

Volunteers in Migrant Education

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen large numbers of adult migrants arriving in European countries. Learning the language of the host community is central to the successful integration of these new communities. However, the scale of the need, as well as the austerity policies in place in many of the host countries, means that it may be necessary to rethink our approach to the language education of adult migrants.

One response to the current situation has been an increase in the use of volunteers to support adult migrants in learning and using the host community language. Volunteers can make a valuable contribution to the language learning and social integration of adult migrants by providing opportunities for adult migrants to practise their language skills, one-to-one or in small groups.

Volunteers add value

It is fun to work with volunteers; they are enthusiastic, creative and passionate about the work that they do and they have the time to do all the extra things that can make such a big difference to learning. Research from the Netherlands shows that not only do volunteers help to improve the language skills of migrants, they also help to increase their self-confidence and participation within society. What's more, integration is a two-way process. Engaging in language learning activities generates valuable contact between members of the host community and adult migrants resulting in greater understanding between the two groups.

The use of volunteers does not necessarily lead to effective provision of course. We all know examples of well-meaning volunteers who try their best, but are using out-dated or inefficient methods that add little to the language learning process and can even have a negative impact on learners' motivation and confidence. We believe that cooperation between volunteers and professional teachers is very important in adult migrant language education. That means that it is very important to clearly identify the roles that each can play within migrant language education and to ensure that their work is effectively coordinated.

Working with volunteers: where to start?

While many organisations are using volunteers as part of their education offer for adult migrants, they often struggle to make effective use of them. In the VIME project we have

been considering how volunteers can provide added value for language learners alongside professional provision.

Successful use of volunteers in adult migrant language education starts with a very skilled coordinator: the person who guides the volunteers and language learners. As a general principle, volunteers, in whatever role, should always work under the coordination of a professional coordinator. The coordinator selects the language learners and interviews them. Also, he/she is responsible for selection, training and guidance of volunteers and matching them to appropriate learners. For all participants, it is important to know what they can expect, what they should do (and what not), and which results they can expect (and which not).

Free and willing

We see volunteering as an economic issue: a volunteer is someone carrying out a role without pay. However, we should also be aware that for many volunteers, there are more complex reasons for making this commitment. The Danish, Dutch and German words for volunteer translate as 'free and willing'. Free as in autonomous, not as in unpaid. In English, we can distinguish between doing something voluntarily, i.e. without external pressure (or incentive) and volunteering, which has a more emotional sense, suggesting commitment to the support of a particular cause.

2. Language learning

Why do adult migrants learn the host community language?

The learning goals identified by the adult migrant should be the starting point for language provision. Adult migrants need to learn the host language in order to support their children, find work, engage with public services, build social relationships and integrate with their local community. Their goals in learning the language are important in determining the most appropriate learning pathway. Formal provision often assumes and supports the achievement of a limited range of learning goals; other types of provision may be needed to provide opportunities for learners to meet other goals. Volunteers play a significant role in the latter, together with their coordinator.

How does effective language learning work?

Volunteers have a key role to play in facilitating access to the language and motivating the learner in his/her learning process. Volunteers should also be aware of the conditions that need to be created in order to support language acquisition, such as rich input, the opportunity to interact in the target language and of course, opportunities to practise what has been learnt. A language learner can never get enough practice and interaction with the volunteer may be the only chance for the learner to practise the language they have studied.

Theories of language socialization suggest that migrants are integrated into their new community through their use of the language of that community and that interaction with the host community is beneficial to their development of proficiency in the host language. Language learning activities increase the chances of adult migrants being able to interact with the host community by improving their language skills. However, they can also have a positive impact in terms of socialisation by facilitating contact and understanding between adult migrants and the host community. In this cultural exchange is particularly important.

Where does learning take place?

It is important to recognise that language acquisition does not just happen as a direct result of language teaching. Formal classroom language learning is not the only way in which languages can be learnt. In many cases, depending on their access to host community members and their own aptitude for language learning, adult migrants can learn the host language informally through engagement with the demands of daily life. However, in the VIME project we have focussed on initiatives designed to explicitly support the language education of adult migrants and have identified activities to support such learning in three distinct domains.

- **Formal education engagement** : formal classroom teacher, group learning, leads to recognized qualifications as part of a formal education pathway, taught by qualified teacher.
- **Non-formal educational engagement** : timetabled/drop-in, one to one/small groups, oral skills, practice, homework support, working under supervision/independently, no formal curriculum/accreditation.
- **Social engagement:** (cooking clubs, gardening groups, choirs, drop in cafes) no explicit language learning goal, instead opportunities for use, social support, providing help with forms/official letters etc. or just someone to talk to. Also cultural integration: opening a window to society, visits to local places, explanations of local holidays and customs etc.

3. Which roles can volunteers play?

We have identified the following core roles within adult migrant language learning activity.

1. Language assistant:

- has a direct connection with the classroom teacher (formal educator);
- the work is directed by the classroom teacher and is intended to reinforce and practice language presented in the classroom or to focus on particular areas of the learner's language that the teacher has identified as in need of improvement;
- does not teach the group, instead he or she facilitates differentiation, providing extra help for individuals or small groups to practice the language they have studied.

2. Language coach:

- has no connection to the classroom (formal or non-formal) and is not directed by a teacher; may work in the learner's home or a public space, or a community venue to support individuals or small groups;
- the main focus is on (oral) practice.

3. Language Buddy:

- the main focus is social support. They act as a reference point, for example helping the adult migrant to understand official letters and complete forms, or explaining processes that they need to go through as part of their new daily life.
- In the workplace, a Language Buddy may support a colleague to understand work processes or health and safety instructions.]

4. Language Champions:

- works actively to engage adult migrants in language learning activities;
- may also work with the host community to support them as part of a two-way process of integration.

4. The importance of coordination

Coordination is essential

Language volunteers should always work under the supervision/coordination of a teacher or pedagogical coordinator. We have identified two distinct coordinator roles, though of course, depending on the size of the organisation the two roles may be carried out by one person.

- Pedagogical coordinator: takes responsibility for ensuring that the volunteer is supported in selecting appropriate materials/approaches for particular individuals/groups and may also lead professional development activities for volunteers.
- Logistical coordinator: deals with practical matters of timetabling, resourcing and matching of learners to volunteers. Also, has contacts with local partner organisations, such as the local government, language schools and local ngo's.

Selecting and training language volunteers

First of all, it is essential to think about what attributes and skills are needed in each of the identified volunteer roles before anyone is recruited. Some people may make great volunteers in sports or community activities, but lack the necessary knowledge and / or attributes to be a language volunteer. Some may be experienced (language) teachers, while others may have other types of professional experience that can be made use of, or transferable skills from other areas of their lives. The level and focus of training required by individual volunteers will be largely dependent on their background and the role that they want to play.

Thorough preparation of volunteers in their role is an important basis for success. However, it does not stop there. The coordinator needs to monitor the activity of the volunteer and his/her language learner(s) in order to be able to support the volunteer, identifying training needs and giving advice and guidance on approaches to take and identifying relevant materials that can be used to stimulate learning.