



## Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

### Tool 29 - Selecting and using texts for reading at elementary level

**Aim: To offer guidance on finding suitable texts for elementary reading practice and for adapting and using them in language support activities.**

Migrants need to be able to read certain kinds of text in the target language such as notices, instructions, leaflets, messages in chat or in social media, and e-mails. Children and adolescents at school will also need to be able to understand texts related to the subjects in the school curriculum. Apart from these needs, reading the language can help with learning because reading texts are 'visual' and can be looked at again and again, unlike language that is spoken. If, however, any learners in your group have a very low level of literacy in their first language or are not familiar with the script of the new language they will need special help.

#### READING ACTIVITIES

When selecting texts and activities for reading you may find it useful to refer to the relevant *Common European Framework* descriptors in Tool 20 - *Setting objectives for supporting the language learning of migrants who are beginners in the language of the host country*.

#### Types of reading text that might be suitable for learners at elementary level.

- Notices that migrants may see in buildings or in the street. For example: Exit, Private, No entry, Open from 9.00 - 18.00, Closed, Bus stop, No smoking and so on, as well as longer safety messages, e.g. Fire door - keep closed, Wet surface - take care, Stand behind the yellow line, Keep this door locked etc.
- SMS and chat messages, e-mails etc.: migrants may be used to dealing with these in their first language, and they can be useful for elementary writing practice.
- Information leaflets they might need to understand, e.g. information about accommodation, library leaflets, sport-related information, and so on.
- Publicity, such as advertising in the street, on the internet, or in magazines and newspapers.
- Headings and instructions on internet pages.
- Newspaper headlines etc.
- Simple stories with pictures or 'graded readers' (books with simplified versions of well-known stories).
- Texts written by you specially for the group, or by language textbook writers for learners at elementary level.

## Questions to consider

### **Is the reading text related to topics you are dealing with in other areas of language support or to their learning of school subjects?**

It is often useful to select texts that are related to topics and situations that have already been featured in your language support. For example, if migrants are working on a scenario about using health services, select a related text. Migrants themselves can help here: they may have or mention texts that they want to understand for practical reasons or because they find them interesting, such as leaflets or information about medication. Children at school may want to work, for example, on a history, geography or science text used in one of their lessons.

### **Is the reading text relevant and/or interesting for your group?**

Reading in a new language is hard work. If the information is useful or interesting to them, readers will be more motivated to read. If one learner brings a text, decide whether it is useful for the whole group:

- Does it contain relevant information for their everyday lives (e.g. food, health services, leisure activities)?
- Is it about something they can identify with or have experienced? Is it about something topical, e.g. international news, famous people, a new videogames or a local event?
- Does it have an interesting or amusing angle?
- Is it about how people feel, think, and do things in the host country?
- Is it free of topics that might be considered offensive by your group or individuals in it?

### **Is the linguistic level of the reading text suitable for your group?**

- Will they be able to understand it without necessarily having to understand every single word or using a dictionary?
- Are the contents already partly familiar to the migrants, e.g. because they have read about the topic in their first language?
- Is the vocabulary basic and non-technical? Does it contain some international words? Are some words repeated in the text?
- Are the sentences quite short and mostly in the active rather than the passive voice?
- Are pictures, diagrams, photographs etc. used to illustrate meaning?
- Are longer texts divided into paragraphs with headings and subheadings?

If the language level of the text is too difficult for learners in your group, it may be possible to find ways of making it easier for them.

## Using reading texts in language support activities

If a text is seen to be authentic and genuine, learners are likely to respond positively to the related language activities as 'real life' tasks and therefore to find them more motivating. However, sometimes adaptation of the text to the learners' level is needed in order for the related tasks to be feasible and work successfully.

**Step 1:** Once a text has been selected (or written by you) you need to decide how to share it with the group:

- If it is a printed or handwritten text, can it be photocopied and given to each person?
- If it is a text found on the internet, in an e-mail etc., can each person read it on a mobile phone, should it be printed and copied, or can it be projected onto a screen or board?

- If it is a photograph of a sign or notice, can it be shared on mobile devices or should it be printed and copied or projected?

**Step 2:** When necessary, decide whether:

1. the topic of the text can be introduced by encouraging learners to use their existing knowledge.
2. The text itself can be made easier to read in some way before learners read it, by working on its structure, layout and graphical aspects, for example:
  - Dividing the text into shorter sections and getting learners to read one section at a time
  - Adding headings to the sections
  - Selecting some of the 'new' words and expressions and helping learners to understand these before, during or after reading, e.g. by adding explanations or examples in glosses or footnotes.
  - Especially for learners with lower levels of literacy and unused to reading printed texts:
    - Using pictures or other kinds of graphics
    - Changing the layout and look of the text by enlarging it, using a clearer font, increasing the spacing between lines, adding different colours, using the bold for key terms etc.
  - As indicated above, a major simplification of texts is not advised. But in cases where it is considered necessary, the following measures may be considered:
    - Try to replace or explain unknown vocabulary with high frequency words. If it is not possible to do this, add a brief explanation or clarify the meaning with an example in brackets.
    - For conceptually abstract terms (e.g. democracy) and for technical terms related to school subjects, provide a definition if necessary, but do not replace them as there is a risk that the meaning of the text will be changed.
    - Repeat the key terms instead of referring to them with pronouns.
    - Use full terms rather than their acronyms, e.g. World Health Organisation, not WHO
    - Try to simplify long sentences and complex subordinate clauses.
    - Try to use common connecting words, e.g. 'and' instead 'as well as'.
    - Focus learners' attention on the topics and changes of topic in the text.
    - If necessary, consider replacing passive with active verb forms.

**Note:** An example of how this can be done can be found in the appendix. As already pointed out, in most cases it is not a good idea to rewrite the text completely using simpler vocabulary and grammar. This is because learners need to get accustomed to reading normal and 'authentic' texts in the language.

**Step 3:** Decide whether to 'prepare the ground' by, for example, mentioning the topic, asking migrants some questions about it, introducing some key words, showing a picture or two etc. Alternatively, you may wish to show them the text straight away and ask questions about it.

**Step 4:** Get learners to read the text. If it is short, they can read it all; if it is longer, it can be divided into sentences or sections.

- Tell them not to worry if they don't understand every word.
- Ask simple questions about where they might see such a text, what the topic is, the meaning of certain words, which some might know (let them use a shared language to explain to fellow learners, or the dictionary on their phones)
- Don't ask anyone to read the text aloud. Instead, ask simple questions about the information the text contains, or tell them to ask questions (practice '*what does xx mean?*', '*How do you pronounce this word?*' etc.)

**Step 5:** Get learners to read the whole text again or a very similar text. This time, decide whether it would be good for them to hear the text while reading to enable them to link the spoken and written versions. You can read it yourself or record yourself or someone reading it.

**Step 6:** Move on to an activity such as a scenario or a role-play about a related topic.

**Example for elementary level:**



**Operate nearest fire alarm.**



**DO NOT stop to collect personal belongings.**



**Leave building by the nearest exit.**



**DO NOT re-enter until told it is safe to do so.**



**Report to the assembly point.**



**In case of fire break the glass.**

**Step 1:** There might be a similar sign in the building where you work. Show it to learners, photograph it or print the image from a website and photocopy it (colour is not necessary), project it on a wall or board, or show it on a device.

**Step 2:** Before showing them the notice, ask learners to explain or translate the word '*fire*'. Where have they seen fires? Depending on the language level of participants, you could also teach '*what would you do...?*' as a phrase. Remind of one or two other words and expressions e.g. '*exit*', '*belongings*', '*do not*'; alternatively, get them to explain them.

**Step 3:** Show them the notice. Ask them to read the first three instructions (the symbols may help). Guide them in acting out the instructions (maybe you can find a fire alarm – don't let them operate it!). They may help each other using actions, drawings, their phone dictionaries or a shared language etc. Then ask them to read the next three instructions and act out the meaning. You may need to explain '*assembly point*'. If there isn't one near the building, invent a suitable location for it.

**Step 4:** Get learners to read the whole notice again. This time, you may want to read each instruction aloud (or play a recording of yourself or someone else reading it). If so, read at natural speed with clear emphasis on the key words. If migrants want to practise pronouncing certain words themselves, help them with repetition practice.

**Step 5:** Plan a simple role play, starting with an imaginary fire in the building. You could practise questions such as '*where's the fire alarm?*', '*what should we do?*', '*where is the nearest exit?*', '*can I get my bag?*', '*where should we go?*' etc. Migrants take turns to play the role of 'fire officer' and office workers or customers in a shop.

---

## APPENDIX

### MAKING A TEXT EASIER TO READ – AN EXAMPLE FROM GEOGRAPHY

#### The original text:

#### What are some of the dangers from a volcano?

Volcanic eruptions pose many dangers aside from lava flows. It's important to heed local authorities' advice during active eruptions and evacuate regions when necessary.

One particular danger is pyroclastic flows, avalanches of hot rocks, ash, and toxic gas that race down slopes at speeds as high as [450 miles an hour](#). Such an event was responsible for wiping out the people of Pompeii and Herculaneum after [Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79](#).

Similarly, volcanic mudflows called lahars can be very destructive. These fast-flowing waves of mud and debris can race down a volcano's flanks, burying entire towns.

Ash is another volcanic danger. Unlike the soft, fluffy bits of charred wood left after a campfire, [volcanic ash](#) is made of sharp fragments of rocks and volcanic glass each less than two millimeters across. The ash forms as the gasses within rising magma expand, shattering the cooling rocks as they burst from the volcano's mouth. It's not only [dangerous to inhale](#), it's heavy and builds up quickly. Volcanic ash can collapse weak structures, cause power outages, and is a challenge to shovel away post-eruption.

[accessed at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/volcanoes> 20.12.2023]

- a. *Decide whether to use the whole text or to leave out parts of it. This will depend on the learners' level of competence, their literacy level, their ages etc, the length of the text, and whether learners need to read and understand technical terms and phrases. In the example below some phrases have been deleted.*
- b. *Decide whether to add extra headings to help learners to focus. Some obvious extra headings are included in the example below.*
- c. *Identify vocabulary and expressions that may be difficult for learners. Some examples that may be difficult for learners are marked in the example below.*

## The 'easified' text:

### What are some of the dangers from a volcano?

Volcanic eruptions pose many dangers aside from lava flows. It's important to heed local authorities' advice during active eruptions and evacuate regions when necessary.

#### Falling rock and ash

One particular danger is ~~[pyroclastic flows,]~~ avalanches of hot rocks, ash, and toxic gas that race down slopes at speeds as high as [450 miles an hour](#). Such an event was responsible for wiping out the people of Pompeii and Herculaneum after [Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79](#).

#### Mudflows

Similarly, volcanic mudflows ~~[called lahars]~~ can be very destructive. These fast-flowing waves of mud and debris can race down a volcano's flanks, burying entire towns.

#### Ash

Ash is another volcanic danger. ~~[Unlike the soft, fluffy bits of charred wood left after a campfire,]~~ [volcanic ash](#) is made of sharp fragments of rocks and volcanic glass each less than two millimeters across. The ash forms as the gasses ~~[within rising magma]~~ expand, shattering the cooling rocks as they burst from the volcano's mouth. It's not only [dangerous to inhale](#), it's heavy and builds up quickly. Volcanic ash can collapse weak structures, cause power outages, and is a challenge to shovel away post-eruption.

### **Notes on teaching, also applicable to the teaching of subjects**

- *The topic:* this could be introduced using a photo from the internet or poster image. Learners could be asked a few questions such as: "what is this called in your language? And do you know the word in the [host country] language?" "Have you seen a volcano? Where?"; "Are volcanos dangerous? Why?" And so on.
- *Dividing the reading:* you could divide the text with simple headings and get learners to read just one section at a time silently. This may be easier than reading the whole text. While the learners read the text, the teacher can also read it aloud slowly but normally. This may be easier for learners, especially those at very elementary level with low literacy.
- *Vocabulary and expressions:* there are two main possibilities:
  - At the end of each section ask learners which words/expressions they do not know. Invite learners to explain or guess the meaning. If no-one knows, try to explain the meaning using a similar word (e.g. 'leave' for 'evacuate'; 'pieces' for 'fragments' etc.), a common language, a drawing, hand gestures etc. Learners may then also explain a new word in their own language to others who speak it or look it up in a translation app or bilingual dictionary on their phone etc.
  - Introduce some of the more difficult words (but not too many) before the reading, as brainstorming activity, asking learners if they know them or using simple explanations, body language, flash cards, etc. and any language you have in common with learners. Learners can then share their understanding or use bilingual dictionaries etc.

*Note: the first option may be better because it is similar to what learners need to do when reading a new text by themselves: they need to try to guess meanings or ask others for help or find a translation to understand words and expression that are new for them.*

- *Using the text as a basis for interaction:* after learners have read the whole text once or twice you may wish to ask some questions or ask learners in groups to discuss questions, not only about the content but also about learners' reactions, such as "Would you like to see a volcano erupting? "Imagine you live near a volcano. How do feel about it?"; and so on.