



Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

Tool 1 – Supporting migrants in managing relations with people in a new context

Aim: To offer guidance on how to help migrants manage their interactions with other people in their new context.

Migrants arriving in a new country often find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings. Their social life in the place where they settle, even provisionally, involves interacting with local people without knowing how these people communicate. This involves developing an awareness of how oral communication works in an unfamiliar language environment and developing some competence in the language.

Below are some suggestions for helping migrant learners to adjust to their new social life. Suggest that they do the following, giving them examples and support where necessary:

- Communicate in a language which they know and which they think the person or people they are talking to might understand.
- Learn one or two basic phrases for greeting and asking for help (e.g. *"hello"*, *"excuse me"*, *"please"*, *"thank you"* etc.)
- Be willing to say things in a mixture of different languages.
- Use non-verbal means such as gestures and other kinds of body language or photos on a smartphone, etc. to aid communication.
- Say when they do not understand something and ask the other person to repeat what they have said.
- Use automatic translation apps available on their smartphones to find important words.
- Get help, where necessary, from someone else who can act as a mediator.

This kind of oral communication involving very limited language resources is useful for greetings, basic politeness, simple exchanges with new neighbours, buying goods and services or asking for information, and the language involved is quite routine and predictable. However, difficulties may arise when learners do not really know the words and expressions needed when social aspects of the new environment are different from those in their country of origin or are not referred to in the same way. Examples may include the names of places and people used in street names; the brand names of products; the different names of institutions; street signs and notices; the significance of certain national or religious holidays, and so on. In these cases, communication difficulties may lead to simple linguistic difficulties, but they will not result in personal misunderstandings.

At a more advanced level, migrant learners will probably have acquired language skills that enable them to go beyond such stereotypical basic exchanges. They are able to talk about subjects which are more personal and may involve other kinds of misunderstanding between speakers, for example because:

- The intentions behind what the speaker is trying to say are not fully understood.
- Certain facial expressions or hand gestures are misinterpreted.

- Migrants do not know:
 - the 'rules' of conversation in the new environment, for example ways of addressing people, how to interrupt someone politely and so on
 - the meaning of or intention behind certain fixed phrases, for instance in English "are you joking?", "It's not my fault", "I'm fed up" etc.
 - how to offer advice, make a request, refuse politely etc.
 - how to express an opinion in a subtle way.

In the case of adult learners, problems may arise if they may raise a subject which is usually avoided, such as asking about someone's age, their income, their political views (especially if these involve national pride), or when the conversation involves social issues such as abortion, sexuality, the death penalty, or subjects to do with religious beliefs (See also Tool 2 - *Supporting recently arrived migrants who are adjusting to their new situation.*

Topics such as these as well as more personal issues may be raised with people one is beginning to get to know. In such cases, it is normal for disagreements, which are not the same as misunderstandings, to occur. If they do occur, they need to be handled kindly and respectfully on both sides. If the person the learner is speaking to shows signs of hesitancy, embarrassment or shock it is important that they find out the reasons and try to clarify things.