



Working with volunteers:

OPPORTUNITIES & DIFFICULTIES

Why work with volunteers in the first place? What benefits can they bring?

Volunteers can augment and support the language teaching we're able to provide as paid teachers. They can act as an extra listening ear, giving more students more talking time, support and attention.

They may be able to help with practical support, when you just need a spare pair of hands, like setting out chairs or collecting photocopies. Where mixed level groups are unavoidable, volunteers can help the teacher make the lesson accessible to a wider range of students.

The PROS:

Volunteers can:

- Give students more attention and opportunities to talk
- Help manage classes with mixed levels and/or complex needs
- Offer knowledge and experience of the local area / country
- Build supportive relationships with students

Language learning groups of any kind also have many benefits beyond just language learning – they're an opportunity for people to make connections and exchange knowledge and experience. Conversations may arise about how the school system works, or how to access medical care, for example. Volunteers may have knowledge and skills to share in these kind of exchanges. They are likely to have lived in the country for some time themselves and be able to support with navigating bureaucracy, accessing services or answering questions about how things work.

The class will also, hopefully, act as a supportive community where people enjoy their time together. Volunteers can add to this sense of community by being a warm, welcoming presence. They may have things that they have in common with students - perhaps they live in the same area, speak some of the same languages or come from the same cultural or religious background. The teacher may be able to facilitate activities in class which reveal other shared interests, hobbies or experiences. These connections between learners and those in a teaching or supportive role help build the community in the class.

However, some teachers are wary of working with volunteers. An ineffectual volunteer can hinder learning by

error correcting inappropriately, dominating conversations with learners or making lesson planning difficult through their inconsistent attendance. Teachers may not be paid for the extra time and effort that is involved in recruiting, inducting or managing a volunteer.

If you'd like to work with volunteers but have some doubts about how to proceed, this toolkit outlines the fruits of our research on how to get started. It looks at effective volunteer recruitment, induction and some tips for how to work well together. In short, how to make the most of what volunteers may have to offer, whilst safeguarding against the risks involved in inviting a new person into your classroom.

In our experience, it's worth taking some time to set up a mutually beneficial teacher-volunteer relationship. Clear communication and ground rules at the beginning of the relationship help prevent some of the unhelpful volunteer behaviours mentioned above.

It takes time to set up a new relationship. No matter how formal and well organised the intake and induction of new volunteers may be, a fair bit of chaos or friction at the beginning of the relationship is inevitable. If you let someone

The CONS:

Volunteers can:

- Attend inconsistently, making lesson planning difficult
- Error correct inappropriately
- Talk too much, not giving students space to talk
- Create extra work for teachers who aren't paid extra to induct or support volunteers



else in your classroom there will be a period of adjustment. It is our task as teachers to be open to new ideas and unexpected behaviour that challenges our view on good teaching. In turn, we can share our pedagogical skills and experience with volunteers. In other words: we teach them to be assistant teachers. All being well, this will be a fruitful process - well worth the time involved.

“It is our first job to make the students feel noticed in the classroom, and with help from the volunteers it is easier to consider every student and give them a feeling of being paid attention to.”

Teacher, Austria



DOES VOLUNTEERING UNDERMINE PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHING?



The mention of ‘volunteers’ amongst teachers can cause concern for those working in countries, like the UK, where paid professional language teaching are losing jobs and funding and sometimes being replaced by volunteer provision. That is why, this toolkit focuses explicitly on the work of paid teachers alongside volunteers.

However, we know from our research that many unpaid volunteers across Europe are organising classes for refugees and often acting as teachers where no funding or paid teachers are available. Often these volunteer-run classes are the only provision that refugees have

access to. Volunteer groups are also doing innovative work around informal language provision. We want to celebrate the generosity of the volunteers acting in this way.

At the same time, we also want to make the case in this toolkit for the importance of properly paid and trained language teachers. Professional teachers can offer a level of expertise and consistency that only the most dedicated and financially independent volunteers can match. They’re therefore vital to supporting refugees to learn language and participate fully in the new communities in which they find themselves.