

## **The use of volunteers in migrant language education**

**How can we assure the quality and efficacy of host language learning for adult migrants in the context of growing demand and restricted budgets?**

The integration of migrants is one of the greatest current challenges for Europe. In order to support their full integration and avoid social exclusion, migrants should be supported in participating in the labour market and civic society. Learning the language of the host country is an urgent precondition for such participation, and in this, adult education has a key role to play. To meet the demand for migrant language education there is a need for greater numbers of trained educators. However, the scale of need, and restrictions on national education budgets, means that it may be necessary to rethink our approach to the language education of adult migrants and look beyond the formal classroom.

Through the active involvement of members of the local community we can create a virtuous circle: migrants become more integrated into their new community through their use of the language of that community, and at the same time their interaction with the host community is beneficial to their development of proficiency in the host language.

**So, how can volunteers help meet this growing demand, and how can we assure the quality and efficiency of their work?**

Volunteers are more and more important in meeting the demand for adult migrant language learners. They can provide a cost-effective solution, and if used correctly, enhance the quality and effectiveness of provision. However, asking volunteers, however well-meaning and skilled in other domains, to lead the language and literacy education of this very complex group of learners is unlikely to lead to successful learning. Instead volunteers can add great value by playing a number of different roles within the language learning process, from working closely with the professional teacher in the classroom, to supporting individuals in the community.

Collaboration between professional teachers and volunteers, and between the organisations they work with is crucial. However, the relationship between the two groups is often difficult, with a lack of clarity in the definition of their roles leading to mistrust on both sides and the creation of barriers to collaboration. Coordination of volunteer activities, aligning them with the work of professional teachers can create coherent, stimulating and effective language learning pathways for 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. However, without clear description of the roles, competences and modes of cooperation needed between professional teachers and volunteers working in such provision within migrant education organisations the increase in the numbers of volunteers is likely to have a detrimental impact on the quality of provision of migrant language and literacy education. The current increase in the use of volunteers appears to have developed in an ad hoc manner with little formal training provided for the volunteers, a lack of coordination of their work and poor collaboration with professional teachers.

Experts in four countries, working within the Erasmus + project VIME have developed guidance and practical products for volunteer organisations to adapt and use with the sole objective of facilitating and strengthening the quality of the language education support provided by volunteers, either working independently or in cooperation with professional teachers.

### **How are languages learnt?**

All adults are different and learn languages in different ways. But we know that learners need to be exposed to the language for them to learn it. However, input is not enough, learners also need the opportunity to use the language in diverse contexts, and they need to interact with others using the new language to achieve communicative goals. And of course, in order to achieve fluency in the new language they need plenty of practice. Through engagement in social activities, volunteers can help create an environment in which migrants are required to use the host language, supporting them in increasing their understanding and ability to communicate.

### **What types of provision best support migrant language learning?**

Formal classroom language learning can play an important part in supporting language acquisition among this group, but the formal route is not the only way in which migrants can be supported in learning the language of the host community. Through the work of the VIME project we have identified three distinct domains in which such learning can be facilitated. The three domains should be seen as having 'fuzzy' boundaries with overlap between them in the work of particular organisations.

- In **formal education engagement**, a qualified classroom teacher leads group learning, leading to recognized qualifications as part of a formal education pathway. These programmes are usually delivered by state education organisations, such as colleges.
- **Non-formal educational engagement** can be classroom based, but is not part of the formal system and does not lead to qualifications. It provides greater flexibility of provision and is often run by small community organisations.
- We also suggest that **social engagement activities such as** cooking clubs, gardening groups, choirs, or sports, can provide important support to the language learning of adult migrants. These activities have no explicit language learning goal, but provide opportunities for language use, as well as social support, and cultural integration.

The lack of connection between the three domains means that in many cases learners are active within only one and are active in that domain by chance, because they happen to have been 'recruited' by an organisation within that domain, not because the type of activity in that domain is best suited to their learning needs. Some learners are active in more than one domain, but with little connection between what they do in one domain and another. In other words, there is a lack of joined-up pathways that use activity in more than one domain to maximise the opportunities and support for adult migrants to learn the language of the host community.

### **What roles can volunteers play in migrant language education?**

Within the VIME project we have described four distinct roles.

- **Language Assistants** work inside the classroom, providing extra help for individuals or small groups. Their work with learners 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.
- The **Language Coach** differs from the language assistant in that he or she has no connection to the classroom, working instead in the learner's home or a public space or a community venue to support individuals or small groups.
- While the role of both the Language Assistant and the Language Coach is explicitly focused on language learning, the focus of the **Language Buddy / Befriender** 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.
- As with the Language Buddy, the priority for the **Language Champion** is not work with adult migrants to directly improve their language. Instead, he or she works actively to engage adult migrants in language learning activities. This may involve Outreach work, but may also involve campaigning and lobbying in order for more appropriate provision to be developed or for better resources to be made available. Language champions may also work with the host community to support them as part of a two-way process of integration.

### **How can we best ensure that the work of volunteers complements and adds value to that of professional teachers?**

Coordination of the work of volunteers is necessary to assure the quality and effectiveness of their work. However, volunteers often work in isolation in this context, without access to expert guidance on approaches to take with their learners. Coordination is needed in terms of pedagogy, ensuring that the volunteer is supported in selecting appropriate materials and approaches for particular individuals or groups, as well as on a logistical level, dealing with practical matters of timetabling, resourcing and matching of learners to volunteers.

Collaboration and coordination of language education provision should also take place between institutions responsible for formal learning and those working in the non-formal sector in order to avoid overlap, and to ensure that the work of the volunteers adds value to the language learning of adult migrants.

### **How can we best support the work of volunteers?**

It is unrealistic to expect volunteers to increase the quality and effectiveness of migrant language education without any preparation. Systematic training for the role or roles they will fulfil in the migrant language learning process is needed. The VIME project has developed a set of training modules for each role a volunteer can take. Encouraging cooperation between professional teachers and volunteers can be stimulated by involving the professional teacher in the training of volunteers.