

# Talk with me

Volunteer language mentors  
for refugees



## Project Manual



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# Introduction

The main idea of this project was to create an easy-to-multiply framework that could be used in various projects in order to facilitate the integration of refugees in the hosting communities.

From our experience, one of the most important needs of the refugees, after they settle in Europe, is to speak the local language. This offers them the chance to study, work and just live their lives here. But this is only one small step towards becoming a part of a community.

Therefore we wanted to create a context where people with different backgrounds, locals and refugees, get to meet and start to develop a relationship with one another. We conceived an unconventional language course that would get young people to really connect, share their experiences and explore each other's culture, providing a comfortable environment for this purpose.

With this in mind, we designed a volunteer program, lasting 10 weeks, implying 10 meetings, for local young people, in which they participate as language mentors for refugees their own age. Each volunteer is matched with a refugee and they meet in pairs and discuss different topics each week, for approximately one hour. Both the volunteers and the refugees benefit from trainings before beginning the program, during which they are prepared, on one hand for the work they are supposed to do and, on the other, for intercultural learning.

We used conversation and learning/teaching a foreign language as a tool for building a bridge between cultures. During this process the student/teacher roles are interchangeable and the school-like atmosphere is replaced with a more casual one that favours trust, and why not friendship.

This document, "Talk with me – Project Guideline", is structured in 7 sections that are designed to offer any willing organization the guidelines for implementing a similar volunteer program successfully and efficiently.

In the following material you will find our joint opinions on how to organize and coordinate such a project, based on the experiences we had in the 3 participant organizations: **Gemeinsam leben und lernen in Europa e.V.**, Passau, Germany, **Tulip Foundation**, Sofia, Bulgaria and **Cluj-Napoca Volunteer Center**, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

# 1. Recruiting volunteers

Recruiting the volunteers is a very important step in any volunteer project. The project's outcomes depend very much on the volunteers' belief in the project's ideas, their enthusiasm and thoroughness in performing the tasks required, and many other aspects. Therefore, careful thought should be given to this part.

Firstly, it is important to decide what the responsibilities of the potential volunteer should be, this meaning to create the volunteer job description. In our case we decided on these tasks as the main ones and the minimum necessary for the project's running:

- Attending all the trainings and meetings.
- Preparing for the meetings with the refugees.
- Regular communication with the program coordinator and their matched refugee.
- Keeping a documentation of their activities and submitting a final evaluation of their work.

Secondly, it is important to decide, together with your project team, which are the main characteristics the volunteers should have, in relation to the tasks you want to give them. This means to create the volunteer profile. In our case we found these characteristics as basic and essential for the project's running:

- Willingness to work in a multi-cultural environment.
- Interest in communicating with other people and discovering other cultures.
- Responsibility and ready-ness to commit to the 10 meetings.

After the volunteer's responsibilities and profile are clear it is time to:

- Compose a call for volunteers that includes: the characteristics and responsibilities of the volunteer, certificates obtained, important details about the work (time, place, people involved), and a short description of the project.
- Design a form in which the volunteers write about their motivation, interests, availability etc.

The next step is to get the information to interested people, by spreading the call through means suitable to the people you want to reach. Here are some options:

- Ask friends
- Present the project at universities
- Distribute flyers
- Through other volunteers active in the organization
- Start a cooperation with volunteer centers and volunteers organizations
- Use online platforms for volunteering
- Social media etc.

The selection of the volunteers can be done on the basis of the forms they fill in for applying, the way they match the volunteer profile, their interest in job required and/or during the initial training. If not all the suitable applicants can be involved at once, it is a good idea to use a waiting list that is helpful for keeping in touch with the potential volunteers. It is important to find, as soon as possible, volunteer work in your organization or suggest other options for the interested people, in order to keep their motivation level high.



## 2. Orientation and training for volunteers

Although a pre-existing qualification is not required of the volunteers, they are not ready to start the activities right away after the selection. The initial training is very important both for delivering certain information and for settling a certain mindset which is essential for the efficiency of the program.

Timewise, the training should be scheduled right after the initial meeting with the volunteers, or anyway, before the one-on-one meetings between the volunteers and the refugees begin.

The content and the way to implement this training is described step-by-step in the “Talk with me – Training Curriculum for Language Mentors”. The core topics are the following:

- Organizational Matters - Aims of the project
- Basic knowledge about refugees and asylum procedures (in accordance to your country)
- Intercultural training
- Limits within voluntary work, Role as language mentor
- Pedagogical basics
- Local networks and networking

For the implementation of the training the following things are needed:

- Attendance list
- Handouts that summarize all essential content of the training
- Toolbox that contains helpful materials for the meetings (see the “Talk with me – Toolbox”)
- Flipchart or pin board, markers, cards
- Drinks and snacks
- Adequate room with sufficient seating
- Information flyers on your organization (optional)

Regarding the certification for this training, there are two options:

- Give one at the end of the training in order for the participants to get recognition of their readiness to start the program, even if they will not be selected in this round  
*or*
- Give a certification of the whole volunteering activity, including the training, at the end of the 10 meetings in order to increase the motivation of the volunteer to finish the program.

## 3. Recruiting refugees

Even though the refugees are the direct beneficiaries of this program, its outcomes depend very much on their input and their willingness to participate. Same as in the case of the volunteers' recruitment process, the way to go is to establish what the responsibilities of the refugees are and which of their personal traits can improve the way the programs runs.

The main responsibilities of the refugees for participating in the volunteer program are:

- Attending all the trainings and meetings
- Keeping contact with the coordinator and their matched volunteer
- Propose conversation topics by bringing photos to the meetings

Characteristics of the desired participant are:

- Willingness to speak / learn / practice the language
- Motivation to take part in the project
- Interest in the new culture and way of life
- Reliability

The next step is to design a call for the refugees. This should give information about the structure of the program and the age group, but also include a description of the activities.

Then it will be up to you to spread it through means and in places that are accessible to the possible candidates. Here are some suggestions:

- Contact Youth Workers, Refugees Centers, National Agencies for refugees, organizations working with refugees, etc. in your area
- Ask your friends if they know refugees in the age group
- Contact universities or other institutions in your area
- If you have conducted projects that involved refugees before, ask the participants of these projects to inform their friends
- Ask refugees already participating in different programs to bring along their friends

Regarding the selection process, it proved useful to conduct individual interviews with each interested person, because of the varying language skills. So, in order to make sure that the person understood what the program is about and that they are willing to take part in it, we recommend face-to-face interviews.

During this stage it is very important to explain the aims and the limitations of the program and their responsibilities, as part of the program. Try to stress that getting involved implies committing to attending the 10 meetings and actively participating throughout the program.

During the interview, do not forget to collect the basic information about the candidates and their contact. The ones that have a basic knowledge of the language may be asked to sign a participation agreement.



## 4. Orientation and training for refugees

The training for refugees is equally as important as the training for the volunteers as language mentors. The main objective of this session is to prepare refugees for intercultural learning, making them open to discover and accept differences between their own culture and the one of their partner. This can be done at different levels depending on the participant's language skills, age and other aspects.

The participants should also get an idea of what volunteer work is about. Moreover, it is important to clarify the role of a language mentor.

In addition, it is try to clarify the expectations of the participating refugees, explaining the limitations of the project and their required contribution. At this moment, if it appears to be necessary try to explain some of your inner organizational rules and regulations, and also maybe some of the local customs regarding work.

In the chronology of the project, this training has to take place before the matching, and it can contribute to the selection of the refugees.

The content and the way to implement this training is described step-by-step in the "Talk with me – Manual for an information session and intercultural training for young refugees".

The core topics are the following:

- Intercultural Training
- Aims of the project
- What is voluntary work

For the implementation of the training the following things are needed:

- Attendance list
- Flipchart or pin board, markers, cards
- Drinks and snacks
- Adequate room with sufficient seating
- Information flyers on your organization (optional)
-

# 5. Introduction and matching session

## The introduction

The introduction can take place during a separate, initial session or it can be included in the matching session, as the opening part. The main facilitator should be the project coordinator, but all the team that is involved in the project should take part or at least introduce themselves. As for the participants for this session, they should be all the recruited volunteers and refugees. Other people interested in getting involved in such a program can also participate (if the initial session is separate from the matching one).

During this session it is of great importance to present the project again, in a summarized form, in order to make sure that all the participants have the same understanding of what it is about.

Organizational matters are the foremost concern at this point. Therefore, use this meeting to clarify the general set-up and some basic conditions and rules, let the participants fill out the necessary documents and decide on a means of communication. Try to keep the paper work at a minimum in order to avoid creating a formal environment that might displease and intimidate the participants, while still taking into account the legal requirements in your country such as the volunteer contract or others. At this point, make sure to allocate enough time for filling everything in and explain thoroughly why each document is needed. We recommend using a participation form, a declaration of agreement that photographs taken during the project can be published, a declaration of professional discretion and an attendance list.

Here are some useful tips for explaining the role of the paperwork required from the participants:

- The **declaration form** outlines the commitment and obligations during the project.
- The **declaration of agreement for publishing photographs** is needed if you want to publish any photographs taken at the sessions in a newsletter, on your website/social media or in a local newspaper. Make sure you mention where exactly you want to publish them.
- The **declaration of professional discretion** serves to prevent the spread of personal and intimate information shared among the participants and protects the personal rights and privacy of each participant.
- Having an **attendance list** of each session is a condition for funding.

During this introduction, try to settle on the days of the week in which the participants would be available, in case your organization can offer an appropriate common space for the

one-on-one meetings. Our recommendation is to decide on one or two afternoons, the most, in order to be possible for one of your staff members to always attend these meetings. Availability on one of the two days can turn out to be a criteria for the matching the volunteers and the refugees.

All that's left to do, after the administrative part, is an introduction round for people to get acquainted. The best way to get the participants to know each other and to become more open towards one another is to play games and do ice-breakers.

Here is one suggestion on how this can be done

- You can start with a round of introductions during which everybody says their name, why they want to participate and their expectations of the project. The next step is to play an **ice-breaker**. You divide the room in three areas, one representing "Yes", another "No" and the last "Maybe/I don't know". The project coordinator starts to make statements such as "I like doing sports", "I like to read.", "I have been abroad.", "I know more than two languages.", "I have a sister.", "My favorite time of the year is summer." and so on and the participants have to move to a side of the room according to their answer. This way personal information is shared and the participants find out, who has similar interests, hobbies, life situations etc.



## The matching session

It would be a good idea to start off this session through a team building exercise, provided that one of its goals is to increase communication among the individuals of the group and enhance mutual understanding.

- One method can be the game 'Build a tower'. The group is divided into sub-groups of 4-6 people. Each group gets the same materials and the task the build a tower as high as they can. Materials can include cardboard boxes, paper, toy building bricks, straws, spaghetti, tape, toothpicks etc. Set an end time for the task and off they go. Make sure each participant gets the chance to make contributions and engage in discussion on the best way to build the highest tower.

The next step is to match volunteers and refugees, making pair that will work together throughout the project. Our experience proved that the best way to match a volunteer with a refugee is by using a random system. The easiest way to form language-mentor couples is to ask the volunteers to write down their names on small pieces of paper, put the names in a box and then ask every refugee to draw a name from the box.

Using any criteria brings in the risk of offending someone or it can lead to participants issuing specific claims that might be difficult for the organization to fulfill. Still try to keep everything in check through your own intuition and common sense.

The only criteria we still used were the availability on certain days and, with a lower priority, common interests, similar occupations or others.

Thus you can use any interactive method for making pairs on the spot or you can have it already done before the session and just announce it then.



## 6. Implementing the 10 meetings

The 10 one-on-one meetings are the core of this project. They should take place once a week for two months and a half. Their content can be established either by the refugee, through bringing a photo depicting the subject that he/she wants to talk about or by the volunteer, using the toolbox provided by the organization.

If a large common space is accessible for the organization throughout the program, it is recommended to use it as a location for the one-on-one meetings. This way the possible discomfort of being alone with a stranger is avoided, while still keeping the meetings private and personal. Another advantage would be the possibility of developing relationships with other people than one's assigned pair, through sharing the space and spending time together after the meetings.

In case such a space is not accessible for your organization, the meetings will take place independent from one another and the coordinator can organize meetings for the whole group in key moments, such as the beginning or the end of the program.



Once the core sessions start, the coordinator's role is to keep in touch with all the participants and make sure that everything goes as planned

and that they do their tasks. Keeping a record of the evolution of each pair can be relevant and the coordinator's role is to motivate and encourage everyone, mostly the ones behind on their work. Also, the well-being of the participants is important for the development of the program. This aspect should be one of the main concerns of the coordinator, who should work as a mediator, finding solutions and fixing things.

It is useful to have a person responsible for taking photographs and collecting impressions from the participants, all of which can be used in press statements, articles, on your homepage or in newsletters.

# 7. Project management

Regarding project management issues, the volunteer program that we propose has a few specific aspects, other than the ones described above. They are listed and described in the following section.

## a. The program's structure and timeframe

The project consists of:

- Preparations for the volunteer program
- An introduction session
- Two training sessions: one for the language mentors and one for refugees
- A matching session
- Ten core sessions (meetings between volunteers and refugees)
- One final session with all participants
- A final evaluation of the volunteer program

The time allocated for this program should be a minimum of 20 weeks to include all the activities listed above. For the preparations it is recommended to start at least 2 months before the planned introduction session. Therefore this is a punctual volunteer program that can be carried out by an organization active in the social area or even by an informal group that is guided by the documents created in the "Talk with me" project.

## b. Production of learning material

One important part of the preparations for this program consists of the production of supporting materials used for teaching and learning. Organizations that are interested in implementing this program are welcome to ask for one of the toolboxes we developed through "Talk with me" project. After getting a toolbox and it is recommended to add your own country specific topics. Also, encourage the volunteers to develop the materials you give them and to share ideas between themselves.

Another thing to keep in mind before starting the project is to have all the necessary documents ready before the start of the program (volunteer contracts, job descriptions, timesheets, etc.) Most of the needed templates are available in the outputs of the "Talk with me" project, but, they might need to be adapted to your country's legislation and to your organization's needs.

## c. Preparation and logistics

Other preparations include settling a location, either only for the first meetings or for all the sessions.

Here are some suggestions regarding location:

- it should be easily accessible by public transport for both groups of participants
- large space, preferably with more rooms where the pairs can have their meetings
- It is a good idea for the space to offer some options for spending time after the meetings

A suggestion would be to find a youth center or a meeting point of youngsters which could be great for the refugees to get in contact with more people.

Apart from the space and location, other important preparations are the selection of the facilitators for the training activities, selecting the most appropriate periods for each activity in the volunteer program and acquiring the necessary materials for the program, such as stationary and snacks. Next one can design and plan the dissemination of the volunteer program and the activities related to raising the motivation of the volunteers involved.

## d. Supervision and monitoring of the volunteer program

It is very important that one specific person from the coordinating organization is responsible for the project and oversees its progress during the whole time of implementation. It is useful to assign a second (or even a third person) to support the project coordinator in case of illness or especially stressful periods, who have to have a full understanding of the project and know what to do.

Their main role during the program is to keep in contact with all the participants and to encourage the volunteer to develop his/her capacity of succeeding in the activity by increasing his/her autonomy and providing freedom of decision. Also, the project staff has to offer the volunteer support in solving any occurring problem and to hold a record of every pair's progress.

In this program, the supervision is based on the mutual relationship between the volunteer and the project coordinator. This implies that both parties should be interested in increasing the efficiency of the volunteer program and running it in a professional manner.

The supervision meetings can be held in groups, but can also be individual, according to the needs of the volunteers. During these meetings one can discuss and harmonize the following topics:

- Organizing the work schedule (if there are any discrepancies between the volunteer and the refugee)
- Clarifying and solving possible occurring issues
- Offering consultancy and answers to the volunteer's concerns
- Offering positive feed-back, words of appreciation and thanks to the volunteers, and setting an overall atmosphere of gratitude
- Reporting errors
- Establishing or restoring work standards
- Evaluating the needs of the volunteers
- Discussing the progress of the volunteers
- Providing a professional behavior model through the coordinator's own actions

In some key moments of the program's progress the project coordinator can collect quotes from the participants that reflect their opinion on the past meetings. This gives an overview of the current atmosphere and can be useful for improving the program during its development.

## e. Internal communication

The first step is to find a convenient and suitable channel for staying in touch with everyone involved in the project. For sharing documents you can use Dropbox, Google Drive or others, while for communicating depending on the length of the message WhatsApp or e-mail could be appropriate options. Make sure you all agree on the chosen option and that the participants find it easy to stay in touch.

We suggest regular meetings with the project team to improve the general atmosphere, find out issues that need to be resolved and receive a feedback on the way the program is running. Set up the regularity of the meetings and also deadlines for replying to messages on different channels.

Appoint people that are to be contacted in different situations, and if it is only the coordinator make sure everyone knows this. Establish a procedure for communicating in urgent situations and define what these might be.

Nevertheless, assigning the role inside the project team is part of the internal communication and has to be done thoroughly in order for the project to run smoothly.

## f. External communication / PR and dissemination

Getting visibility is a very important aspect of this project, as it generates general awareness of your work. Furthermore, the project can function as a good practice of practical integration work and as means to reduce prejudices and prevent racism, xenophobia. If you promote it properly (e.g. with professional photographs and professional PR materials), you could soon end up with partners to fundraise your project and future willing partners or/and participants.

For this it is useful to have volunteers taking photographs at each session. Try to find people that are interested and professional in this area, this way, you will have good quality photographs that can be used for the presentation of your project in local newspapers, on your website, on flyers for the future etc.

Keep people up to date with your work on social media, such as Facebook or others. Many refugees communicate via Facebook and can share your content, resulting in a general awareness of your project in their community. This can help you to get in contact with more refugees willing to participate in the project as they already know about its benefits.

## g. Evaluation

The evaluation is a complex process and is structured according to the answers to the following questions:

- Why do we evaluate? We evaluate this volunteer program in order to assess our work and to improve it for the future.
- Who are we evaluating? The participant (volunteers and refugees) and the staff.
- What do we evaluate? We propose to evaluate both the progress of refugees and the performance of volunteers and then to evaluate the whole volunteer program.
- In relation to what do we evaluate (standards)? It is important to set minimum standards by assigning, before the start of the program, real numbers to values such as: the number of volunteer hours invested, the number of refugees and volunteers involved, the number of topics covered.
- How do we evaluate (using what tools)? In general, we suggest using non-formal assessment methods by which one self-assesses his/her progress without marks, in a relaxed atmosphere. There are a number of non-formal assessment methods - some of them being described in the "Talk with me – Training Curriculum for Language Mentors".
- When to evaluate? We propose middle and final evaluation in order to be able to improve some aspects of the program during its implementation.
- Who evaluates? As this is a non-formal education program, we propose self-evaluation for the participants, but also a formal assessment conducted by the program coordinator.

Here are some of the practical ways to do the evaluation that we suggest:

- Collecting quotations from participants during the 10 meetings
- Final evaluation forms for the volunteers and the refugees
- Evaluation meetings with each pair
- Discussions with the project team and a written feedback from each member

## h. Financial issues and fundraising

The proposed program involves very small financial requirements. It is designed to be easy to implement in many different conditions – and this is one of the main reasons we consider it a volunteer program prone to be successful.

However, there are some cost you should consider before launching the program:

- Covering some internal transport costs for participants to travel to the meetings
- Printing toolboxes or other materials
- Renting a space for trainings, for the two orientation sessions, and the matching session and maybe also for the 10 meetings
- Providing snacks and drinks for the trainings and matching sessions
- Communication cost if you decide on it

We recommend trying to find support from other state institutions, NGO's, companies etc. and using the network created by your organization throughout its activity in order to find the resources you need.





This Manual has been developed as part of the “Talk with me” ERASMUS+ project (2015-3-DE04-KA205-013137) by Gemeinsam leben & lernen in Europa e. V. (Germany), Tulip Foundation (Bulgaria), and Centrul de Voluntariat Cluj-Napoca (Romania).

The project is funded in the frame of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

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