwriting or/and on their own phones. Also, ask them to orally suggest simple replies, such as "*OK, see you at 4 pm*"; "*OK, thanks*"; "*OK, I'll get it*" etc. Then ask them to reply to your message(s) in writing.
3. When they have had some practice, suggest (or ask them to suggest) some similar situations – arranging a meeting, inviting somebody to meet for a coffee, asking someone a question (e.g. "*Where is the post office?*", "*What time is your interview?*"), etc. – then they should all send a

message to someone else in the group, and reply to each other's messages. The more realistic the situations are, the better.

4. After one exchange of SMS or e-mail messages, ask the refugees to read out the replies they received or show them to you. If necessary, suggest some changes that will make the messages clearer.
5. If possible, send real messages to individuals in the group from time to time when you are not with them. For example, you could send feedback about their language work or the time of meetings with you, ask about their health if they are not well etc. Encourage them to reply to you.

See also Tool 24 *Identifying refugees' most urgent needs* and Tool 30 *Observing situations in which refugees need to use the target language*.