



Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

Tool 24 - Accustoming young migrants to the language needed when studying school subjects

Aim: To provide guidelines for teachers helping young migrants to adjust to the language used in subject teaching at schools and colleges.

Young migrants entering the education system in their new host country will be taught school subjects in the language used in the school or college in question. This language is more or less identical to the language used in social communication, but it has specific features related to transmitting knowledge of and developing competences in the various subjects. These features are not often found in everyday communication, so it is important to ensure that they are fully understood and used by all students, including migrants.

Below are some points to bear in mind when teaching subjects such as maths, science, history, IT, commerce and job-related subjects.

- Be aware that students' difficulties in learning may be to do with language rather than with cognition.
- Do not restrict learning to vocabulary specific to the subject (e.g. angle, cell, bulb, software etc.): take opportunities to go beyond the more specialised terms.
- Be very clear when presenting and explaining factual knowledge and task instructions etc. For example, PowerPoint slides or a similar aid written in both a shared language and the host country language may be useful.
- Make frequent use of pictures, diagrams, graphics, maps, signs, symbols, icons, real objects etc. to aid students' understanding of explanations.
- Take advantage of similarities of certain abstract terms between languages, particularly words of Greek or Latin origin.
- Organise practical activities in pairs or groups where one member of the group can be a long-term 'language companion' for a recently arrived migrant.
- Find an effective way of helping migrant learners to use the relevant textbooks, for example with the support of their family members or other migrants who have been in the country longer.
- Give migrant learners opportunities to describe things, talk about experiences, demonstrate things etc.
- Apart from their personal notetaking, limit the amount of writing they need to do.

Specific steps can be taken to simplify oral explanations and make them easier for migrant learners to understand, including those listed below.

- Make sure that learners understand what topic, process or phenomenon etc. is being explained or discussed.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and use pauses between each sentence, question, answer and change of topic.
- Repeat or paraphrase what you say whenever necessary, especially your questions and frequently used key terms, common expressions and new vocabulary.
- Use gestures and other body language such as facial expression and mime to help convey meaning.
- Include concrete examples in your explanations, especially examples related to students' daily life and experience.
- Avoid digression or sudden changes of topic.
- Keep sentences and questions short and simple, and use common connectors, such as 'then', 'after that', 'so', 'because' etc.
- Avoid too much use of passive voice in the spoken language: for example, 'we heated the liquid to 100 degrees' may be easier to understand than 'the liquid was heated to 100 degrees'.
- When using pronouns such as 'it' or 'they' make sure that students understand who or what they refer to.

These features of language are very common in written texts about certain subjects, especially in the field of science and technology. It is important to ensure that learners become accustomed to them and understand their use and begin to use them in their written work.

Teachers of the various school or college subjects should also encourage activities and resources that aid learning but are not specifically to do with language, such as drawing, physical activities, video games, the internet, mobile phones, apps etc.

This kind of approach to teaching and learning subject-related language needs to be ongoing and long-term.

(See also Tool 25 – *Functions and expressions useful in subject teaching with young migrants*).