



## Language for Work - Tools for Professional Development

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### Abstract

Europe is home to many millions of adults – migrants (including refugees) and ethnic minorities – whose first language is different to the majority language of the country where they live. The ability of these adults to secure employment and then progress at work is essential both to their wellbeing and, more broadly, to social stability and economic development across Europe. The recent arrival of large numbers of refugees in Europe makes the issue of integration all the more urgent. Key to this is support for these adults to learn the majority language, particularly in relation to work. (Vermeulen, H.) Labour market inclusion is a primary goal of integration policy. For millions of adult migrants in Europe, learning the language of the country of residence (L2) is a key enabler of access to and progression within the labour market. The Language for Work Network (LfW) aims to promote and develop this important area of linguistic integration. Created through a project funded by the Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, this international network brings together researchers, practitioners, policy makers and others from the field of vocational learning and skills. Through its website and programme of activities, LfW shares research, policy and practice across Europe, supporting the full range of practitioners engaged in this field. Language for Work – Tools for professional development uses the European learning network created by the ECML project, Language for Work – Developing migrants' language competences at work (2012-15), to make these approaches accessible to practitioners involved in work-related majority language learning. It creates a professional development framework to help teachers implement these new approaches. To support refugee integration, the project also develops a 'quick guide' with key underlying principles and a selection of effective approaches (including non-formal and informal approaches) to support work-related majority language learning. The project's 'Quick guide' tool offers an at-a-glance overview of the key principles and approaches used to deliver successful work-related linguistic integration of adult migrants, including refugees. (Vermeulen, H.)

**Keywords:** *foreign language, professional development, international network.*

### 1. Introduction

Successful integration of adult migrants depends to a considerable extent on two interconnected enablers, language skills and employment. Migrants need language skills to find suitable employment and then progress at work. Employment can help migrants to develop their language skills.

Migrants who arrive with the language skills and qualifications they need to secure quality employment may require little further support. For the many other migrants who arrive with limited language skills and no recognized qualifications, support to develop work-related language skills is crucial.

Work-related language skills are the skills people need to

- find suitable employment, including language skills for job-search, CV writing, job applications, interviews, etc.
- contribute positively as an employee, including language skills for job specific tasks, health and safety, team working, quality management, customer care, employment rights, responsibilities and processes
- progress at work and develop their career, including language skills for formal workplace training, informal on-the-job learning, further vocational education and training outside the workplace.

Work-related language skills are specific to

- social norms around work – i.e. general expectations around behaviours, ways of communicating, etc. in the context of the world of work
- legislation and regulation, e.g. health and safety law, quality standards
- the communicative demands of the particular field of work – i.e. language skills required for e.g. engineering, health and social care, retail, IT, etc.
- social norms specific to a particular workplace – i.e. ways of communicating, behavioural expectations, etc.



- the communicative demands of the individual job itself – which will always evolve as circumstances around the job change.

### **1.1. Language skills at work**

At work, people need to be able to

- understand their rights and responsibilities
- talk about work schedules
- talk about job tasks
- process and communicate information, spoken and written
- deal with instructions, spoken and written
- collaborate with others including
- offering suggestions
- offering help
- asking for help
- dealing with feedback
- interacting with customers
- reporting, orally and in writing and much more besides!

What level of work-related language skills do migrants need?

The answer to this question will always depend on specific circumstances, including the type of work and the amount of on-the-job support. In the field of social care, for example, the worker providing care to an individual in that individual's own home may have less support available to them than the worker based in a care centre, who can seek help from colleagues close at hand.

Broadly speaking, the vocational level of the job gives some indication of the level of language skills it will require. Legislation, regulation and quality standards related to the job may offer further indicators. In some countries, compliance with the basic health and safety laws that apply to all jobs generally requires at least CEFR level B1 language skills, whatever the communicative demands of the job itself. Likewise, national quality standards and regulations for specific sectors, e.g. health and social care. (Cavounidis, J.). Also worth noting is the increasing requirement across all jobs for workers to process information and communicate effectively.

Ways to help migrants develop work-related language skills:

Migrants can be helped to develop work-related language skills through many different kinds of formal learning programme, including

- integration and other language learning programmes for migrants
- employability and pre-employment programmes for job-seekers
- vocational programmes for specific occupations.

For migrants already in employment, support for language learning can be incorporated into most workplace training programmes. People and performance management processes, including supervision and team meetings, also offer good opportunity to support language development. These formal and non-formal learning opportunities can be supplemented by support for informal learning, both at work and in the community, through

- coaching and mentoring programmes
- volunteer buddying schemes
- peer support groups
- self-access learning resources.

What expertise do you need to help migrants develop work-related language skills?

There are different ways to help migrants develop work-related language skills, including

- formal instruction
- coaching
- support groups
- making learning resources available.

The expertise you need varies accordingly. It is definitely good, however, to have some understanding of two things. One is language learning – specifically, what helps an adult acquire a new language



(and what hinders them). The other is the field of work in question (e.g. hospitality, engineering, social care, etc.).

What do we know about language learning?

We learn a new language primarily by interacting in it. Formal instruction can be very helpful, but is not enough on its own. We gain competence by using the language to communicate in real-life situations. Much of the learning happens unconsciously and it takes persistence over an extended period of time, particularly to achieve the level of required by most jobs.

Individual progress depends on a host of often interrelated factors, including motivation, aptitude; educational background, what other languages the individual knows, what opportunities and support for learning are available to the individual – and so on.

Barriers to language learning for migrants

Typical barriers to language learning for migrants include

- lack of confidence to interact in the language
- very limited contact with speakers of the language
- limited literacy
- lack of time, money for tuition
- not knowing how to find language tuition
- lack of learning support at or outside of work
- lack of effective personal learning strategies (sometimes linked to lack of confidence in own ability to learn)
- lack of motivation to persist with language learning activity.

To offer effective support, we need to address these barriers. It is also important to remember that the personal situation of migrants may be extremely difficult due to trauma, family circumstances, legal uncertainties and many other factors. (Baldwin-Edwards, M.)

## **2. Literacy and work-related language learning**

Information processing and written communication (often using the medium of digital technology) are now central to all jobs, including entry level jobs – making literacy a key competence at work. Likewise, formal language learning (including self-access online learning) typically assumes confident literacy as well as study skills. Not all migrants have these skills, so support to develop them can be extremely valuable.

### **2.1. What is ‘adult literacy’?**

Adult literacy can be defined as the ability to read and write at the level an adult needs to function and progress at work and in society generally. It is a key to citizenship as well as employability. Literacy is not a fixed thing and (like language itself) it is inextricably bound up with social practices, i.e. the context in which it is used. It is possible to be more literate in one context than another, cf. terms such as ‘financial literacy’, ‘digital literacy’ and ‘scientific literacy’. Moreover, it changes over time (again, like language itself) as society evolves and technology develops.

Literacy skills themselves sit on a continuum and people often benefit from support when confronted with a new literacy task, e.g. a new type of form to fill in.

## **3. Why might a migrant have limited literacy and/or study skills?**

- Limited access to schooling – migrants from impoverished, war-torn countries, for example, may never have had opportunity to attend school
- No previous exposure to the alphabet used in your country
- No previous exposure to the social practices around literacy in your country, including the literacy practices common in workplaces in your country
- No previous exposure to the methods of formal learning used in your country
- Negative experiences at school
- Learning difficulties related to literacy, e.g. dyslexia

(Baldwin-Edwards, M.)



### 3.1. Enablers of language learning for migrants

Migrants today come from a very diverse range of backgrounds – but, as language learners, all migrants will benefit from

- Encouragement and support to learn
- Opportunity to use the language in real-life situations
- Help to notice and understand the forms of the language
- Help to notice and understand social norms and expectations around communication
- Corrective feedback
- Help to develop effective personal learning strategies
- Help migrants to learn outside of the classroom
- Help migrants take better advantage of informal language learning opportunities
- Beware of the low-pay, limited language trap
- Support learning at work
- How to gain the support of managers
- Workplace tips  
(Baldwin-Edwards, M.)

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