



# #1

# SUPPORTING TEACHERS

*in the classroom*

## THE CONCEPT

Volunteers support teachers by helping to supervise activities in the classroom, working with learners on an individual, small group or whole class basis. Some volunteers work on a one-to-one basis with beginner or very advanced learners.

Volunteers can make a big difference for the teachers and for the learners. Thanks to volunteers, the teacher can spend more time with learners who have questions or require more support.

In contrast to all the other contexts of volunteering presented in this toolkit, you are likely to be guided, supervised and accompanied by a teacher throughout your volunteering in the classroom. The teacher will give you more scope to act. Is ultimately in charge of their class, so do what you can to make sure you're on the same wavelength and understand each other well.

When assisting a teacher in the classroom, they may ask you to carry out the following tasks:

### Classroom Monitor

You can be checking for students':

- accurate pronunciation
- reading comprehension
- accurate grammar
- general comprehension of the activity



"Having a volunteer in the classroom makes a big difference to the teacher, because you often have these mixed levels. Although the students support each other a lot, it can help to divide those groups."

### Teacher, UK



You can also provide extra conversation for shyer or quieter students, and opportunities to interact with another expert speaker. When the teacher presents new activities, the volunteer can sit with students who are a little lower than the others and help them understand the instructions

### Co-Presenter

You can assist the teacher in presenting new activities, for example, taking a role in a dialogue with the teacher. In a conversation you can play the other role so that it will sound and appear more authentic for the students.

### One-on-One Tutor

You can help students with special needs one-to-one. This can be helpful for a student with low levels of literacy compared to others in the class. One-to-one support can also be helpful if a student is preparing for a specific challenging situation, like a test for a driving permit or citizenship, or a job interview, and it is not appropriate for the whole group to work on the topic at that time.

### Special Project: e.g. Job Interviews

After the learners have practised interviews in class for a while, you can roleplay an interview situation, with you conducting the interview in the role of a potential employer. In a location outside the classroom, you can make the situation as real-life as possible, greeting the student formally and



asking a variety of questions specific to the job the student is interested in.

## FIRST STEPS (TO BECOMING A SUPPORTING VOLUNTEER IN THE CLASSROOM)

If you decide that you'd like to volunteer in a language class, contact language schools and other adult learning organisations to find out if they work with volunteers. If they have volunteer vacancies, the volunteer coordinator may well invite you for a selection interview. Be prepared and find out for yourself what you want to do as a volunteer in the classroom. Why are you interested in this kind of volunteering? Do you know the school's policy? Are you happy with a job supporting the teacher?

### First Meeting

If possible, request a meeting with teacher you'll be working with to discuss your responsibilities, the specific needs of individual students and the language school's approach to language learning. Does the teacher want you to work with all learners or only with the lowest level? Are you allowed to translate or should you explain vocabulary in the language students are learning? What does the teacher want from you in terms of error correction? Bring a list of specific questions and concerns to make the most of your scheduled time. Often teachers are doubtful about working with a volunteer for fear the volunteer might take over the classroom. Make clear this will not be the case.

### Boundaries

Before you start your volunteer experience, have a clear idea of what your personal boundaries are. Are you willing to discuss aspects of your personal life such as your relationships and children? People might ask you a lot of personal questions. You don't have to disclose anything that you don't want to talk about.

### Be Open-Minded

Don't judge the teacher's teaching methods, especially during your first few volunteer sessions. The teacher is trained for the job they are doing and likely has a lot of experience. Observe what is going on in the classroom. There may be reasons why the teacher takes decisions that might appear counterproductive at the start but that work out well in the end.

### Communication

Ask the teacher what kind of communication they prefer. Is it ok to send an email, text or to phone? Try to be on time, or arrive in advance if this is what the teacher prefers - it might be necessary to exchange information before the class

starts. If needed, be available also for a few moments after the class for a debriefing. Let the teacher know if you're having difficulty with a task. Persevering with something the wrong way may create more work for the teacher than taking a few minutes to ask questions during the process.

## BASIC IDEAS AND CONTENT

Even if lesson content is provided by the teacher you might want to add your own input to particular lessons. Talk to the teacher about what you could add. For example, you could tell your own story or bring a meaningful object to the classroom to tell students about. If you feel like your contribution to the class could be helpful suggest it to the teacher. You'll be supporting the teacher and working together as a team.

### Methods

Most teachers use the communicative approach to language learning: students are encouraged to talk and explore what a text is about. Expressing and exchanging ideas is more important than the perfect use of grammar. This might be very different from the way you learned languages yourself. This approach is based on scientific research and has proven to be more effective than the grammar approach you may have worked with as a student. Don't turn the clock back - see for yourself what the benefits of communicative language learning are for the learners.

### Feedback

As a volunteer you might want to correct the errors the learners make. Talk with your teacher about their policy on feedback and error correction. The degree of correction will depend on the aims of the activity and the teacher will have an idea of what errors are productive to focus on. (Cross Reference to Error Correction and Feedback)

### Lesson Plans

Teachers usually work to lesson plans and decide lesson content in advance. If you want to prepare yourself you could ask to see lesson plans in advance of the class as well. You can reflect on lesson plans with the following questions:

- What could I do to contribute to this topic?
- How will I be supporting the teacher during different activities (role play, one-to-one, monitoring the classroom)?
- How can I rehearse the vocabulary with the learners?

Discuss your contribution with the teacher. Of course you want to reduce the teacher's workload, not add to it, so take responsibility for preparing any of your own ideas.



## CHALLENGES

### So Much to Do

Chances are good that you'll arrive in a busy classroom with beginners who can't communicate much in the target language. Where do you start? Observe how the teacher manages the classroom and makes sure everybody is able to speak and learn. You'll quickly see which learners have more difficulty and which learners are quicker. After the lesson talk to teacher about how you can best support. This could include discussing the specific needs of different students and how you might help them. It can be useful to check in with the teacher at least a few times at the beginning of your placement, to find your way. When the teacher can rely on you, lessons will go smoothly.

### Find Your Role

Sometimes, as a volunteer, it can be hard to find your place in the school/organisation. If in doubt, ask. Some institutions have teachers' lounges reserved for staff, for example, and volunteers eat separately at lunch. We hope that wherever you are volunteering makes you feel welcome but unfortunately volunteers can sometimes be something of an afterthought. You can always ask if the rules and etiquette of this kind aren't clear.

### Collabouration

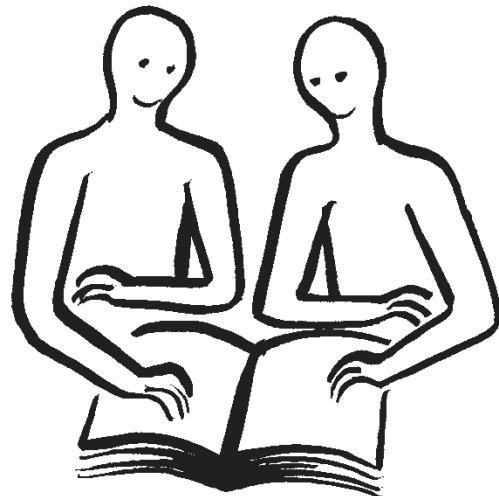
Before you came, the teacher may have been alone in the classroom. Teachers set up the classroom their way and their style of interacting with the learners might be very different to your own. Try to adapt and make sure the teacher knows what you're able to do. Do you have some skills - like singing, drawing, acting - or areas of interest that might come in useful? Once you get to know the teacher and the class well enough, you can always offer up these talents or areas of knowledge.. This can help learners get to know you better or just make lessons more enjoyable. The teacher may be happy for you to contribute to the class community in this way.

### If Things Go Wrong

Sometimes you try your best to help out as a volunteer, but things don't work out. Perhaps communication between you and the teacher isn't working for whatever reason. In this scenario you could also try talking to the teacher about the communication difficulties. Perhaps they'll want to find a way forward and come to a better understanding. There may also be a volunteer coordinator you can talk to who can match you with another teacher or opportunity that's a better fit. Maybe there are other volunteering activities that you'd prefer. There will be other possibilities, so don't let this misadventure get you down. Volunteering is also a learning process after all.

## GROUND RULES

If you support teachers in the classroom, stick to their rules as much as possible. It is they who set the agenda, determine error correction and decide on priorities.





# HAPPY MEMORIES

October 2018. 25 migrant learners in a classroom full of pictures. Most people know their way around the classroom, and Patrick does too. He started as a volunteer at CVO VOLT just a few weeks ago. After a career as a headmaster he wanted to do something for society and decided to dedicate some time to others. That's why he started to look for opportunities to volunteer. When he saw CVO VOLT's ad in a newspaper, he immediately sent an email to the coordinator and a week later he was back in the classroom, not as headmaster but as volunteer. Joke, the class teacher, is happy to have a volunteer with teaching experience in her group. "But volunteers don't need to have experience in teaching", she points out. There are certain skills that matter. Volunteers particularly need listening skills and patience. Patience to wait until the person has spoken and patience to speak more slowly than usual. "They also need the patience to let the learners think. The learners may not give the answers immediately" Joke says.

Patrick was at ease in the lessons, explaining exercises or having a conversation with more advanced learners who finished their work early. "Teaching changes lives forever", Patrick says. When the coordinator asked him if he'd like to take part in a storytelling project with the migrant learners he was thrilled. After two meetings with the teacher they decided the project would be about memories and places. When migrants arrive in the new country, memories are often the only thing that's left to them. Teachers and volunteers felt creating a bond between the migrants and their new town would help them express themselves better and feel more at ease in the new language they're learn-

ing. Patrick is one of four volunteers in this project, and he is the only one with teaching experience.

After some icebreakers, the first lesson of the project focussed on memories. The teachers used storytelling techniques to encourage the learners to talk about their own country. The volunteers involved did so too. Patrick talked about the memories of his childhood, how the town changed and what he did in his free time when he was a teenager. It was nice for the learners to talk and listen to a native speaker who wasn't the teacher and barriers disappeared rapidly. Next step was to choose a place in town the learners could relate to, something that made them think of their home country. Some chose the botanical garden, the town hall, the market, a school or the theatre. The learners went home with one assignment: explain why they had chosen this place. One week later learners, teachers and volunteers went to the city and visited each other's favourite places. They explained why they liked it so much, what kind of memories they revealed etc. The final exercise was back in the classroom. Together with Patrick and another volunteer involved in the project, the learners shared their experiences based on pictures that were taken during the walk in town. All the participants exchanged memories and told the others which memory had touched them most.

Volunteers, teachers and learners were happy to take part in the project. They learned about each other's culture, gained self confidence in expressing themselves in Dutch and enjoyed practicing their new language.