



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

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### Tool 6 - Supporting migrants of different ages who are learning a new language

**Aim: To offer guidance on approaches to providing language support which are appropriate to the different ages of migrant learners**

#### Introduction

The ways in which migrants can best be supported in their learning of a new language depends to a considerable degree on their age, their background, and their experience of education. These factors need to be taken account of by those providing language support when deciding on the approach they should adopt. It is also very important to remember that the new language migrants are learning is an additional language. It does not replace their original language or languages. Below are some general points to bear in mind.

#### Migrants who are children<sup>1</sup>

Young children are born able to learn several languages. It is estimated 66% of the world's children are brought up speaking more than one language<sup>2</sup>. Although most children learn their languages either at home or at school supported by friends and family, the situation facing migrant children may be somewhat different. They may have had experiences which affect their ability to learn. They find themselves in an unfamiliar environment where an unfamiliar language is spoken which their parents may also not understand. Everything is unfamiliar. However, children are adaptable and good at learning and, with the support of their families and other adults, and by engaging in language learning activities, they can often learn a new language quickly. Once they are adolescents it may be harder for a child to learn a new language, but if they have previously learnt a language other than their mother tongue this will probably help them.

#### Some things to remember about migrants who are children

- Migrant children, especially refugee children and unaccompanied minors, may have experienced trauma which can have an impact on their ability to learn. But progress in learning a new language can have a positive effect on their self-confidence and contribute to their resilience.
- Some children will have been able to speak more than one language from early childhood and they and others will have been exposed to several new languages during their lives. They can use that experience when learning a new language.
- Children are usually motivated learners who can learn the new language unconsciously. Younger children do not need to think, "I need to learn this" or "How am I going to learn this?" They are able to imitate pronunciation quite easily and to work out the rules of the new language for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> In this tool the word 'children' is used to refer to pre-teenagers who are not yet adolescents. Teenagers tend to learn languages more like adults do.

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press Some facts about the world's 6,800 tongues. 2001. Retrieved October 1, 2012, from [http://articles.cnn.com/2001-06-19/us/language.glance\\_1\\_languages-origin-tongues?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2001-06-19/us/language.glance_1_languages-origin-tongues?_s=PM:US)

## Some useful ideas when working with migrant children

- Try to make the language learning environment fun and engaging and give children lots of praise and encouragement. Many migrant learners, especially children, will find it stimulating to learn the language through games and game-like activities (see also Tool 49 - *Language games and activities for migrants*).
- Do not 'teach' grammar or pronunciation to children – just use language naturally and give them plenty of opportunities to use the new language.
- Remember that what is important is communication, not correct grammar and pronunciation, so you do not need to correct 'mistakes': simply repeat what the child has said using the correct form.
- If possible, use real objects, toys or props to illustrate the language you are using, e.g. real fruit, toy animals, etc.
- Use stories and songs which have a cumulative or repetitive element<sup>3</sup>.
- Use story books which have bright, attractive and clear illustrations which children can relate to. For learners at beginner level or who have a low level of literacy 'silent' books, i.e. books with pictures but no written words, may be useful. They can also be used in a wide range of language contexts<sup>4</sup>.
- If possible, use videos in the target language to expose learners to different kinds of language use.
- If you are working with a family group, encourage them to use their home languages together. It is important that parents understand the importance and value of children continuing to use and develop their home languages.
- Some children will go through a 'silent' phase of language learning. This is normal and should be respected. It does not mean they are not learning the new language: they are doing so by listening and trying to understand.

## Adult and older adolescent migrants

Handbooks on adult education often talk about the advantages adult learners enjoy:

- They are likely to be aware of their responsibilities in the language learning process.
- They can draw on their background and their existing knowledge and resources, particularly in relation to their experience of communication, and this can be exploited in collaborative learning.
- They are often pragmatic as well as practical, and thus ask questions and try to find coherent answers.
- They are able to analyse topics and contents from different perspectives.

In groups of adult and adolescent migrants these advantages sometimes apply but often they do not. In adult and adolescent migrant groups, these advantages may not consistently apply due to personal and situational factors, such as stress, trauma, limited language learning experience, and lack of education and confidence.

## Suggestions

When planning your language support for adult learners it may be helpful to bear the following in mind:

1. *Adolescents and, even more so, adults have a well-developed personality, as well as an accumulation of life experiences. This may mean that they:*
  - resist changes in their values or belief system.
  - consider the views of other people in relation to their own life experiences.
  - want their individual past experience to be acknowledged and exploited.

It is therefore suggested that you

- allow enough time for the sharing of perspectives and experience when planning a language activity.
- begin the activity very gradually, enabling learners to develop their familiarity with new expressions and vocabulary and/or new information and give concrete examples (thus avoiding generalizations).
- encourage them to help each other with new information and new language.

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include: The Very Hungry Caterpillar (which is available in 40 languages), Handa's Surprise (available in 17+ languages), and the song Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes (25+ languages)

<sup>4</sup> See for example, <https://www.ibby.org/awards-activities/activities/silent-books>

2. Adults and also older adolescents have defined levels of self-esteem. This means that they may:
- be upset by situations where their self-esteem is undermined and may become passive.
  - reject the power relationship in language support (*I manage the language activity; you do what I tell you to do*).
  - be cautious and sometimes unsure about their relationships and may not fully trust people they have met recently.

It is therefore suggested that you:

- always adopt a respectful attitude, avoiding sarcasm, or authoritarian pressure.
- avoid activities that involve competition or require learners to assess each other's language work.
- avoid categorical statements, e.g. *you must...*, *that's wrong...*, and use instead expressions such as *So far as I know, ...; ... It's probably best...* etc.

3. The pressure of time may be a factor for adolescents and very often for adults too. This means that they may:

- Prefer to learn what they want to learn, and what is important for them in terms of its usefulness.
- Become impatient or bored with language activities that they do not consider useful.

It is therefore suggested that you:

- Start from the questions and priorities expressed by learners, and, if possible, decide together with them what to work on.
- Check which language activities learners consider useful for their everyday life in the host country and in general for their migration plans.

4. Remember that, even if adults and many adolescents can take advantage of the learning strategies they have developed in their previous lives, they may still have problems because:

- short-term memory is affected by the stresses of their situation.
- they tire more quickly than younger language learners.

It is therefore suggested that you:

- vary materials, and activity types.
- help your learners to master some basic terms (e.g. listen, repeat, pairs etc.).
- engage learners in different ways to encourage:
  - understanding (*Is that clear? Do you understand?*).
  - sharing of opinions and ideas (*What do you think?*).
  - sharing of personal experience (*Have you ever...?*).
  - activating their learning (*Could you give me an example? Could you tell Ahmed about it?* etc.).
- encourage learners to ask questions so as to:
  - attract or keep their attention.
  - reduce potential passivity.
  - reduce the distance between migrant learners and yourself.
  - help them to memorize language.
- summarise or ask learners at the beginning of a new activity what they learned in the previous language activity, and what they thought of it, asking questions such as *'What new expression did we learn for....?'; 'Did you find the role play useful?'* etc.