



## CHAPTER 2.5

# Easing Early Communication: Language Assistance

## GOALS FOR INTEGRATION (SEE CHAPTER 1.3)

-  **ONE** To restore security, control and social and economic independence by meeting basic needs, facilitating communication and fostering the understanding of the receiving society.
-  **TWO** To promote the capacity to rebuild a positive future in the receiving society.
-  **THREE** To promote family reunification and restore supportive relationships within families.
-  **FOUR** To promote connections with volunteers and professionals able to provide support.
-  **FIVE** To restore confidence in political systems and institutions and to reinforce the concept of human rights and the rule of law.
-  **SIX** To promote cultural and religious integrity and to restore attachments to, and promote participation in, community, social, cultural and economic systems by valuing diversity.
-  **SEVEN** To counter racism, discrimination and xenophobia and build welcoming and hospitable communities.
-  **EIGHT** To support the development of strong, cohesive refugee communities and credible refugee leadership.
-  **NINE** To foster conditions that support the integration potential of all resettled refugees taking into account the impact of age, gender, family status and past experience.

 The focus of this Chapter

 To keep in mind

## Chapter 2.5

# Easing Early Communication: Language Assistance

This Chapter focuses on providing language assistance to resettled refugees both in the context of reception and early settlement support and in their later interactions with programs and services in the receiving society.





## CHECKLIST

### Planning language assistance

When establishing a new resettlement program, give priority to:

- ✓ identifying interpreters and translators speaking relevant languages;
- ✓ recruiting bilingual settlement support workers;
- ✓ providing basic training to professional and volunteer language assistance providers on refugees and resettlement issues, roles and confidentiality.

In the longer term, aim for:

- ✓ establishing centralised interpreting and translating services or 'banks';
- ✓ establishing interpreting services in key government departments (education, income support);
- ✓ formal training, accreditation and standards for professional interpreters;
- ✓ strategies to promote the use of interpreters among government and community based service and program providers.

### Language assistance as a resource for rebuilding

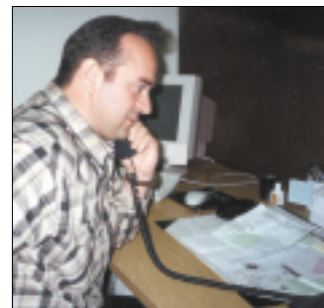
In the early resettlement period, many resettled refugees will have a limited grasp of the language of the receiving society (referred to as the target language). While they will begin to acquire this through their participation in language training programs (see Chapter 2.6) and their day-to-day interactions in the receiving society, it will be some time before they achieve basic competency and longer still before they are technically proficient (see p. 128). Even if functional in the target language, resettled refugees may require assistance when communicating about matters requiring a high level of technical proficiency or in circumstances they experience as stressful (e.g. health care or legal matters).

Some groups, such as refugee elders, may have language learning difficulties and will require ongoing access to interpreter support.

Providing access to language assistance helps to:

- promote clear communication. This is particularly important as language difficulties may be further complicated by refugee and resettlement related anxiety or different cultural communication patterns;
- foster rapport, trust and a sense of safety in relationships between resettled refugees and others in the receiving society. This is particularly important for resettled refugees, with trust being a common casualty of traumatic

- experiences (see Chapter 1.3);
- facilitate resettled refugees' access to the services and resources they will require for integration;
- ensure that resettled refugees have equitable access to the resources of the receiving society and that their rights are respected;
- foster resettled refugees' understanding of the receiving society.



Care should be exercised when using family, friends and staff who are not trained in formal language assistance, professional or settlement support roles to interpret, as:

- they may be placed in a position where they are exposed to information of a sensitive or traumatic nature;
- communication with the resettled refugee may be impaired if there are issues they feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about discussing;
- this may place undue stress on these relationships and, if involving children, may impose an unfair burden of responsibility;
- they may lack the proficiency in both languages to accurately interpret information, particularly in matters requiring technical language proficiency (e.g. legal and health care matters);
- confidentiality is particularly important when working with resettled refugees, especially those from small, close-knit communities.

In the course of their resettlement, refugees will also require access to translated materials including information about services and entitlements as well as forms and questionnaires. They may also need to have important documents translated (e.g. medical records, professional qualifications).

### **Factors affecting language assistance**

A number of factors will influence the planning and provision of language assistance in receiving societies, including:

- the extent to which there are established refugee and ethnic communities speaking languages represented in contemporary refugee intakes;
- whether there is an established work force to provide language assistance (e.g. bilingual professionals, bilingual support workers, interpreters and translators);
- the existing infrastructure for work force development, support and quality assurance for language assistance providers, in particular, it is important that language assistance providers are offered training to deal with the





## EASING EARLY COMMUNICATION: LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE

- effects of traumatic experiences on the communication process;
- any other languages spoken in the receiving country which may be known by resettled refugees (e.g. common European languages);
- funding arrangements for language assistance.

### **Issues to consider in meeting language assistance needs**

Planning language assistance for reception and early settlement support

Resettlement agencies responsible for receiving refugees and providing early settlement support will need to make provision for language assistance, both to communicate with resettled refugees and to facilitate their access to services and programs in the wider community. In most countries provision is made for this in funding arrangements or service agreements. For example, in Australia, resettlement services have access to the centralised government interpreter service. In Spain, interpreters are provided by government either directly or by agreement with a local non-government organisation. In the USA, funding agreements between government and resettlement NGOs require that assistance be provided in the refugee's own language for the first 90 days following arrival. This is achieved by employing bilingual settlement workers and, for smaller language groups, using centralised interpreter services.

Language assistance for long term integration

As resettled refugees' link with resettlement support agencies is necessarily time limited, strategies will be needed to improve the provision of language assistance by mainstream service and program providers (e.g. government income support programs, health care services).

Approaches to providing language assistance

There are three primary ways in which existing resettlement countries meet language assistance needs:

- by recruiting bilingual staff in resettlement support roles and in key professional positions in mainstream agencies located in areas with significant refugee populations (e.g. bilingual doctors, bilingual teachers);

- by building a work force of professionally trained interpreters and translators;
- by using volunteers, primarily from ethno-cultural communities.

These are not mutually exclusive, with many countries using these different approaches in a complementary fashion. Some of the issues to consider in building language assistance capacity are discussed in Table Eight on the following page.



### Promoting access to interpreters in emerging resettlement countries

RESETTLEMENT programs in their founding years may experience some difficulties in providing language assistance, particularly if they have relatively small refugee intakes or limited capacity to fund training and employment of interpreters. Emerging resettlement countries have sought to address this by:

- recruiting bilingual volunteers;
- employing bilingual settlement support workers;
- prioritising the use of interpreters and translators (e.g. for first or more complex appointments);
- communicating in a third shared language. For

example, some of the Iraqi, Iranian and Afghan refugees recently settled in Chile are fluent in Russian, having studied in that country. The resettlement NGO in Chile was able to secure the support of a retired Russian language professor to assist with communication;

- selecting refugees who speak a second language also spoken in the receiving country, even if not that country's main language. For example, in Chile, where many nationals speak another major European language (e.g. French or German), refugees who spoke one of these languages were targeted;

- placing particular emphasis on target language training for resettled refugees to facilitate early independence;
- securing assistance with translations through the government ministry responsible for foreign affairs;
- aiming for linguistic homogeneity in early caseloads and placing resettled refugees from the same language group in one resettlement community;
- facilitating communication on very basic concepts through the use of language dictionaries (see box, p. 114).





## Table Eight: Factors to consider in planning to meet language assistance needs

Mode of assistance	Possibilities	Limitations and cautions
Professional interpreters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• technical linguistic competence is assured;</li> <li>• trained in ethics, approaches, role etc;</li> <li>• bound by professional code of ethics (e.g. concerning confidentiality);</li> <li>• role boundaries clear;</li> <li>• particularly important for ensuring access to services and programs in the wider society that do not have bilingual professional and client contact personnel;</li> <li>• if provided as part of a 'bank' or contractual arrangement, assistance can be provided to a diverse range of language groups and across geographic areas relatively efficiently and cost effectively;</li> <li>• modern telecommunications systems can be used to facilitate geographic access.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• training and qualifying periods may create delays in making interpreters available for emerging refugee communities;</li> <li>• if training and accreditation requirements are too stringent they may serve as a disincentive to trainees particularly those in emerging refugee communities and communities with limited formal education;</li> <li>• relatively resource intensive.</li> <li>• hands-free telecommunications equipment ideal when using telephone interpreters</li> </ul>
Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• resource efficient;</li> <li>• advantages associated with engaging community in integration (see Chapter 2.3);</li> <li>• has possibilities for providing language assistance and social support in one relationship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not bound by a professional code of ethics, confidentiality may be compromised;</li> <li>• need to consider general issues involved in engaging former refugees in voluntary support roles (see Chapter 2.3);</li> </ul>

### INTEGRATION IN PRACTICE

#### Responding to urgent need in Spain

IN 1999 Spain accepted nearly 1,500 Kosova Albanian refugees as part of the UNHCR's humanitarian evacuation program. As this country did not have the capacity to provide language assistance to all evacuees, the local Kosova Albanian community developed a practical Albanian–Spanish dictionary for use by both evacuees and Spanish settlement workers, covering key words and concepts.



Mode of assistance	Possibilities	Limitations and cautions
Volunteers (continued)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• training and support critical;</li> <li>• untrained personnel may not necessarily be technically bilingual. Should be used with care in contexts requiring technical language proficiency;</li> <li>• possibility of blurring of interpreting and support roles.</li> </ul>
Bilingual integration support providers and professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rapport building eased by eliminating three-way communication;</li> <li>• resource efficiencies result from building integration support and language assistance into one role.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• as above;</li> <li>• difficult to meet the needs of all language groups by establishing staff positions, especially if refugee intake is diverse;</li> <li>• resource inefficiencies and professional boundary issues may result from using bilingual professionals to undertake interpreting tasks on behalf of resettled refugees (i.e. as opposed to practising their own profession bilingually);</li> <li>• settlement workers recruited for their language skills may require training in other aspects of their job role;</li> <li>• some resettled refugees may not wish to consult with a professional from their community.</li> </ul>





## Initiatives to support access to language assistance

Centralised interpreter services or ‘interpreter banks’

Given that most resettlement countries have a highly diverse refugee intake, it is difficult, even for specialist services, to employ interpreters or bilingual staff to meet all needs. This is particularly the case given that the need for language assistance at any point in time cannot always be predicted.

In countries with large refugee and immigrant programs, this has been addressed by establishing centralised interpreting and translating services (either by government, voluntary organisations or the private sector) through which agencies serving resettled refugees can book the services of interpreters and translators.

Generally these services offer interpreters who attend appointments ‘on-site’ (or face-to-face) as well as via three-way telephone communication. Examples include the Canadian province of Manitoba’s Language Bank, a program staffed by trained volunteers and the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS), established by the Australian government which provides free interpreting services to facilitate access to government funded services.

In the USA, some smaller agencies meet language assistance needs through contracts with larger facilities (such as hospitals) to secure interpreters on a sessional basis.

While in most countries, centralised interpreter services can only be accessed by service providers on behalf of resettled refugees, in some they can be accessed free-of-charge by resettled refugees themselves.

Dedicated interpreter services may also be established in larger government departments in some countries.

Promoting use of interpreting and translating services

The experience of resettlement countries is that even with well established and relatively accessible interpreter services, there is a need to ensure that professionals and personnel in the wider community utilise them. Professional development and awareness raising activities may be required to ensure that relevant personnel are:

- able to identify clients requiring an interpreter;
- understand the importance and advantages of communicating through an interpreter, despite the additional time and costs involved;
- aware of booking arrangements;
- understand the basic skills involved in communicating through an interpreter;
- aware of any legislative requirements to provide language assistance.

Strategies that have been used by resettlement countries to promote the use of interpreters include:

- simplifying booking procedures at both the agency and interpreter service level;
- developing cards held by the resettled refugee which identify the language they speak and interpreter service details;
- activities among refugee communities to promote awareness of the right to an interpreter (e.g. multilingual posters in health care waiting rooms);
- funding agreements between government and agencies serving refugees obliging services to provide language assistance to clients who are not proficient in the target language;
- legislation to mandate the use of interpreters (see box, p. 118).



## INTEGRATION IN PRACTICE

### On-screen interpreting in Finland and Norway

INTERPRETING centres in Finland and Norway have begun to use on-screen interpreting enabling all parties to the communication to see one another. This form of communication requires a personal computer, camera and microphone. Picture and sound are communicated via internet or telephone.	may be superior to telephone interpreting since it gives parties to the communication the benefit of eye contact and of reading non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions. It may be particularly useful in hospital and other medical settings. With increasing technological developments, the equipment involved in this communication is	becoming more readily available and affordable. However, particular attention is required to ensure that confidentiality is observed. Experience in Finland and Norway has been that, although it has taken some time for this new technology to be accepted by clients and service providers, it is being used more frequently and in an increasing number of settings.
In certain circumstances on-screen communication		



## INTEGRATION IN PRACTICE

### Promoting the right to language assistance

SEVERAL jurisdictions have legislation which mandates the use of language assistance. The Office of Civil Rights in the USA has issued policy guidance based on a title in the 1964 <i>Civil Rights Act</i> which prohibits discrimination in federal government programs on the basis of race, colour or national origin. Under the guidance, all services in receipt of any federal government funding	are required to provide assistance to people with limited English language proficiency (LEP). This includes anyone unable to speak, read, write or understand English at a level that permits effective interaction with health and social service agencies and providers. Other examples include the State of Massachusetts, USA, where all hospital emergency rooms are	required to have interpretation facilities available and the Swedish <i>Integration Act</i> and the Spanish <i>Law of Asylum</i> which oblige services to provide language assistance. The experience of these countries is that while this is a highly effective strategy, legislation needs to be complemented with awareness raising, professional development and monitoring activities.
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#### Work force development, quality assurance and professional support

In some countries interpreting and translating has become increasingly professionalised. This has occurred in recognition of the fact that these are roles which require skill not only in the area of technical language proficiency, but in interpersonal communication, ethics and cross-cultural issues.

This has been achieved through the development of:

- formal training, credentials and accreditation for interpreters and translators. In some countries, interpreters have also been offered specialist training in particular areas (such as mental health interpreting, legal interpreting);
- professional standards for interpreters and translators;
- professional codes of ethics for interpreters and translators.

Like other professionals working closely with resettled refugees (see Chapter 3.1) interpreters require professional debriefing and support.

## INTEGRATION IN PRACTICE

**Meeting diverse language assistance needs across Finland**

REFUGEES, immigrants and asylum seekers settle in municipalities across Finland. Many different languages are spoken, among them Arabic, Kurdish, Farsi, Somali, Vietnamese, Russian, Albanian, Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, Estonian, French and Turkish. Since Finland was a relatively linguistically homogenous society until the mid 1980s, its existing interpreter work force had developed primarily for the diplomatic service and to meet conference and commercial needs.	interpreting, over the telephone or on-screen, free-of-charge to resettled refugees. These technologies make it possible to meet language assistance needs in distant municipalities and for scarce resources to be put to the best use.	In 1996 the Finnish National Board of Education established the <i>Further Qualification for Community Interpreter</i> with the aim of working toward an appropriate and uniform level of skill among community interpreters. To obtain the qualification certificate, applicants complete a skill test demonstrating that they have met a prescribed level of competence (as opposed to meeting formal education, training or prior work experience requirements). This allows people who have developed their skills through practical or life experience to seek qualification.
As its resettlement and migration programs have expanded, however, Finland has recognised the need to invest in the development of community interpreting services. While integration is facilitated at the municipal level in Finland, it is not practically or economically viable for each individual municipality to have its own interpreting facility.	Community interpreters are employed by the centres on a full-time, part-time and freelance basis, depending on the demand for particular language skills. This enables the service to meet diverse language needs relatively cost effectively. Many community interpreters are themselves former refugees.	Training for community interpreting remains a challenge for Finland. A number of universities, vocational adult education centres, providers of adult education and interpreter centres have begun to offer courses. However, they are relatively short and, as yet, there is no uniform syllabus.
Accordingly, since the early 1990s eight regional interpreter centres have been established. They are currently funded by the Finnish Ministry of Labour.	The interpreter centres can be accessed by health, social welfare and other settlement related services on behalf of refugee clients and by the municipalities during resettled refugees' initial introduction period and thereafter if required.	A greater number of appropriately qualified teachers and learning materials are required to support the development of the courses.
These services provide translating, on-site interpreters and distance	The regional interpreter centres are responsible for recruiting new interpreters and for maintaining the professional skills of their work force. The centres also offer customer training on cross-cultural communication, interpreter booking procedures and communicating with an interpreter.	





## PROMOTING ACCESS TO LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE

### OVERALL, A SOUND INTEGRATION PROGRAM WOULD:

- take steps to ensure that government programs and services in receipt of government funding provide appropriate language assistance;
- take steps to ensure that reception and early settlement support services provide appropriate language assistance;
- support the development of centralised interpreter and translating services;
- have ongoing strategies for planning and building an interpreter work force in response to changing needs and intake patterns;
- have systems for screening and training volunteer language assistance providers;
- support the development of appropriate training, accreditation and standards for professional interpreters;
- provide funding and technical support for professional development programs for bilingual resettlement support workers who do not have requisite human service qualifications;
- have arrangements for the translation of key integration documents at minimal or no cost to resettled refugees (e.g. prior professional qualifications, medical records).

### SPECIFIC PROGRAMS AND SERVICES WOULD:

- have a formal written language assistance plan;
- inform resettled refugees of their rights in relation to language assistance;
- provide language assistance in a timely fashion;
- have key information, forms and other documents translated into relevant community languages;
- have protocols to ensure the sensitive management of incoming telephone calls from people who are not proficient in the target language;
- provide training to staff on booking and using interpreters and the importance of communicating through them;
- have hands-free telecommunications technology to promote the use of telephone interpreters;
- have some means of identifying and recording resettled refugees requiring an interpreter and the language they speak for the purpose of their ongoing support;
- wherever practical, recruit bilingual staff in key professional and client contact positions;
- avoid the use of untrained personnel to interpret;
- identify a senior employee to coordinate and monitor the agency level language assistance program.

Adapted from E Mercer, *Connections: An information service of the Immigration & Refugee Services of America's Alliance for Multicultural Mental Health*, vol.2 no.1, 2001.