



Refugees need language – how can volunteers give support?

Hans-Jürgen Krumm (University of Vienna)
member of the LIAM co-ordination group

Refugees need language: those who are passing through are mainly interested in the language of their country of destination, while those who want to stay in a country and apply for asylum would be very glad for any opportunity to learn its national language. However, it takes a long time until they live in an environment in which systematic learning of the language is possible or until they have access to proper language courses. This is where the many volunteer refugee helpers and NGOs who also want to assist refugees with language learning have a part to play.

There are, of course, trained language teachers for language teaching for refugees. However, that does not always work satisfactorily, in part because what is needed is not (yet) ordinary language courses but an initial introduction to the national language or ad hoc language support and, partly because some of the NGOs do not have corresponding resources for this purpose. This is where the volunteers come into play again.

What is needed for this task is not a “light” version of teaching methodology, as if the volunteers were expected exactly to imitate language courses (with grammar teaching, skills training, differentiation and cross-language comparison), for which they have not been trained. That would place the volunteers under pressure, along the lines, “*You are not teachers, you are not getting teacher training, but please do what teachers do*”.

What volunteers need is a focus on the specific circumstances:

|| Laypersons help to introduce refugees to the national language – what sensible contribution can they make here without being trained teachers?

Set out below are some basic points concerning what could be conveyed to the refugee helpers so as to help them find their own role in work with refugees:

1. As you are not trained language teachers, do not try not to copy them – focus on what YOU can do.

It is sometimes an advantage NOT BEING A TEACHER when offering refugees support with language:

- You do not have to stick to a course programme or aim for a particular level or a particular amount of textbook teaching - the only concern are the participants.
- You do not have to teach grammar because the aim is not for the refugees to learn the national language correctly to exam level, but for them to be given initial access to it and acquire a language of survival suited to their situation. Grammar may be helpful at times, but it is not the main purpose of the exercise. Some refugees, especially highly educated ones, may ask sophisticated questions about grammar.

- You should stress that you are not a teacher and possibly ask for time to consult somebody else or look something up.
 - You do not have to correct mistakes – except by keeping on displaying ‘correctness’ yourself as a language model. Refugees have too much experience of doing things ‘wrong’; when receiving language assistance from volunteers, they should be made to feel that all efforts, including mistakes, are ‘right’.
2. The country’s national language is important to refugees, but is definitely not their main problem or goal – do not put them under too much pressure in this respect. Stick to ‘easy’ voluntary learning.
- Refugees have many concerns and fears about the whereabouts of their families, how they are going to survive the next few days and nights and in many cases weeks, getting enough to eat, and the general insecurity of their lives, etc. It is wonderful if they want to learn our language all the same, but we should respect the fact that other things will be more important from time to time – we should therefore show understanding if they are late, simply do not turn up or are distracted by messages on their smartphones, etc.
 - When providing refugees with language support, you have to deal with heterogeneous, often changing groups and not always with continuity – you have to get used to that and not hold it against them. However, this also means that linear ‘language teaching approaches’ are not appropriate.
 - The host society constantly increases the pressure on speakers of other languages to learn its national language. In response to this, it has to be said that their native or family language is often all that refugees have been able to take with them and keep and is a necessary island of safety in a strange environment. That means both that any type of pressure should be avoided when helping them learn the national language and also that the use of their own languages should be allowed and, indeed, encouraged.
3. You cannot solve all the refugees’ problems and should not expect too much of yourself.
- Here again it is important to remember that you are not a teacher, you do not have to achieve targets – all you have to do is offer the refugees a bridge to the new language. So do not be disappointed if they, or some of them, do not do things the way you want, if mistakes keep cropping up or if some participants remain silent.
 - Moreover, the refugees you are dealing with are probably all very different (in terms of levels of education, social status, familiarity with languages). You must not therefore expect them all to be equally good at speaking or understanding the language, or, for that matter, writing or reading it. Let the differences stand; it is not your task to smooth them out.
 - Above all, you are not experts in asylum law or psychologists experienced in dealing with trauma. You should therefore avoid subjects such as asylum law, flight and possibly also “family”. If your refugees raise such subjects themselves, that is, of

course, alright. In that case, however, instead of giving half-correct replies, tell them where relevant professional advice is available – do not necessarily answer the questions yourself.

4. The STRENGTHS of “lay teachers” lie in not using conventional language teaching – instead you can be:

- the person who explains things and provides information. You know how things work in the host country and what language you need in particular situations: formulaic expressions are important in everyday language use (*what is that called, what does this cost, where can I find*);
- the person who introduces refugees to ‘things’ with the aid of language. Learning vocabulary and visiting institutions together (excursions) are therefore core features of language support for refugees;
- the person who acts as a communication partner – with TIME and PATIENCE and the readiness to LISTEN to them – so please be guided by the refugees who come to you;
- the person who acts as a language model. It is not a matter of grammar but of copying and practising useful words and expressions.

5. Five traps for teachers – You can avoid them because you are not professional teachers and are not giving school-type language classes:

1. *Excessive emphasis on instruction*: We are language helpers, not teachers who have to prove how good we are.
2. *Control freakery*: The refugees speak languages we do not understand – and we do not have to understand everything going on, as controlling is not our task.
3. *Desire to correct*: We do not have to correct every mistake and show how clever we are. Correctness is not what counts...
4. *Pressure of responsibility*: We are not capable of solving all the refugees’ questions and problems. Let go and acknowledge our own shortcomings.
5. *Care syndrome*: The refugees are adults themselves; they have coped with so many difficult situations that we can expect them to be capable of a lot.

6. If you want to help people access the national language, it would be useful to find out a few things about them:

- Native language competence: Who can speak one of the refugees’ languages and help as an interpreter? Are there linguists among ‘your’ refugees?
- Previous language learning experience
 - In which languages, at what level
 - Is there a language of communication (with you, in the group)?
- Prior knowledge of the national language: Offer opportunities to speak (e.g. pictures, photos) and observe how far their existing language skills go.

➤ Contacts with the national language outside the teaching context

There may be other people you can consult here, e.g. social workers. One of the refugees may be able to interpret because he/she can speak English, French, Bosnian, Turkish, Farsi or German, etc.

You can also try to work with language portraits by using different colours for each language, so that everybody can make his or her linguistic potential visible¹. Identify the differences in the group – who is able to do what? Only when that is clear will the participants be able to learn from one another.

7. Do not set up a “classroom” but a place where everyone wants to come and fits in well. In this connection, when introducing people to a language, it is also important to leave that place now and again and experience language where it is used.

➤ Encounters with the language

- through “excursions”, walks in town

during which everything which occurs is ‘verbalised’.

➤ Projects in which all concerned do the tasks that suit them

- Handicraft projects, theatre projects, music projects

When people “do” things, language is shown at work. So do a lot of things with the refugees and just verbalise what you are doing (invite the refugees to rap with you, to repeat words in a chorus when you are walking through town).

8. If your language support has to be geared more towards a ‘course’ (e.g. because that is what your institution wants), the following basic principles apply:

- Only offer support which responds to the refugees’ needs in their *personal, work and social lives*.
- Make sure that what you do is open enough to cope with the differences between individuals.
- Encourage the refugees to learn the language themselves, e.g. by inviting them to have their say.
- Set realistic goals which are suited to the refugees’ situations and abilities (including tiredness, restlessness, etc.).
- Value the refugees’ own languages and respect and take advantage of their multilingual and multicultural experience.
- Resist combining your language support with exams, tests or even penalties. If possible, give a lot of praise and positive encouragement.

¹ German: Krumm, Hans-Jürgen: <http://tujournals.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/index.php/zif/article/view/538/514>

- English:

<https://year3french.wikispaces.com/Language+Portrait+activity?responseToken=04e4a85bfff284a8766f1639577935309>

- French:

G. Zarate, D. Lévy, C. Kramersch (ed): Précis du plurilinguisme et du pluriculturalisme (Paris 2008): Krumm: Plurilinguisme et subjectivité – portraits de langues, p. 109-112

For further information, you can consult the Council of Europe's Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants website (available in English and French with sections in several languages), where you will find key terms with useful information and some useful comments (in the FAQs). There will shortly also be more specific information concerning work with refugees: www.coe.int/lang-migrants

In conclusion, it should again be stressed that initial contacts with the national language and language support in the host society are not conventional language teaching but a practical project in which laypersons do everything which they are good at, e.g. offering conversations, listening, visiting 'language places' with refugees and observing things together there.

Rev. April 2017