

Language training in the Czech Republic

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Language skills are crucial for the integration of refugees into the local community. In the Czech Republic, all persons granted international protection have the legal right to language tuition but a recent study by UNHCR revealed serious shortcomings in provision.

Provision of language training is one of the three main pillars of the government's State Integration Programme (SIP) in the Czech Republic. In 2007 the Ministry of Education financed the production of a new set of textbooks prepared especially for the language instruction of refugees. But teaching such a variety of individuals using the same textbook for all is not and cannot be a successful way forward. Those seeking international protection inevitably comprise people of different age groups; ethnically, linguistically and culturally different individuals; people with different experience, levels of education, abilities, goals and personal histories.

The textbooks do not take into consideration that elderly people, persons with mental disabilities or illiterate individuals will be taking the courses as well as highly educated professionals wishing to pursue careers in their new home. Given the heterogeneity of the group, one would expect that each person would have an individualised teaching plan based on the initial assessment of their language competencies as well as their needs, abilities and personal goals. UNHCR's research¹ revealed that the refugees attending the language courses were not asked about their personal goals, nor were their needs properly assessed. A young refugee preparing him/herself to study at a university was taught with the same aims and methods as an elderly lady wanting to acquire new social contacts or a young mother whose aim was to be able to hold a conversation with parents and teachers at school.

To date the courses have not incorporated the use of modern technologies – computer language

programmes, use of online dictionaries, video programmes etc. These should be standard teaching tools when educating younger refugees, who indeed expressed dissatisfaction with the rigidity of the teaching methods used.

UNHCR has also discovered that children under 16 years of age are not being offered free language training. The consequences of this omission are potentially serious. They include not only difficulties of inclusion in the education system but also potential delays in cognitive, social and psychological development as well as setbacks in future educational and work opportunities for these children.

The reasons for this omission remain unclear. The Czech Ministry of Education claims that children under 16 are obliged to attend government-funded primary schools, which should provide refugee children with language support. Besides the fact that attendance at primary school should not replace a child's entitlement to language training under the SIP, UNHCR's research shows that refugee children in the Czech Republic in many cases do not receive any special language training at all at school. And what is more, schools are not obliged to offer language courses to refugee children. Any support provided depends solely on the initiative of individual teachers, who may offer support – often in their free time – to refugee pupils.

Furthermore, not all those who are older than 16 receive the language training to which they are entitled. Administrative shortcomings apparently led to a failure to inform them of this right, and between 2007 and 2009 some 20% of eligible adults did not receive language instruction.



Way forward

If language instruction is to be effective from the point of view of both the refugees themselves and the state (in the sense of effective use of public money), changes must be made. First of all, the voices of refugees need to be listened to. Participation of 'students' in the decision-making processes is crucial for the language training to be successful. Their needs and personal goals must be assessed and agreed in advance and then evaluated during and following instruction. Only then can it be seen whether the training was successful or not.

The state has yet to solve the current unsatisfactory situation in the language training of refugee children. Experience and research clearly show that without any external help Czech schools will not be able to offer the necessary language support to their refugee pupils. Financial support through the SIP for all schools educating refugee children would be a significant step forward for the actual provision of language training for all refugees in the Czech Republic.

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1. 'Analysis of the State of the Language Training within the State Integration Programme in the Period of 2007-2009', available at: <http://tinyurl.com/UNHCRcz-lan-training>
See also: <http://tinyurl.com/UNHCRcz-education>