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

# Tool 7 - Migrants as language users and learners

Aim: To introduce the concepts of plurilingualism and the linguistic repertoire and to encourage reflection on the factors that determine success in language learning.

Introduction

The Council of Europe’s work on language education is founded on the principle of [plurilingualism](http://www.coe.int/it/web/lang-migrants/repertoire-language-), according to which we all have the capacity to learn and communicate in more than one language. Our **plurilingual competence** reflects our linguistic repertoire, the languages which we have learnt at different stages in our lives and which we use in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. We do not necessarily have the same level of proficiency in all the languages we know; in some we may be able to understand written text more easily than speech, while in others we may only be able to engage in simple spoken communication. The language portrait (See Tool 8 - *Creating a plurilingual self-portrait: a reflective task for you*) is a good way of capturing and reflecting on our plurilingual competence and linguistic repertoire.

The plurilingualism of migrants

Many migrants, whether adults or children, are plurilingual. Some come from multilingual societies where it is usual for people to communicate in two or more languages; they may have learnt one or more foreign languages at school, and they may also have learnt a little of the language of a country they have passed through. Depending on their age, they may already have a varied experience as language users and language learners – an experience in which it is often very difficult to distinguish clearly between language learning and language use. At the same time, it is important to recognize that many migrants have never learnt more than one language, especially if they have lived their lives mainly at home.

Taking account of migrants’ linguistic repertoires

These considerations should be borne in mind when preparing to provide language support for migrants. Whatever their age or the extent of their linguistic repertoires, they know (though not always consciously) something about how language functions and how to communicate in a variety of situations. If they can read and write in an alphabetical language, they also know that language consists of words and sentences, and, if they have learnt one or more foreign languages in an educational setting, they may have positive and negative memories that will impact on their learning of a new language.

Thinking about factors that influence success in language learning

Migrants’ success in language learning will depend on many factors, both external and internal. Some of these factors are listed in the table on the next page. Identify those that you think you could influence and use the “comment” box to note how you would try to influence or take account of each factor.

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|  | **Can it be influenced by you?  (✓ or X)** | **Comments** |
| Previous educational experience. |  |  |
| Health and well-being, including personal state of mind. |  |  |
| Amount of exposure to the new language. |  |  |
| Age. |  |  |
| Learning methods used. |  |  |
| Personal experience of learning another language. |  |  |
| Motivation. |  |  |
| Other factors – which? |  |  |

To what extent did your comments coincide with the following points?

Although you cannot influence **previous learning experience**, you can certainly take it into account when you form small groups or by asking more experienced learners to support those who have less experience.

You cannot influence migrants’ **well-being and personal state of mind** either, but you should take it into account by selecting topics to focus on, by giving your learners time to talk to one another, and by reassuring them during their learning.

The amount of **exposure to the new language** is something you can and should influence. It is important for migrants learning a new language to have as many opportunities as possible to listen to speakers of that language and to interact with them. If it is possible, it may be helpful to organize outings into the wider community (see Tool 76 - [*Preparing language support activities in the community*](http://rm.coe.int/tool-56-planning-language-support-activities-in-the-community-language/16807171d1) *with migrants*).

You cannot influence the **age** of your learners, but you can try to make use of the fact that older migrants often have more experience with languages or may have some competence in English, which can be used as a lingua franca. Ask your learners to use their experience and knowledge to help one another.

This toolkit is designed to help you to decide on the **learning methods used**. Some learners, for example, may prefer tasks where every step is prescribed, while others prefer a more open approach. Most may prefer a mixture of ‘controlled’ and freer language practice. The better you get to know the learners in your group, the easier it will be for you to adapt your approach to their needs.