



EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR  
MODERN LANGUAGES  
E C M L  
C E L V  
CENTRE EUROPEEN POUR  
LES LANGUES VIVANTES

COUNCIL OF EUROPE  
  
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

# Language for work – a quick guide

**How to help adult migrants develop  
work-related language skills**

This publication is a product of the project *Language for work – Tools for professional development*, part of the 2016-19 programme of the European Centre for Modern Languages, *Languages at the heart of learning*.

It was written by members of the project team, Alexander Braddell (UK), Mathilde Grünhage-Monetti (DE, Project Co-ordinator), Christophe Portefin (FR) and Kerstin Sjösvärd (SE).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Berg, W. and Leinecke, R. (2014), „*Deutsch habe ich im Betrieb gelernt*“. *Berufsbezogenes Deutsch im Unternehmen verankern*. Braunschweig: Network IQ Lower Saxony.

Photograph on page 10 courtesy of Kartoffelmanufaktur Pahmeyer GmbH & Co. KG

Photograph on page 19 courtesy of Lars Bergström.

Thanks also to members of the Language for Work Network for review and comment, including Klara Bilic Mestric, Irina Mitarcheva, Deirdre Ní Loingsigh, Annemarie Nuwenhoud, Olga Orrit, Veronica Pajaro, Toon van der Ven and Séverine Wozniak.

# Language for work – a quick guide

## How to help adult migrants develop work-related language skills

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 recognised qualifications, support to develop work-related language skills is crucial.

This short resource offers guidance on how to provide that support.

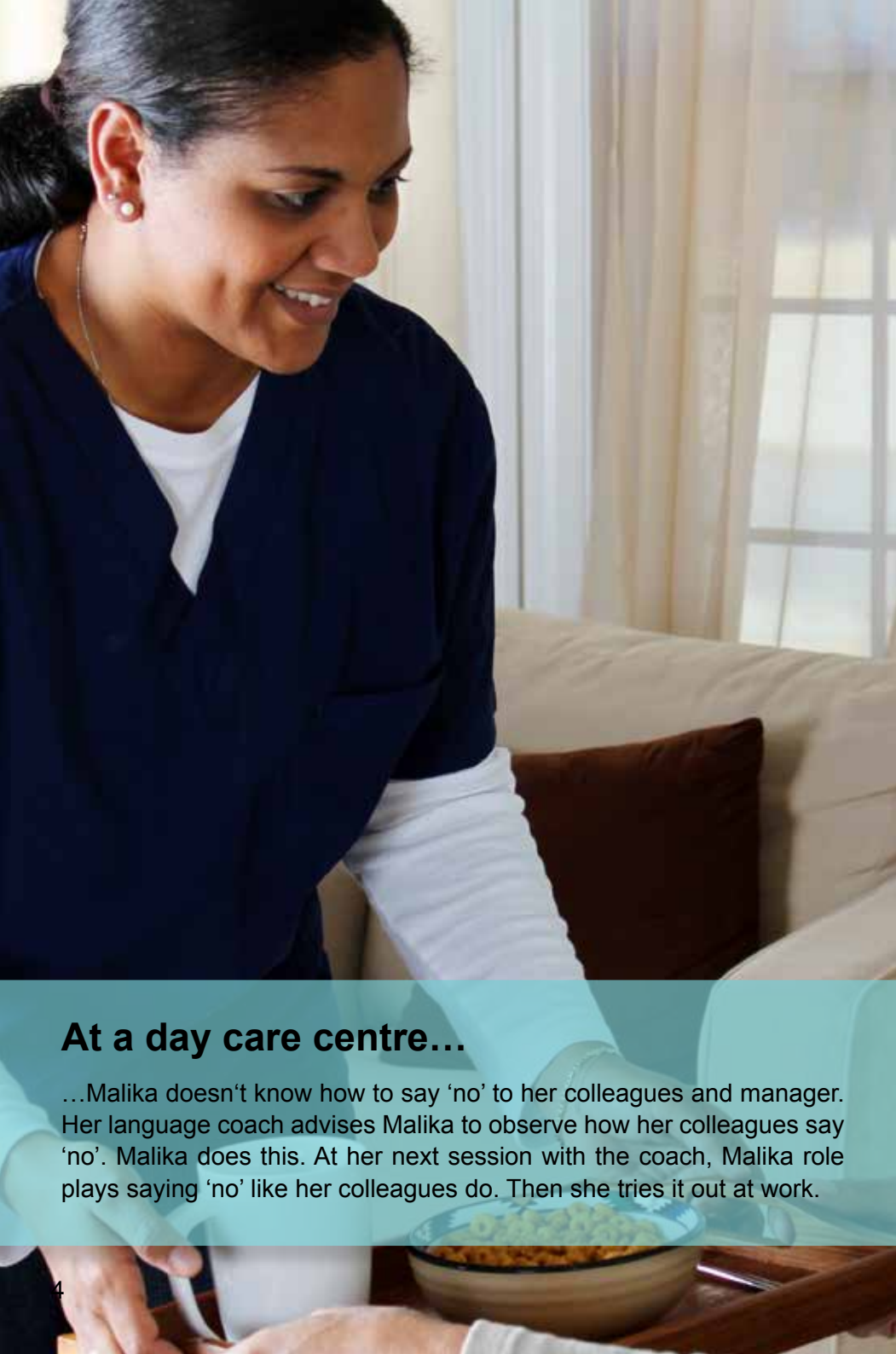
## Who is this guide for?

This guide is for professionals supporting the linguistic integration of adult migrants, including professionals working in the fields of

- language learning for adult migrants
- integration programmes for adult migrants
- vocational education and training
- adult education
- human resources
- labour market support services.

## What is in this guide?

- What we mean by work-related language skills (p4)
- What level of work-related language skills migrants need (p6)
- Ways to help migrants develop work-related language skills (p7)
- What expertise you need to help migrants develop work-related language skills (p8)
- Barriers to language learning for migrants (p10)
- Enablers of language learning for migrants (p12)
- How to help migrants to learn outside of the classroom (p14)
- The low-pay, limited-language trap (p14)
- How to support learning at work (p15), and
- Where you can find out more about how to develop work-related language skills (p19)



## At a day care centre...

...Malika doesn't know how to say 'no' to her colleagues and manager. Her language coach advises Malika to observe how her colleagues say 'no'. Malika does this. At her next session with the coach, Malika role plays saying 'no' like her colleagues do. Then she tries it out at work.

## What are work-related language skills?

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

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.

# Language skills at work

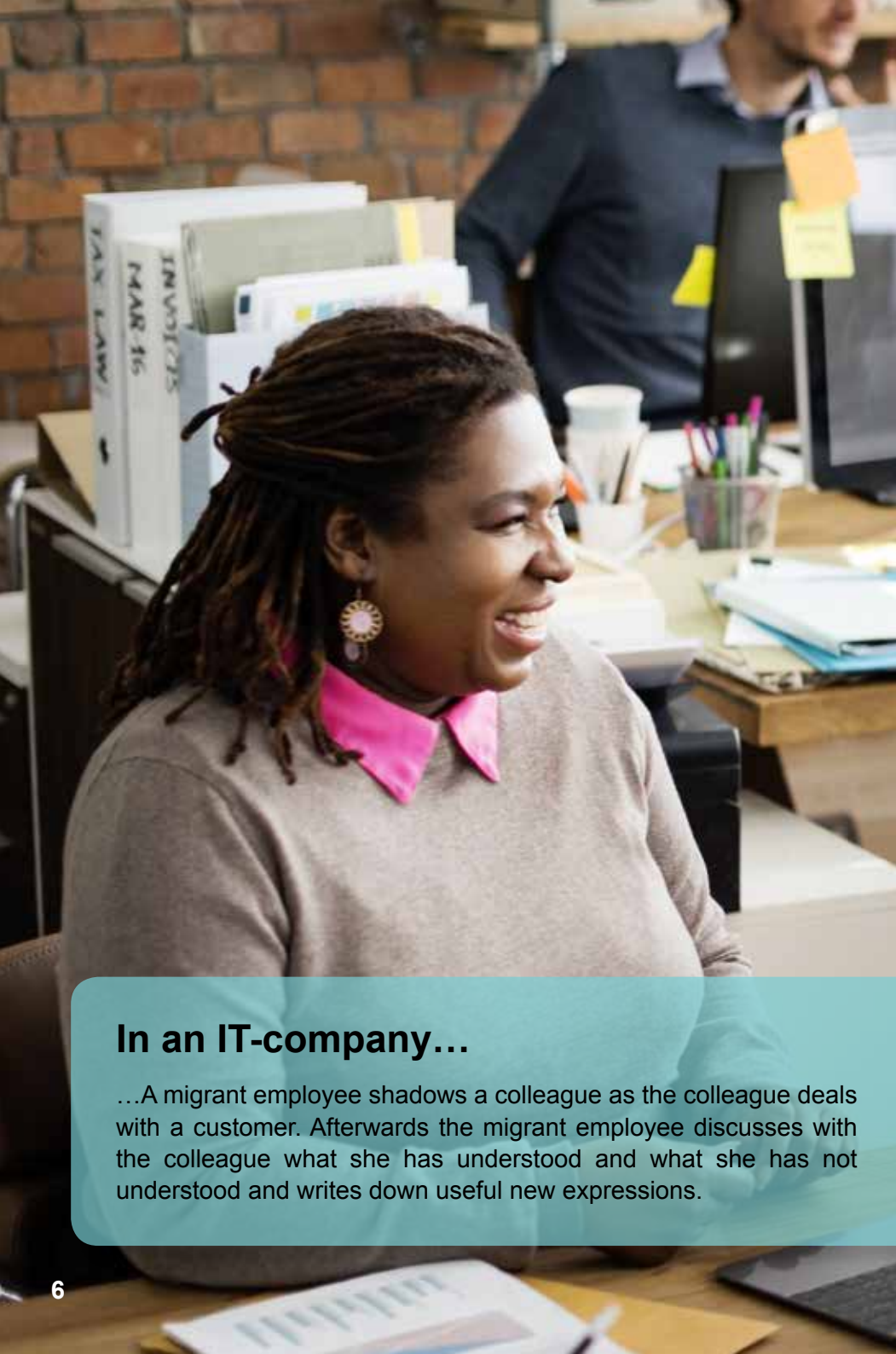
At work, people need to be able to

- 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!

## At a metal processing plant...

...An apprentice teaches new migrant employees the terms for machines and tools during clean-up time on Friday afternoon. Some of the new migrant employees write the names on adhesive strips then stick them on the tools. Others take photos on their phones and label the pictures.





## 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<sup>1</sup>, whatever the communicative demands of the job itself. Likewise, national quality standards and regulations for specific sectors, e.g. health and social care.

Also worth noting is the increasing requirement across all jobs for workers to process information and communicate effectively.

### In an IT-company...

...A migrant employee shadows a colleague as the colleague deals with a customer. Afterwards the migrant employee discusses with the colleague what she has understood and what she has not understood and writes down useful new expressions.

#### 1 Understanding CEFR language levels

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability. It has six levels: A1, A2 (Basic user), B1, B2 (Independent user), C1, C2 (Proficient user). At level B1, a language user can communicate essential points and ideas in familiar contexts.

Find out more here: [www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages](http://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages)



## 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.).

## In a plastics processing company...

...A colleague teaches a migrant teammate how to describe machine operating procedures, directly at the machine.







## 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 competence 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.

### **At a food processing company...**

...After attending formal language training at work, staff create flashcards for key terms used at work. Staff use the flashcards at work to remind each other of what terminology to use and when.

# 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.

## On a farm...

...Managers meet to agree what terms employees need to know related to a new harvester. In training for employees, managers focus on these terms and issue employees with a handout explaining exactly what the terms mean, using diagrams wherever possible.



# 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.

## 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.

---

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2016), "How skills are used in the workplace", in *Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skill*. Paris: OECD Publishing. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264258051-7-en>

## 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

### In a care home...

...At the staff meeting, the manager briefs staff then lets staff discuss the briefing in pairs. The manager pairs native speaker staff with migrant staff to help ensure everyone understands.



## 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

To acquire another language, the learner needs to be open (i.e. receptive) to learning. To make progress, it is important they feel both motivated and capable of learning the language. Encouragement and support help migrants to feel positive about their learning and to persist with it.

### Opportunity to use the language in real-life situations

To gain communicative competence, migrants need exposure to as much real language – spoken and written – as possible. They also need as much

### At a hospital...

...Nurses create a script to help migrant staff greet visitors and respond to telephone enquiries appropriately.

### On a healthcare course at university...

...Migrants learners take part in interactive clinical case scenarios to practise using language in context.

practice interacting in the language as possible. The more authentic and meaningful these interactions are, the more useful they are to the learner.

### **Help to notice and understand the forms of the language**

To benefit fully from exposure to the language and their interactions in it, learners need to pay attention to how the language works, including its pronunciation and its grammar. Support to study these things is helpful.

### **Help to notice and understand social norms and expectations around communication**

To communicate effectively learners need to understand social norms and expectations around communication, particularly at work.

### **Corrective feedback**

Corrective feedback helps learners to notice how the language works, identify their mistakes and communicate more effectively. When it is personalised and constructive, corrective feedback is also highly motivating to individuals.

### **Help to develop effective personal learning strategies**

To make progress, migrants will need to reinforce and extend any formal instruction with informal, self-directed learning. To do that, they will need learning strategies that work for them personally.



## **Help migrants to learn outside of the classroom**

Whether or not a migrant is attending formal classes, opportunities for informal language learning are all around them: social interactions, contact with public services, news and entertainment media, online learning resources and, for those in employment, work itself all present valuable informal learning opportunities.

Confident individuals with experience of language learning are likely to take advantage of these opportunities, but migrants with less confidence and less experience of language learning may not.

### **Help migrants take better advantage of informal language learning opportunities**

- Give migrants guidance on informal language learning, e.g. as part of integration and formal language learning programmes
- Raise awareness in the wider community of the valuable role neighbours and work colleagues, public services, the media and employers can play in helping migrants to learn informally
- Offer training to e.g. employers, providers of public services (including shops and cafes), community organisations on how to interact with migrants in ways that help migrants to improve their language skills

## **Beware of the low-pay, limited-language trap**

Migrants who arrive in your country with limited language skills and limited financial resources face a dilemma. They need to find work and build a support network as quickly as possible, but their lack of language skills limits them to low-skilled jobs and to friends who speak their own language.

Typically, low-skilled work is low-paid, with little or no support for language development. Migrants must work long hours to earn sufficient income, leaving them little time, money or energy for language learning. Outside of work, they are among friends and family who speak their own language. Despite living in your country, their opportunity to interact in its language may actually be quite limited.

## Support learning at work

With the right support, work itself offers many opportunities for language development. Workplace support is particularly valuable for migrants working in low-paid jobs, for whom language learning at work may be the only realistic option (see Beware of the low-paid, limited-language trap on page 14).

See Some practical ways to support language development at work on page 17 for examples of how to support language development at work.

Where support requires funding and other resources, it is helpful if employers, learning providers and the state (at both local and national levels) can come together as strategic partners.



### In a warehouse...

...The team leader helps migrant staff to feel part of the team by involving them in the conversation at breaks and at lunch time.



## How to gain the support of managers

Generally speaking, employers and their managers will support educational initiatives for staff providing that the initiative

- directly benefits the organisation (i.e. helps to achieve organisational objectives)
- respects the organisation's operational priorities and constraints (e.g. difficulty in releasing staff to attend classroom learning during work hours).

Individual managers may vary in their enthusiasm for the initiative. To gain their support, you will need to build rapport and win their trust.

Do that by listening carefully to their priorities and concerns. Find out what they are already doing to support staff, e.g. through vocational training, supervision and team work. Where do they feel additional support would be helpful?

Then consider how the educational initiative that you are promoting might help managers to achieve their goals. Ask managers what they

### At a cleaning company...

...The manager wants to make the employee handbook more accessible to migrant staff. The teacher spends a couple of hours with the manager going through the handbook and helping the manager to rewrite it in language that migrant staff will find easier to understand. The teacher builds rapport with the manager and learns more about the business from the manager's perspective.



think. How can it be improved? Insofar as you can, tailor your initiative accordingly.

Talk also to staff (both migrants and non-migrants). Gather evidence of their enthusiasm for the proposed initiative. This may help to persuade sceptical managers.

In the design of your initiative, look for opportunities to benefit all staff, including managers themselves. This might include

- informal coaching for managers on communication skills or cultural awareness
- formal training on, for example, diversity.

## **Workplace tips**

Respect employer hierarchies and formal decision-making processes, but pay attention to internal relationships and be aware that influential decision-makers may exist at all levels of the organisation, including among shop floor staff and trade union officials.

Try not to become overly dependent on the support of any one individual.

Never take anything you hear at face value. There are invariably two or more sides to every story in a workplace. Try to hear as many sides as possible before drawing any conclusions.

Always respect the confidentiality of individuals and remember that anything you say is liable to be repeated to others.

As a general principle: knowledge speaks, wisdom listens.

# **Some practical ways to support language development at work**

## **Check that workplace communication is clear and accessible**

Review the clarity and accessibility of spoken and written communications at work. Are documents written in clear, concise language? Do managers and supervisors speak in ways migrant employees can understand?

## **Support peer learning, coaching and mentoring**

Help migrant staff develop their language skills by buddying them with colleagues who are proficient speakers. Support migrant staff to form informal study groups at work. Encourage staff to act as informal 'language champions' and show them how to coach and mentor migrant colleagues.

## **Support reflective discussion at work**

All staff benefit from the opportunity to discuss their work. For migrant staff, these discussions are particularly valuable. They offer migrant staff a chance not only to practice their language skills, but also to broaden their understanding of the cultural concepts and assumptions that shape how we use language.

## **Make available lists of key terminology**

Collect important, frequently-used terms, e.g. terms central to operational procedures, customer service, employment issues, etc. and make lists of these terms easily available to migrant employees, including in digital format.

## **Train managers and supervisors in how to give instructions**

Show managers and supervisors how to explain things in short sentences with lots of repetition, demonstrating what they mean as they go: e.g. 'I take the hand scanner, I keep it on the EAN-Code. I press the button and wait until it beeps. Now I have registered the packet.'

## **Support meetings with key words on flip charts and cards**

Before a meeting, visualize important issues using key words in clear writing on large cards, flip-charts, etc. Arrange them so that everyone in the meeting can see them. Briefly explain them at the start of the meeting and again when they occur during the meeting.

## **Make documents available in advance**

Make relevant documents available for staff to review in advance of any meeting or activity so staff can work through the document at their own pace and get help if they need it.

## **Take advantage of digital technology**

Encourage staff to make the most of the many tools available through digital technology that can support language development, including online dictionaries, automatic translation, spell checkers, grammar aids, audio-visual recording functions, etc., as well as online courses (many are free of charge). Apps can be used to offer learners a virtual helpdesk to which they can send in their language questions.

## **Encourage migrant staff to notice terminology**

Suggest to migrant staff that they note down any unfamiliar terminology they encounter at work so they can discuss it later. This will help them to become more autonomous as learners.

## **Help managers, supervisors and colleagues understand when to correct migrant staff**

Correcting language mistakes during an interaction may hinder communication. Agree when to correct beforehand. Of course, if a mistake could lead to misunderstanding, it must be addressed immediately.

## **Help managers, supervisors and colleagues learn how to check understanding**

Asking someone, 'Do you understand?' is not very helpful. Too often, the person just says, 'Yes.' Instead, ask open questions that require the person to demonstrate their understanding, e.g. 'Can you tell me which materials we use for this, please?' Or 'What will you do first?'

## **Acknowledge and reward staff for their learning**

Learning a new language under the pressure of everyday life and work is hard work. Recognise that work by commending migrant staff for their efforts and rewarding them.

## **Remember, the more involved local managers are, the better.**



## More on how to develop work-related language skills

### Language for Work Network

The Language for Work Network is a not-for-profit membership organisation that works on a voluntary basis to

- raise awareness and promote work-related language learning for adult migrants and ethnic minorities at national and European levels.
- enable all working in this field to share expertise and resources
- provide networking and professional development opportunities
- support the development of theoretical / conceptual models, practice models, quality frameworks.

Website: <http://languageforwork.ecml.at>

### Network resource centre

The Network's online resource centre offers a wide range of free resources on all aspects of work-related language learning for adult migrants and ethnic minorities.

Website: <http://languageforwork.ecml.at/ResourceCentre>



EN

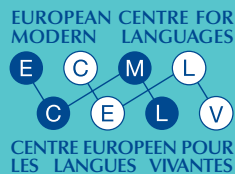
[www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at)

The European Centre for Modern Languages is a Council of Europe institution promoting excellence in language education in its member states.

[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It includes 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union.

All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.



[www.ecml.at/languageforwork](http://www.ecml.at/languageforwork)