



Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

Tool 27 - Assessing language learning and offering feedback in a supportive way

Aim: To offer guidance on handling informal assessment and providing supportive feedback during language support.

In most countries in Europe migrants need to undergo a formal assessment of their knowledge of the national language. This is usually done by means of an official test resulting in certification. These tests are usually designed to check migrants' language competence at CEFR levels A2 or B1. But at the beginning of their language support programme there is no need to prepare migrants for these tests. However, some migrant learners, including real beginners and those with a low level of literacy, may apply for or say they wish to join courses at a higher level such as A2 or B1. This is probably because they think they will learn the language faster or because they want to focus immediately on the level required by law, e.g., for permanent residence, which they consider their main priority. They therefore want access to language support at the level they need to achieve believing that it will help them reach the legally required level as quickly as possible, regardless of their starting point in terms of their literacy and language profile in the second language. Teachers, volunteers and those responsible for placement should discourage this tendency and strongly recommend the course level best suited to the language profile of each learner.

Continuous assessment

In all cases, it is important to assess learners' progress in the language being learnt on a continuous basis using what is called 'formative assessment'. It should be done both for oral interaction and for written work. The main purpose of this kind of assessment is to support learning and improve learners' language skills, not to give them a mark or grade. The focus is on identifying learners' difficulties and then offering ways of overcoming these difficulties in an encouraging way.

Giving feedback in a supportive way

When carrying out formative assessment, or 'assessment for learning' as it is sometimes called, it is very important to use language carefully, especially when giving negative feedback. The classroom climate depends on getting this right. In the following fictional exchange between a person providing language support and a learner, the teacher or volunteer is trying to be supportive.

Teacher: *OK, I've read the work you've done.*

Learner: *What did you think of it?*

Teacher: *Well, it's not perfect.*

Learner: *Really? But I worked hard on it.*

Teacher: *I'm sure you did and that's good, but the important thing now is to learn from the mistakes. Let's look at some of them....*

Always avoid more extreme language such as 'terrible', 'fantastic', 'weak', 'unacceptable'. There are other ways to offer negative feedback that are not harsh, such as:

- *It's not bad, but...* (qualifier: 'but'...).
- *It's not quite good enough yet...* (softened by 'not quite' and 'yet')
- *There's still some work to do... or I know you can do better than this...* (indirect judgement)

Another possibility is to repeat what the learner says but in the correct form without commenting on the mistake:

Learner: *She go to school.*

Teacher: *Yes, she goes to school.*

Learners having difficulties can also be encouraged to listen carefully, notice and compare new words and expressions, read carefully, and, when necessary, ask for help with understanding instructions and new vocabulary. Find ways of encouraging learners, such as:

- *Keep up the good work!*
- *Your work is improving*
- *Very good.*

Try to understand the learner's problem:

- *Which part didn't you understand?*
- *What is bothering you?*
- *Shall we do the exercise together?*

You should also make formative assessment an integral part of your language support. This kind of assessment includes, for example:

- self-assessment: e.g. asking learners whether the response they have given is right or whether they can think of another word or way of expressing something
- peer assessment: asking learners to check each other's work in small groups/pairs, or asking other learners to comment on what another learner has said: "is that right?"; "What is another word she could use?" and so on
- getting learners to assess their own progress in learning how to do certain things in the new language, for example by using a symbols such as: ✓✓✓(I can do this easily), ✓✓ (in can do this quite well), ✓ (I'm learning how to do this), ? (I need help doing this), ?? (I can't do this yet).

This kind of assessment will enable you to get an idea of the progress being made and the awareness and application of individual learners. It is not a substitute for more systematic, formal and reliable means of assessment, including assessments that are not official and do not lead to certification, such as mid-course or end of course exams. These may come later in their language support programme or afterwards.