



Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

Tool 4 - What is involved in providing language support for recently arrived migrants

Aim: To stimulate reflection on the language support needed by migrants who have recently arrived in the country and how this support can best be provided.

Learning the new language is probably not the most urgent problem or aim, at least not for all recently arrived migrants. Other matters are likely to be more urgent and more important for them. However, they will need elementary knowledge of the languages of the countries they find themselves in. Regular language courses with trained language teachers may not be available, but support can be provided by teachers of any subject and by volunteers.

Bear in mind that the migrants in a given group probably have different previous experiences, different levels of education, social background, and knowledge of languages. Also, various factors may affect their attendance, punctuality, and their ability to concentrate, learn and remember.

Some general guidelines

- *Find out about the language skills newly arrived migrants already have.* Their first languages should be valued, and where necessary they can be encouraged to offer language support to one another, for example with reading and writing.
- *Find out whether there is one or more common language that can be used to communicate with them.* Common languages may include the host country language or any other commonly spoken languages. However, a common language needs to be used sensitively. Some learners can be asked to act as informal 'interpreters' if necessary.
- *Focus on non-formal activities.* These can help restore newly arrived migrants' self-confidence and also help to pass the time.
- *Focus on social interaction, including activities outside the learning environment if possible.* Migrants who have recently arrived can more easily adapt to their life in the host country if learning activities provide opportunities for social contact with people of the host community, especially spoken interaction and social events.
- *Let them speak as much as possible.* Migrants who are learning a language need as many opportunities as possible to use the language themselves. So, depending on the situation and your aims, you need to find the right balance between speaking yourself and giving learners opportunities to speak.
- *Avoid pressure.* Migrants, especially those who are refugees, have probably experienced pressure on their journeys and are still under pressure because of their current circumstances. Many language learners go through a so-called 'quiet phase', and some migrant learners may say nothing for weeks. Putting pressure on them to speak might lead to loss of motivation. It is important that they do not think learning a new language is an added challenge involving formal assessment or tests. Use your support activities as an invitation to discover the world of the new language,
- *Allow learners to help each other.* Their own languages are "islands of security" in a country where they do not understand the language, and the home language can be very helpful in learning and can be an aid in learning a new language. It may be difficult for you because you may not feel in control but be patient and give them time to think and to discuss things with each other. Also, show an interest in their languages, by, for example, asking them to mention words or expressions that are equivalent to those in the new language.

- *Limit interruption and correction.* Migrant learners may expect you to interrupt and correct their mistakes because you are seen as 'an expert'. It is true that learners who use fairly correct pronunciation may more easily avoid misunderstandings and enable other people to understand them better. However, frequent correction may result in learners losing confidence and keeping quiet to avoid making mistakes. It is important to strengthen their self-confidence by showing them that they can communicate successfully in the new language even if they make mistakes.

If you have never helped people learn a foreign language before it is important to think about how to support their language learning. Below are some points to remember.

- You do not need to follow a specific course programme or to aim for a particular level of competence: focus on the newly arrived migrants' most important language needs.
- You do not have to teach grammar because the aim, especially for new arrivals, is not to learn the new language correctly for an exam. The aim is to help them adjust to their situation. However, some learners, may expect some grammar because of their previous language learning experiences (see also tool 26 - *Dealing with grammar when providing language support*).
- Migrants need to learn enough of the language to communicate and to express their needs in an urgent situation. Useful expressions, including the necessary grammar and vocabulary, are the most important elements.
- Even if you are not experienced in helping people with language learning you can explain how things work in your country and what kind of expressions and questions are useful for everyday situations: e.g. *what's that called? where can I find...? I don't understand, etc.*
- While carefully using your language and/or a language that you and the learners share, you can orientate them to their new environment. Learning vocabulary, doing things with real objects, or, if permitted, visiting places together - walks in town, handicraft projects, music, sports and so on - are all valuable ways of giving language support to migrants of all ages.