



Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

Tool 22 - Planning language support at a very elementary level

Aims: To raise awareness about what is involved in acquiring a very elementary ability to use a new language and to offer guidance on planning or adjusting language support activities to match the needs of migrants.

With migrants who are complete beginners, the main objectives of language support are to enable them to:

- understand a few common and colloquial expressions that are regularly used in communication situations
- use some of these expressions in social interaction
- introduce and talk a little about themselves, their families and life stories and answer factual questions about their nationality, age or date of arrival in the host country, for example
- ask questions of someone they have met before or when they are in a situation where the conversation is quite predictable
- participate at a basic level in an ordinary conversation with people who speak slowly and clearly and who are cooperative and helpful, using simple utterances of one or two words in the target language, and if necessary, in their first language or any other languages they know

If some learners have a command of the target language that is more than elementary, you may need to provide different activities for individuals or subgroups with different levels of proficiency.

Language skills to be acquired

At this initial stage, the aim is to help learners to begin using:

- a range or mixture of words and a few expressions which they have encountered or will encounter in everyday situations
- a few simple words and expressions that enable them to give basic information about themselves and their everyday needs
- some polite forms needed for everyday social interaction such as: *"Good morning"*, *"Good evening"*, *"Goodbye"*, *"Please"*, *"Thank you"*, *"Excuse me"*.

They may also need to learn something about the different forms of words (morphology), for example comparative forms of adjectives, and about different word combinations or word order (syntax), for example negative sentences.

The different language skills that very elementary learners need to help with:

a. Understanding the spoken word (listening)

The aim is to enable migrant learners to understand:

- spoken public announcements (e.g. times of train departures/arrivals, etc.)
- predictable instructions or directions
- easy recorded messages such as on someone's voicemail
- repetitive types of information (weather reports, teacher's instructions).

At first, they may only be able to do these things if the acoustics are good, i.e. there not much noise, no music etc, when the messages are pronounced slowly and clearly or are accompanied by illustrations (maps, diagrams, pictures) or a written text, and if they are repeated.

b. Understanding the written language (reading)

The aim is to enable migrants to:

- recognise the most common names, words or expressions that they see regularly in signs, written instructions (with symbols, pictograms), prices, timetables, etc.
- identify and understand diagrams, names and other visual information in short texts
- be able to identify the purpose of certain everyday texts from their appearance and context and to anticipate their content.

c. Talking to someone (oral interaction)

The aim is to enable migrants to interact orally. However, communication between native speakers of the host country language and learners at an elementary level is likely to be more successful when the native speakers repeat or reformulate what they say slowly if necessary.

d. Writing to someone

The aim at this very first level is for migrant learners to be able to:

- copy words or short texts, write down numbers and dates, etc.
- write a simple informative text about their day-to-day activities e.g. in messages or fill out forms containing personal details.

Migrants often need or want to write simple messages in the new language for practical reasons. This is challenging for beginners and those with a low level of literacy and for learners who are unfamiliar with the host country script. They may need to write or reply to a text message (SMS) or an 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. It is also very likely that they will need to fill out forms, for example when dealing with applications for welfare benefits, sports clubs and so on.

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

Using pictures to support communication

When you are not sure about the migrant learners' skills in the target language, it may be helpful to use some simple pictures of everyday life. With colleagues, you can build up a useful resource bank of photos and other images from newspapers and magazines. Put the pictures you have chosen in context and ask open-ended questions to encourage communication. This will help you to find out more about each learner's competences in the target language.

For example:

This is a market/school etc. What can you see? What's happening in this picture?

What are these called in (target language)?

Can you tell me about/ describe _____?

Some general guidelines

The following are some points to bear in mind when using pictures:

- in the case of online pictures, only use photos or images which are free to download and share; sometimes pictures are free, but it is necessary to register before downloading them
- use pictures or real objects which contain only one main object or person so that the meaning is clear
- keep the intercultural dimension in mind and try to avoid using images which may offend migrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

(See also Tool 30 – *Selecting pictures and realia for language activities: some guidelines*).