

11 - Refugees as language users and learners

Aim: To introduce the concepts of plurilingualism and linguistic repertoire and to encourage reflection on the factors that determine success in language learning.

Introduction

The Council of Europe's work in language education is founded on the principle of [plurilingualism](#), according to which we all have the capacity to learn and communicate in more than one language. Our plurilingual competence reflects our linguistic repertoire, the languages we have learnt at different stages in our lives and use in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. We do not necessarily have the same level of proficiency in all the languages we know; in some we may be able to understand written text more easily than speech, while in others we may only be able to engage in simple spoken communication. The language portrait (See Tool 38 [Plurilingual portrait: a reflective task for refugees](#)) is a good way of capturing and reflecting on our plurilingual competence or linguistic repertoire.

The plurilingualism of adult refugees

Many adult refugees are strongly plurilingual. They come from multilingual societies where it is usual for people to communicate in two or more languages; they have learnt one or more foreign languages at school; and having spent a long time living as migrants, they have also learnt to communicate in the languages of the countries they have passed through. They have, in other words, a richly varied experience as language users and language learners – an experience in which it is often very difficult to distinguish clearly between language learning and language use. At the same time, it is important to recognize that many refugees have never learnt more than one language, especially if they have lived their lives mostly in the domestic sphere.

Taking account of refugees' linguistic repertoires

These considerations should be borne in mind when preparing to provide language support for adult refugees. Whatever the extent of their linguistic repertoires, they know (though not always consciously) how language functions and how to communicate in a wide variety of situations. They probably understand the importance of pronunciation, which adults often find one of the most difficult aspects of language learning; and if they can read and write in an alphabetic language they know that language consists of words, phrases and sentences. Also, if they have learnt one or more foreign languages at school, they may have positive and negative memories that will impact on their learning of new languages.

Thinking about factors that influence success in language learning

Refugees' success in language learning will depend on many factors, both external and internal. Some of these factors are listed in the table on the next page. Identify those that you think you could influence and use the "comment" box to note how you would try to influence or take account of each factor.

	Can be influenced by you? (✓ or X)	Comments
Previous educational experience.		
Health and well-being, including personal state of mind.		
Amount of exposure to the new language.		
Age.		
Learning methods used.		
Personal experience of learning another language.		
Time constraints.		
Motivation.		
Social circumstances.		
Availability of childcare.		
Opportunities to personalise learning.		
Cost.		

To what extent did your comments coincide with the following?

Although you cannot influence previous learning experience, you can certainly take it into account when you form groups or by asking more experienced learners to support those who have less experience.

You cannot influence refugees' well-being and personal state of mind either, but you should take it into account by selecting topics that correspond to the situation of your group, giving your learners time to talk to one another, or taking them to places of interest to them.

The amount of exposure to the new language is something you can and should influence. It is important for people learning a new language to have as many opportunities as possible to listen to speakers of that language and to interact with them. To do this it may be helpful to organize outings into the wider community (for suggestions, see Tools 40 to 54 from section "Scenarios", and Tools 56 *Planning language support activities in the community* and 57 *Practising language in the real world*).

You cannot influence the age of your learners, but you can try to make use of the fact that older people often have more experience with languages, while younger people may have some competence in English, which can be used as a lingua franca. Ask your learners to use their experience and knowledge to help one another.

This toolkit is designed to help you to influence the learning methods used. Try to find out whether all your learners react positively to the same methods or whether it is better to divide them into groups which use different methods. Some learners, for example, may prefer tasks where every step is prescribed, while others prefer a more open approach. You can offer a choice of texts to work with and ask who prefers pair or small group work to plenary activities and organize things accordingly. The more you get to know the members of your group, the more you can adapt your approaches to their needs.

Think about the other factors listed in the table, and if possible discuss them with colleagues. Refugees live in a situation of "forced language use": they need a degree of linguistic and communicative competence in order to survive in a new country, follow asylum procedures, and find food and accommodation. But does this motivate them to learn? If it doesn't, what does? If you have a language in common with some of the refugees, use it to discuss with them what they believe might increase their motivation. Does lack of childcare make it difficult to provide language support? If so, is there anything you can do about it? And so on.

The Council of Europe website *The Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants* (LIAM) has a [key terms section](#) where you can find more information on topics such as

- Alphabetisation / Literacy.
- Competence / Plurilingual Competence.
- First language.
- Informal learning.
- Language needs.
- Vulnerable Groups.
- Etc.