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The UN Refugee Agency

# TEACHING ABOUT REFUGEES

## Language Acquisition Guide

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# BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Teachers who are welcoming multilingual students into their classrooms may be concerned about how to meet the linguistic and academic needs of these students. The following document provides teachers with an overview of good practices to support multilingual students.

## Children Ages 6-11

## Beginner Language Proficiency

### What to expect

Students acquire **social** language quickly through immersion with peers. Some children will demonstrate **social language proficiency** in as little as 6 months, but a silent period of 3-6 months is considered normal (British Council). Children's understanding of a new language will also be better than their use of the new language for some time.

In addition, while many children achieve social proficiency quickly through playing and interacting with peers (i.e. games on the playground, chit-chat at lunch), it can take much longer to achieve academic proficiency. For children **to learn academic language, vocabulary and grammar used in the classroom must be explicitly taught.** (Cummins 1999)

Language **learners might need to hear a new word 40 times or more before they have acquired it for their own use**, and are able to use it in the correct way and place grammatically. Don't be surprised if a learner appears puzzled by a word that might have been prominent in certain lessons.

When a student has acquired enough basic vocabulary to understand some of what's going on in the classroom environment, her brain will naturally begin to prioritize structure, and so the category of a word (noun, verb, particle) is more important for the language learning brain than the "correct" word choice. **Learning structure is invisible, and takes a lot more brain energy than learning the parts that fit into the structure.**

**You might notice that students seem to be performing well or "getting" it one day, and then backsliding the next. This is normal.** If a student mixes up something that you thought they had learned, chances are it's because the brain either needs to put something else into place to anchor the new knowledge, or is starting to grapple with something new.

Literacy skills (eg. understanding how sounds relate to letters) will transfer from a child's native language to the new language (Durgunoglu 2002). **Children who have more exposure to literacy in their native language have an easier time transferring literacy skills to a new language.**

## Children Ages 6-11

## Beginner Language Proficiency

### How to meet student needs

**Encourage parents to speak and read with their children as much as possible in their native language.** See if the school library has books in their native language and keep them in the classroom or direct parents towards them. If not, ask the school librarian if it would be possible to buy some in or take a trip to a local library to find some. Learn to pronounce **student names** as their families do. This allows the student to feel their language and culture are valued.

Rather than asking “Do you understand?”, **ask concept checking questions** which allow the students to demonstrate if they have understood directions or vocabulary words (British Council).

“Do you read first or answer the questions first?”

“Can you point to someone who is wearing red?”

“Can you name three different animals that hibernate?”

Provide corrective feedback when you sense that a learner knows how to use the form, but has made a mistake, **so the learner has a chance to self-correct**, feel accomplished and build the neural pathways for correct usage. If they can't self-correct, then you know a refresher lesson and concentrated practice will probably help them.

**Give students an opportunity to demonstrate the linguistic and cultural knowledge they bring with them into the classroom.** E.g. Ensuring students are comfortable with the idea, offer each student the chance to teach the class how to say or sing something in their language, print out the script of different languages and have the class learn some letters together.

Provide a visual for all new vocabulary to trigger students' memory:



Provide Sentence Frames for writing and speaking to model grammar and provide access to the next level of language proficiency. For example:

This story is about \_\_\_\_\_.

First, \_\_\_\_\_.

Next, \_\_\_\_\_.

Finally, \_\_\_\_\_.

## Adolescents Ages 12-18

### What to Expect

#### Beginner Language Proficiency

Students may appear shy because they do not want to risk making a linguistic mistake in front of peers. A fun and relaxing classroom environment helps to lower anxiety.

**Receptive skills** (listening and reading) almost always progress more quickly than **productive skills** (speaking and writing).

Language **learners might need to hear a new word 40 times or more before they have acquired it for their own use**, and are able to use it in the correct way and place grammatically. Don't be surprised if a learner appears puzzled by a word that might have been prominent in certain lessons.

When a student has acquired enough basic vocabulary to understand some of what's going on in the classroom environment, her brain will naturally begin to prioritize structure, and so the category of a word (noun, verb, particle) is more important for the language learning brain than the "correct" word choice. **Learning structure is invisible, and takes a lot more brain energy than learning the parts that fit into the structure.**

**You might notice that students seem to be performing well or "getting" it one day, and then backsliding the next. This is normal.** If a student mixes up something that you thought they had learned, chances are it's because the brain either needs to put something else into place to anchor the new knowledge, or is starting to grapple with something new.

#### Intermediate Language Proficiency

Students are able to learn academic content (math, science) and a new language at the same time.

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Academic proficiency can take 5 or more years to achieve. **However some students will be able to progress to higher-level studies without yet attaining this.**

## Adolescents Ages 12-18

### How to meet student needs

#### Beginner Language Proficiency

**Try and design lessons with opportunities for students to use all four language domains** to encourage their language acquisition. Some examples are:

**Listening:** Ask students to work in groups where language learners interact with native speakers. Give the group members appropriate roles including resource person (to look up information in the dictionary or on the internet), timekeeper, and listener for specific vocabulary words.

**Reading:** Re-read familiar texts, assign a reading buddy, teach phonics and vocabulary in a small group while other students read independently

**Writing:** Provide sentence frames to help students write about a picture displayed on the board.

**Speaking:** Ask students to “Turn and Talk” to a partner about their thoughts on a specific topics. Then students can share their responses as a whole group after first practicing with a classmate.

Introduce **3-5 vocabulary words** with visuals per day. Post the words and corresponding visuals on a “word wall” in the room so students can see them. Using visuals triggers memory and students are more likely to use new vocabulary if it is posted on the walls.

Ask students to repeat directions back to you to check for understanding. Ask **comprehension checking questions** rather than asking “Do you understand?” (British Council)

#### Intermediate Language Proficiency

**Try and design lessons with opportunities for students to use all four language domains** to encourage their language acquisition. Some examples are:

**Listening:** Listen to a recording (song, radio news story) and complete a fill-in-the-gap activity with key vocabulary.

**Reading:** Add a vocabulary list with definitions to any reading.

**Writing:** Compose a text message about what students learned during a lesson.

**Speaking:** Ask students to work in groups where language learners interact with native speakers. Give the group members more challenging roles including writer, reporter, or summarizer

Continue to introduce **3-5 vocabulary words** with visuals per day.

Provide **Sentence Frames** for writing and speaking that stimulate critical thinking.

For example:

The story is about \_\_\_\_\_.

I disagree with \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

The evidence I can find is \_\_\_\_\_.

Adapt **age-appropriate academic content** to provide linguistic access for all students.

E.g. Shorten tasks and add vocabulary lists that students need to complete work.

**Examples:**

- “Do you read first or answer the questions first?”
- “Can you point to a country in Asia on the map?”
- “Can you name what weather you would see if there was a typhoon?”

Offer students opportunities to introduce their own language, approaches to different topics, cultural insight into topics wherever possible.

Whenever possible, allow students to use **technology** to organize and express their thinking (see resources below).

Parent Communication (instant translation):  
<https://talkingpts.org>

Vocabulary Practice Game:  
<https://duolingo.com>

Vocabulary Flashcards:  
<https://studyblue.com>

Graphic Organizer:  
<http://popplet.com>

## References

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