

# Fostering foreign language acquisition in young refugees using mobile devices: The YouRNI project experience

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*Integration of technology into foreign language learning could extend the opportunities for language contact and better retention in the context of newly arrived refugees in the European countries. Research has shown that technology increases the motivation in foreign language learning and also fosters learner autonomy by allowing the learners to personalise the learning and enables them to self-regulate. The use of mobile technologies for language learning is also in accordance with a constructivist approach that caters for learner involvement and agency in the learning process not only in classrooms but outside the classroom as well. Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants readily have mobile devices at hand which could also be used in the classrooms where they are learning new languages. The teachers should also be able to exploit these devices to develop refugees' language skills. These reasons have become the driving force behind the YouRNI project that focuses on the refugee crisis in Europe, giving particular attention to inclusive schooling of asylum seekers and migrants in vocational schools (age 15+). This paper covers the initial findings of the project needs analysis as well as literature review to disseminate best practices on the use of mobile devices and apps in teaching languages of the host countries to the refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.*

**KEYWORDS:** YouRNI project, migrant education, language learning apps, integrating refugees, individual learning, Erasmus +, vocational education and training (VET)



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The so-called refugee crisis is a challenge to governments, societies and citizens across Europe.

Leading European politicians emphasise that solutions and problem-solving strategies should rely on joint European approaches rather than stand-alone steps taken by any single country.

Erasmus+ is an important instrument in supporting

European policy agenda and promoting common European values, for example in order to prevent violent radicalisation.

Hence, the Paris Declaration has led to an add-on of the Erasmus+ priorities, and the YouRNI project addresses these updated priorities by focusing on the integration of young refugees in Europe, giving

particular attention to language learning, employability and inclusive schooling of asylum seekers and migrants in vocational schools (age 15+) for successful integration. The project aims at making the best use of technologies, i.e. learning apps for the host country's language, and addresses the English language as the European lingua franca to allow young refugees to play an active role in political and social life.

Schools and teachers are key agents supporting the settlement of refugee youths in their host country as they not only provide intensive language and learning support, but also promote a positive image of refugees and asylum seekers and oppose stereotypes and negative views of forced migrants. However, providing education and inclusion services for refugees is a big challenge, which is why teacher training activities are at the very core of the YouRNI project underlined by European values.

Current debate on the refugee crisis shows that a lot of European citizens and refugees need help, support, information exchange and reorientation in order to comprehend these values, especially in the context of a demanding situation. Everybody has to find their position, and teachers and teacher trainers are crucial players providing for the sharing of European values, because their beliefs will decide if and how these values are represented, discussed and transferred in the

classroom. They can promote cultural awareness, enhance intercultural understanding, and demonstrate that diversity should be seen as a chance, rather than as a threat to social cohesion. In this sense, the YouRNI project is of decisive importance in focusing on European values which form the foundation of the European Union and the Erasmus+ idea.

## **2. THE YouRNI PROJECT**

The YouRNI project (2016-2019) aims at testing, evaluating, and spreading working methods and materials for disadvantaged pupils, specifically young refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. It will strengthen inclusive education by using and adapting a very popular and accepted tool of the target group, mobile devices, especially language apps, as an incentive and a driver to create better opportunities for young refugees. Learning apps will be used to improve language learning, and social partners and other VET (Vocational Education and Training) providers will be involved in fostering young refugee's employability. Participants will use their knowledge of regional structures and contacts and experiences of vocational schools to help young migrants enter the labour market.

The research conducted in the YouRNI project so far has focused on (1) selecting, evaluating, testing and disseminating language learning apps that have proven to be successful in the language

learning classroom; 2) enhancing the individual learning time of each learner and improving the usage of these apps by creating accompanying materials for learning outside the classroom, e.g. written materials, 'explain-it' videos or similar materials; 3) exchanging best practices of schools giving career guidance to young refugees, e.g. involving schools, employment agencies, Chambers of Commerce and other stakeholders which show a particular interest in integrating young refugees into the labour market; 4) relevant career guidance; 5) starting a specialised network for teachers who work in this special target group of young refugees, asylum seekers or similar groups.

The main objectives are integrated into the project title: *'Integration of young refugees: Using mobile devices leading to better language acquisition and relevant career guidance'*. Thus, the key objective will lie in improving integration of young refugees by focusing on the following crucial aspects.

1. Using mobile devices in a two-tier approach: (1) learning-apps for better language acquisition, i.e. selecting, evaluating, testing and disseminating language learning apps that have proven to be successful in the language learning classroom; and (2) promoting apps and websites for career guidance.
2. Increasing the individual learning time of each

learner and improving the usage of language apps in order to make students continue learning their target language outside the classroom, e.g. by creating accompanying materials for learning outside the classroom, by written materials, 'explain-it' videos, free online language courses, links to Goethe Institut, BBC, Webinars, MOOCS or similar materials.

3. Exchanging best practice between schools giving career guidance to young refugees, e.g. involving employment agencies, Chambers of Commerce and other stakeholders which show a particular interest in integrating young refugees into the labour market; different countries have developed various strategies on how to support refugees to enter the labour market. In order to cast light on these different strategies, YouRNI will use and spread the expertise of project partners on the regional, national and European level, e.g. with the help of the project's dissemination concept.
4. Focusing on the technical aspect of the project: using language apps means as a reliable IT-infrastructure at schools, concepts like Bring-your-own-device (BYOD) or Bring-your-own-internet (BYOI), and the use of refugees' hardware pose a challenge because of the different platforms being used (iOS, Android and their different versions).
5. Focusing on the legal aspect of free Internet

access for students. This causes security issues with different answers in different countries to be discussed.

6. Considering the Erasmus+ field of 'Strategic Partnership'. YouRNI wants to initiate a network connecting teachers who work with this special target group of young refugees, asylum seekers or similar groups. The exchange of best practice should be an everyday routine and not just a topic of an Erasmus+ project.

Project partners are Berufliches Seminar Karlsruhe Germany (coordinating partner), Education Group Austria, Escuela Profesional Otxarkoaga Spain, Veneto Lavoro Italy, Falun Borlänge Regionen AB Sweden, Istanbul University–Cerrahpaşa Turkey, Landesinstitut für Schulentwicklung, Baden-Württemberg Germany (associated partner), Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport, Baden-Württemberg Germany (associated partner), Pädagogische Hochschule Zug Switzerland (associated partner).

YouRNI addresses the Erasmus+ field of 'Strategic Partnerships for School Education'. The main target group are teachers, and the project's first and foremost goal is to support partners to develop networks for teachers involved in the education and training of refugees and asylum seekers and give their work a European perspective. The schooling, education and integration of young

refugees needs carefully selected teachers with a special knowledge of how to deal with diversified groups of learners. A deep understanding of intercultural competence, profound experience in integration training and the acceptance of diversity in our society is at the centre of these teachers' profile helping build more cohesive and inclusive societies. The applicant organisation and two more partners are teacher training institutions thus emphasising teachers' needs for further qualification to promote intercultural dialogue, improve L2-didactics of app-based language learning and foster the inclusion and employability of young refugees.

Project target groups can be identified as follows: (1) in-service teachers involved in the schooling of refugees; (2) teacher trainees of young refugees: three partners are teacher training institutions, and many teacher trainees are asking for extra-qualification in the schooling of refugees; (3) young refugees in VET-schools, mostly 15+.

The YouRNI project will have four transnational project meetings with a sequence of three questionnaires leading to the use and improvement of a learning package for learning inside and outside the classroom. A two-tier approach will be the guideline, looking both into app-based language learning and career guidance supported by mobile devices. The project applies a methodology that rests on six pillars: networking,

*‘The project applies a methodology that rests on six pillars: networking, needs analysis, development, collecting results, improvement, and presentation and dissemination’*

needs analysis, development, collecting results, improvement, and presentation and dissemination.

Six teacher training seminars will be organised around the topics covered by the YouRNI project:

1. Istanbul/Turkey: ‘English as the European lingua franca for young refugees in order to participate actively in European politics and develop a better understanding of European common values.’
2. Bilbao/Spain: ‘Examining and applying didactics of L2 acquisition for young refugees using integration training as a frame.’
3. Linz/Austria: ‘Reviewing media and materials for young refugees in German-speaking countries.’
4. Veneto/Italy: ‘Using educational biographies and Europass as a tool for career guidance to improve employability of young refugees.’
5. Zug/Switzerland: ‘Designing a teacher training

qualification course for L2-refugee classes using ECTS as a European instrument in state-controlled teacher training.’

6. Karlsruhe/Germany: ‘Developing a course on vocational language training for young refugees fostering intercultural competence.’

### **3. SYRIAN REFUGEES AND THEIR CURRENT STATUS IN TURKEY**

Throughout the YouRNI project, the Turkish team has contributed with solid information from the ‘kitchen floor’ in Turkey. It is reported that the number of Syrian refugees has exceeded three million (Şahin & Sümer, 2018). While some argue that Syrian refugees arriving in Turkey end up being registered multiple times as they move from city to city, the Turkish state persists with the number of 3.5 million refugees in its official statements.

As of March 2017, the conflict has led nearly five million Syrian refugees to flee their country. Among these refugees around three million currently reside in Turkey. Approximately 880,000 of the refugees living in Turkey are of school-age (between ages of 5 to 19), of whom 45% attend schools in Turkey (Aras & Yasun, 2016). Erdoğan and Erdoğan (2018) however argue that seven to eight million people fled from Syria and as of November 2017, the total number of Syrian refugees in Turkey amounted to 3.5 million. 33,3%

of the registered refugees in Turkey are reported to be illiterate and only 5,6% hold high school or higher diplomas.

A recent poll conducted in 2017 among Syrian refugees living in big cities found that 73% of all Syrian refugees will remain in Turkey. Aras and Yasun (2016) find that about 65% of Syrians (including approximately 572,000 children) are expected to remain in Turkey even after the war concludes. Integrating such a large number of students is going to be a critical component of Turkey's development trajectory. This has led Turkey to consider some solutions for the integration of Syrian refugees. It is estimated that over 300.000 babies have been born since the influx of Syrian refugees both in camps and in the cities where they currently reside.

In this context, education becomes very important in the integration and language acquisition processes. According to Aras and Yasun (2016), education benefits the refugee community, especially refugee children, by increasing socio-economic status and mitigating the psychosocial effects of conflict and achieving protection related objectives. Education is a useful mechanism to reduce the psychosocial impact of displacement and trauma. The personalities and coping skills of school-age children are being shaped almost daily. Due to the disruption of their physical, intellectual, cultural and social development

stemming from their refugee experiences, children often suffer from depression, engage in vengeful behaviour and conflict, and experience anxiety and loneliness.

Until 2018/2019 school year, Syrian refugees have two main options for the continuation of their education in Turkey, as they can choose to attend either Turkish public schools or temporary education centres. The Turkish Ministry of National Education opened Temporary Education Centres (TECs) for primary and secondary school students in 2014. These TECs provided educational opportunities for school-age Syrian children in Turkey. The schools offered lessons in Arabic as the medium of instruction and followed a curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education of the Syrian Interim Government and modified by the Turkish Ministry of National Education. The Ministry reported that approximately 78% of Syrian refugee students attended TECs, while the rest attended other schooling institutions, mainly Turkish public schools. Through government mandate, Syrian students at first grade and preschool level can only attend Turkish schools.

In 2013, the Turkish Ministry of National Education published a paper that marked the ground for the continuation of Syrian children's education. The paper stated that the Ministry of National Education is responsible for providing educational opportunities for Syrian refugee

children, and the Ministry of Education of the Syrian Interim Government is responsible for determining the curriculum for Syrian refugee education. The paper also indicated that Syrians who are high school graduates having passed the 'Baccalaureate' exam in Syria can enrol in universities in Turkey. Since then, 15.000 Syrian students have studied at 140 Turkish Universities (Bircan & Sunata, 2015).

In 2014, the government passed the *Law on Foreigners and International Protection* that identified the scope and implementation of the protection to be provided for foreigners seeking protection in Turkey. The law also broadly defined the educational rights of Syrian refugees by stating that applicant or international protection beneficiary and family members shall have access to primary and secondary education. According to the law, refugees could obtain an international protection ID with proper IDs from the home country and travel documents (Kibar, 2013).

While Syrian students were initially given the right to study at primary and secondary level institutions, the Turkish state later passed *Temporary Protection Legislation* in 2014. It stated that the educational activities of refugee students at primary and secondary schools were regulated according to the Ministry of National Education's guidelines. Afterwards, undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate level studies were regulated by

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the Guidelines of the Turkish Council of Higher Education. Successful students would receive certificates accredited by the Ministry of National Education and the Council of Higher Education. Following these laws and regulations, the Ministry of National Education published another paper in 2014. This provided the opportunity for Syrian students to attend either TECs or public schools in Turkey. In order to be eligible to attend an appropriate classroom at TECs, students need to provide their academic reports from Syria or take a placement exam. TECs generally use Turkish public school buildings in the afternoons or by night after the Turkish students are done with their classes, and sometimes office and NGO buildings. TECs located at office and NGO buildings conduct their classes in the morning until afternoon as they are flexible regarding the time for using classrooms.

McCarthy (2018) states that the Turkish government allowed the establishment of TECs that teach partly in Arabic although its regulations didn't allow for education in languages other than

Turkish. However, the Syrian curriculum was designed almost single-handedly by the Ministry of Education of the Syrian Interim Government with adjustments made by the Turkish Ministry of National Education on culturally sensitive subjects (Aras & Yasun, 2016). This created some discrepancies between the two curriculums. For instance, a subject might be taught at the 5th grade at TECs but at the 4th grade at Turkish schools, which could add extra challenges to the adjustment phases of Syrian students transferring to Turkish schools.

According to McCarthy (2018), *'TECs have become a part of an education system in which the traditional relationship between education and the nation-state does not exist, creating an anomaly in the centralised education system'* (McCarthy, 2018, p. 232).

She concludes that the curriculum followed in these centres does not reflect the socio-cultural values to be transmitted to the next generations to contribute to social cohesion in a nation-state.

However, as the conflict in Syria continues and the influx of refugees is repeated by every event in Syria, and observing that Syrian students could not acquire the Turkish language in those TECs, the Turkish state decided to close down all the TECs where the medium of instruction is partly Arabic and partly Turkish. In 2017, the number of Syrian

students in public schools in Turkey was 170.000 and in TECs it was 300.000 (McCarthy, 2018). As of 2018/2019 school year, all of the Syrian students will be enrolled to Turkish public schools and they will be mixed with the Turkish students and immersed into the language. TECs teachers reported that Syrian students cannot develop friendships with local students and this denies them the opportunity and the natural environment to acquire the Turkish language easily.

Aras & Yasun (2016) report that a debate among bureaucrats emerged concerning whether or not to place Syrian students in the 'fusion education' programmes in Turkish public schools. 'Fusion education' programmes are currently offered for students with certain identified deficits, such as lack of attention and hyperactivity. Through such programmes students receive private education in courses that they request help with. The extension of fusion education programmes to Syrian students could help them receive additional help in courses that they struggle with and help them catch up with their peers. McCarthy (2018) argues that the fact that language support programmes are limited and that teachers don't receive training for multilingual classrooms in public schools in Turkey is also detrimental for the Syrian students.

The Turkish Ministry of National Education has started appointing teachers for the Syrian refugees through the project called *Promoting Integration of*

*Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System* (PICTES). It was signed by Turkey and the EU and employed 6.000 teachers. The teachers were given training on how to teach Turkish as a foreign language and how to create materials for those students. Also 40.000 Syrian students who needed transportation to schools were provided with this opportunity. The wages were also paid by the project, which is due to finish this year (2018). Besides, there are other teachers who are appointed to work at the TECs. Most of them are former Syrian teachers who speak and instruct in Arabic. Their wages are paid through three main avenues, which are UNICEF, NGOs and donations. UNICEF pays teachers approximately ₺900 (Turkish Lira) per month (approximately 120 Euros). Some schools choose to pay wages to teachers through private donations and support from NGOs. Among the schools investigated, the wages for teachers provided as a result of private donations ranged between ₺1,000 and ₺2,000 per month, and the wages of teachers compensated by NGOs between ₺1,200 to ₺1,500 per month (Aras & Yasun, 2016).

#### **4. LANGUAGE ACQUISITION USING MOBILE DEVICES**

Smets (2018) has pointed out that recent studies show that there is indeed a high penetration of smartphones among Syrian refugees (see, for example, Xu et al., 2015). This is in accordance with the findings of the initial needs analysis

conducted by the partners of the YouRNI Project. The questionnaire that was completed by teachers of the refugee classes gathered responses from around 80 teachers from Germany, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Switzerland and Turkey. 90% of respondents reported that their students were in possession of a smartphone. In this respect, the refugees around Europe are 'connected refugees' as pointed up by Smets (2018).

Savill-Smith et al. (2013) claim that mobile devices are acting as a bridge offering the opportunity to make links between (a) learning that takes place inside the classroom and the outside world, so it does not just stop at the school gates; (b) synchronous learning together with their peers; and (c) asynchronous learning at other times and places convenient to them (Savill-Smith, 2013, p. 129). They also stress that besides using mobile devices in the language teaching curricula, they can help refugees and migrants interact with the host community.

The high percentage of mobile devices ownership has led the YouRNI research into their use for language acquisition purposes. Project partners have created tools to evaluate apps to be used for this purpose, and these tools were translated into partner languages to be promoted to language teachers. Thus, teachers could use apps that they think could help their refugee learners acquire the language of the host country (see Table 1).

Table 1

*App evaluation form*

YouRNI Project. *'Integration of young refugees: Using mobile devices leading to better language acquisition and relevant career guidance'*

DESCRIPTION
Name of application
Release date / current version
Operating system(s) + OS version
Price
Download from
TECHNICAL DESIGN AND SUPPORT
Offline mode available
In-app or online help, tutorial, support available
Privacy / data security (e.g. registration, Apple ID, e-mail address required)
Build-in adaptive learning mechanics (algorithm that considers user abilities and knowledge level)
TARGET LEARNERS
Age (children, young adult, adult)
Proficiency level (CEFR level)
User language(s)
CONTENT AND FOCUS
Main purpose
Focus
Organisation of content

Throughout the project, a body of literature on how to use mobile devices and apps for language acquisition has been accumulated as well. This paper shall describe some creative ways of using the mobile devices and apps for language acquisition. For instance, Gresswell and Simpson (2013) give specific examples of class blogging projects. They show how learners encountered, engaged with and used digital technology for productive learning experiences and how their use of digital media enabled them to overcome some of the literacy challenges they faced.

Mobile devices may also act as a communication bridge. For instance, if a teacher uses *Skype* (a voice-over-Internet protocol service) this may encourage students to communicate with their teacher and with each other. There are many other similar apps that allow for face-to-face communication from distance like *WhatsApp* and *Facebook Messenger*. This helps learners communicate with their peers outside the classroom walls. In addition, learners can create their own learning resources from videos they have made and use them to describe the process to their class. The teachers can use the learners' own resources to teach grammar points which could be practised repeatedly both in and outside the classroom by playing the videos on their mobile devices. The students may use the *Seesaw* app to create content and document their daily routines, which can be presented in the classroom

as well. There are many apps that allow learners to create visual digital stories from photographs or videos taken with mobile devices. These digital stories can also be used as visual prompts in an extension activity or sent to the teacher for analysis and feedback. Possibilities are truly endless when mobile devices and apps are considered. For example, learners can document their own experience anywhere from shopping and to museum visits. These can also serve as a basis for written work, where fellow learners can write descriptions or comments. Thus, a natural audience can be achieved for the class writing tasks as well.

Mobile devices and apps can also help refugee students and parents build links with different communities including their school administration, their workplace and their fellow students. For example, learners and their parents can benefit from search apps for their homework. Networking of this kind can ease the isolation that is often experienced by refugees. The use of social media like *Facebook* or *Instagram* can give voice and visibility to the refugees among their local peers. This can foster and maintain positive relationships and can enable cohesion, inclusion and integration into the community around them (Mallows, 2013).

Furthermore, mobile devices may help refugees maintain links with their country of origin. This in

return can help with the traumatic feelings of displacement, isolation and loneliness.

Mobile devices and apps can also enable refugees to be more independent. Search apps, journey planners and map apps can foster autonomy and independence. Refugees can access vital information to act on their own and plan their individual errands without help. Regarding foreign language needs, the refugees can use dictionary, grammar, spelling and translation apps. There are numerous encyclopaedias, such as *Wikipedia*, to learn about the local language and culture.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although often presented as a crisis, training of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers from the conflict areas in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere actually presents educators with an exciting challenge. The challenge is to teach language and support integration of refugees into the community and prepare them for access to the labour market. Since most refugees possess mobile devices of

some kind, the opportunity exists for teachers, schools and educational authorities to use electronic media as a means of language and cultural education, using apps, *YouTube* and other social media platforms. This will require training for teachers in how best to use them for effective language and cultural education and training and support for students in how to exploit technology to the best educational effect.

The EU Erasmus+ initiative through the Paris Declaration of 2015 built a platform for the YouRNI project described in this paper to encourage integration and employability through language and cultural education and vocational training for students aged 15 and higher. Initiatives like this, based on the use of mobile devices as teaching aids and allowing greater interchange between students and between students and teachers, are paving the way for an advanced, accessible and exciting blended learning methodology for language teachers and students alike.

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