



Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

Tool 11 - Taking advantage of the first languages of migrants

Aim: To raise awareness of the important role of learners' first languages in their learning of a new language and the dynamic of the learning group.

Introduction

For people who have recently arrived as migrants, most of their learning will be in the language of their new context. Whether they are young people learning at school or older migrants learning in another educational institution, the learners' first language is rarely heard or used. It may even be avoided by teachers because it is thought, wrongly, that it will interfere with their learning of the new language of schooling. However, migrants' first languages are a valuable resource for language learning and learning in general.

Ideas for encouraging interest in migrants' languages

Migrant learners' first languages need to be valued and legitimized in the eyes of the whole class and especially in the eyes of the young people who speak these languages. The following are examples of actions that can be taken to aid this process:

- Ask learners to say their first name and surname using the correct pronunciation and the correct word stress.
- Encourage them to sing traditional or modern songs which can then also be sung by the whole group, and to listen to songs in their language.
- Ask them to recite nursery rhymes or poem or to give examples of proverbs.
- Ask them to write a few words on the board, especially if the alphabet or writing system is different; and so on.

In an educational setting, the first languages of migrants can be used during lessons in the language of schooling (i.e. German lessons in Germany, Italian lessons in Italy) as a means of developing all learners' awareness of the diversity of languages in the world. This can be done by organising activities involving several languages, in particular the languages of people who have recently arrived or who have a migration background. In these sessions, the focus can be, for example, on words relating to:

- the days of the week or the months of the year;
- parties: birthday or first name day party, New Year party, etc.;
- numbers and letters of the alphabet;
- fruit, flowers and vegetables;
- oceans, seas and other geographical locations (e.g. Manche vs Channel, Akdeniz vs Mediterranean);
- fixed phrases: bon appetit, safe trip, have a good weekend, good luck etc.

First languages as an aid to learning a new language

Simple grammatical comparisons with the first language can also be a help in learning the new language, especially in areas such as:

- the role of suffixes, endings and prepositions;
- forms of plural nouns and the expression of quantity;
- where applicable, the different genders of nouns;
- the presence or absence of cases and the nature of these;
- names of verb tenses;
- the position of the verb and the subject in sentences;
- whether articles are needed or not needed before nouns;
- whether pronouns are used before verbs;
- the structure of negative sentences;
- How questions work; etc.

Conclusion

Migrant learners' home languages are a rich resource for the learners themselves in that they provide a bridge or an avenue to learning other languages such as that of the host community. They are also a valuable means of raising the awareness of migrants in a group about their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, they offer opportunities for those providing language support to raise the self-esteem of their learners by showing interest in these aspects of their background and giving them opportunities to make connections between languages and share elements of their language as well as their culture with others in the group.