

Critical Skills for Life and Work training toolkit: Intercultural communication for refugee professionals

Project Overview

KARL-FRANZENS-UNIVERSITÄT GRAZ
UNIVERSITY OF GRAZ



Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| Why this toolkit?..... | 4 |
| The Critical Skills for Life and Work Project..... | 7 |
| Understanding professional intercultural competence..... | 8 |
| Methodological approaches and co-creation of materials | 12 |
| What the toolkit is..... | 15 |
| Pedagogical rationale | 16 |
| Structure of the toolkit | 17 |
| References..... | 20 |

Introduction

The overriding aim of this toolkit is to improve the professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC) of highly-skilled refugees. PICC refers to the communicative and interactional skills needed by refugee professionals to re-enter the job market. Here, we articulate a framework of PICC applied to seeking, getting and starting jobs in a general professional sphere.

This toolkit contributes to the social and professional integration of highly-skilled refugees—people with qualifications as professionals (UNESCO, 2016). It is made up of two training modules, one for teachers and one for learners.

The first module ‘Professional intercultural communicative competence for work and life’ is aimed at highly-skilled refugees (e.g., medical professionals, engineers, and teachers) who are seeking to re-enter their professions. It will be helpful for professionals who, having experienced displacement and migration, want to re-enter the job market in a position commensurate with their previous professional status and standing. The second module ‘Teaching professional intercultural communicative competence’ is aimed at educators, including language teachers, and other professionals working with highly-skilled refugees and migrants. It will also be helpful to others such as agency professionals and employment consultants who work to help integrate refugees and migrants into the professional jobs market.

Why this toolkit?

Europe is currently experiencing a dramatic and unprecedented influx of refugees. By the end of 2015, the EU as a whole received over 1.2 million first-time asylum claims (IOM, 2015), and according to the UNHCR there are now well over a million refugee asylum seekers in the EU.

A small but significant sub-group are highly qualified professionals who, having been displaced, often find themselves in low-skilled, minimum-wage jobs for which they are over-qualified. Prior educational attainment varies by country of origin, but in the case of Syria, the largest single source of refugees, around 6% of these are university graduates, a large majority with prior professional experience before being forced to flee. This means that among this national group alone there are over 5,000 professionals who might be able to contribute key professional skills and experience to their host countries. Best current estimates are that among all national groups about 15,000 people fall into the category of highly-skilled refugee professionals.

Their skill sets and professional experience often count for little, as host countries in an alarming number of cases fail to utilise the potential of much sought-after qualified personnel. The integration of highly-skilled refugees into the labour market is crucial in order to avoid their long-term dependency and marginalization and to create a positive image in the eyes of the public.

Highly-skilled refugee professionals can make an invaluable contribution to host societies if given the chance to do so. They can be part of the solution to challenges such as demographic ageing or lack of specific skills. There are growing skills shortages throughout the EU: in the healthcare sector alone, the European Commission projects a shortage of around 3 million health professionals by 2020. In current debates around immigration, the issue of how to best optimise the employment potential of skilled refugees is strikingly under-investigated. We therefore have a poor understanding of the particular difficulties faced by this group, and what is required to ensure their successful transition into relevant professions – a transition that would benefit a large number of parties across Europe. It might also benefit countries of origin of refugees hugely, should they be able to return.

There has been very little research to date into highly-skilled refugees and their employability challenges. Our baseline data collection to inform the toolkit preparation suggested professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC) – a concept that is at the core of this toolkit – as a critical component of their employability. Our working definition of PICC is key intercultural communicative skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and critical cultural awareness related to the process of successfully entering the professional sphere after a period of forced displacement. A key challenge for universities, charities, NGOs and employment agencies is to help highly-skilled refugees acquire the communicative, interactional, and intercultural competence they need to re-enter the job market in their professional sphere in the new host country.

A number of initiatives are taking place across Europe to support the integration of refugees into their new countries. Such initiatives include the provision of face-to-face language support delivered by universities, vocational and training organisations, local and

international NGOs and activist groups, as well as online resources for refugees and those who work with them. For example, the European Commission has extended its free Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support (OLS) to the benefit of around 100.000 refugees over 3 years (available at <https://erasmusplusols.eu/ols4refugees/>). The Council of Europe has developed a toolkit in seven languages designed to assist organisations, and especially volunteers, providing language support for adult refugees (available at www.coe.int/lang-refugees). Free resources created internationally include a set of on-line resources created by the UNHCR for teachers working with refugees (available at <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/teaching-about-refugees.html>). However, highly-skilled refugees are a specific adult target group that is currently not well served by education providers. This is where the *Critical Skills for Life and Work* toolkit comes into play.

By offering a set of accessible and innovative resources, our aim is to improve and extend the offer of high-quality learning opportunities that are tailored to the needs of this specific target group. The toolkit marries the key skills, knowledge and competences identified by research into professional development with research on what constitutes intercultural and interactional communicative competence in language learners. The toolkit was co-constructed in collaborative development projects with and by learners, refugees, the language teachers who work with them, and researchers in partner countries. It is, therefore, firmly grounded in the needs of each of both learners (refugees) and teachers, and draws heavily on their experiences and ideas to show ways forward for others like them.

The Critical Skills for Life and Work Project

This toolkit was developed as part of the *Critical Skills for Life and Work project: Developing the Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence of Highly-Skilled Refugees* (CSLW); a two-year Erasmus + development of innovation project (2017-2019). The CSLW project strategic partnership was made up of: [Newcastle University](#) (UK), which was responsible for coordinating the project; [Universität Graz](#) (Austria); [Fryske Akademy](#) (The Netherlands); and [Action Foundation](#) (UK).

The main aim of the project aim was to design a set of training tools for enhancing PICC of highly-skilled refugees and professionals who work with them (particularly language teachers), and so enhance the employability and societal integration of skilled refugees.

The project objectives were:

- (a) To identify and articulate the profession-relevant communicative, interactional and intercultural needs of highly-skilled refugees, which would enable them to find employment in a professional domain for which they are qualified;
- (b) To identify and articulate the training and skill-development needs of teachers, educators, and other professionals working with highly skilled refugees;
- (c) To produce communication, interactional and professional-oriented intercultural competence-focused teaching and learning materials for refugees and language educators.

This toolkit brings together materials from the three teams based in the UK, Austria and the Netherlands but is intended to guide and inspire refugees and those working with them and beyond.

Understanding professional intercultural competence

The materials in this toolkit are strongly informed by intercultural communication theory and in particular by the concepts of intercultural and interactional competence. They are also informed by recent research on teacher education, professional communication, continuing professional development and best practice in language education.

Intercultural competence refers to 'the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world' (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7). Barrett et al. (2013) extend this definition by arguing that intercultural competence is a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied in intercultural encounters. Intercultural competence allows intercultural communicators to understand and respect individuals they perceive to have different cultural affiliations; to respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such individuals; to establish positive and constructive relationships with such people; to understand themselves and their own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural 'difference' (Barrett et al., 2013). One of the reasons why intercultural competence is important in an increasing globalised and diverse society, is the fact an interculturally competent person will have key skills that employers look for in potential staff.

Over the past 25 years, a number of models of intercultural competence have been developed. This toolkit has been inspired by the work of Michael Byram (e.g., 2001; 2008) and in particular by his Intercultural Communicative Competence Model, or ICC (1997), which Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) categorise as a co-orientational model, as it sees the ability of interlocutors to reach mutual understanding and a shared level of worldviews as fundamental to initiate intercultural competence. The ICC model was initially conceived for application within the context of foreign language education. In his work, Byram challenges native speaker models of language learning where learners are judged by native speaker standards. Instead, he emphasises the importance of engaging, through a foreign language, in intercultural communication and interaction with interlocutors with different culturally influenced values, beliefs, and assumptions.

The model is constructed around five *savoirs* or factors in intercultural communication that reflect skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and critical cultural awareness. These are:

- *Savoir être* (intercultural attitudes): the ability to suspend disbelief towards individuals' own and other cultures. Curiosity and openness are central to this savoir, which enables individuals to 'decentre' and see the world from the perspective of an outsider who might have a different set of values and beliefs.
- *Savoirs* (knowledge): not primarily knowledge about a specific culture, but rather knowledge of how social groups and identities function and what is involved. It focuses on social groups in one's own culture as well on social groups in other cultures and on general interaction processes.
- *Savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating): it involves the ability to interpret symbols and events of other cultures and to relate such interpretation to one's own culture and experience. It points up the importance for learners to acquire the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with knowledge(s) they already have.

- *Savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery and interaction): it refers to the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills in real-time communication and interaction.
- *Savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness): concerns the ability to interpret, evaluate and negotiate perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and others' cultures. It highlights the importance for teachers not to try to change learners' values, but to develop their awareness of how such values might influence their interactions with others.

The units comprised in this toolkit are informed by the five *savoirs*. Essentially, we took components of competent professional communication and ways to develop these, and related them to Byram's (1997) ICC model. The resulting framework draws on contemporary thinking and research in a number of distinct yet inter-related areas:

1. Socio-cultural theory (references), which highlights the social nature of learning and the fact that all learning is mediated by language. Of particular relevance is the need to describe, develop and promote interactional competence, as one element of PICC.
2. Problem-based and experiential learning (references), which are considered to be key to many types of workplace learning, especially where adults are involved;
3. Reflective practice (references) and the need for professionals to engage in and learn from their experiences through a combination of data, evidence, dialogue and action.

The notion of 'intercultural speaker', an individual possessing the five *savoirs* presented in Byram's (1997) ICC model, is also central in this toolkit. In Byram's words: '[Individuals] may also be called upon not only to establish a relationship between their own social identities and those of their interlocutors, but also to act as mediator between people of different origins and identities. It is this function of establishing relationships, managing

dysfunctions and mediating which distinguishes an ‘intercultural speaker’, and makes them different from a native speaker’ (1997, p. 38).

Here, we extend the concept of intercultural speaker to professional contexts, with particular interest for the experiences of highly-skilled refugees in Europe and of professionals working with them. In defining professional intercultural communicative competence, we focus on professional communication between people who are members of different groups, with an emphasis on people in social interaction with each other (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). In the words of Holmes (2015): ‘intercultural encounters in the workplace are frequently plurilingual, intercultural, socially constructed interactions that are situated in time, place, space, and purpose. Competence in one encounter can very quickly manifest as incompetence in another supposedly similar context’ (p. 1). A key element of professional competence in any workplace setting is the ability to communicate clearly and interact with colleagues on a number of levels and in a range of contexts. It is apparent when studying spoken interaction that different speakers have different levels of competence and varying abilities to express their ideas and achieve understanding. This is true in any setting, but particularly so in the workplace, where competing agendas, priorities, deadlines, a mix of personalities, and so on may create difficulties and result in tensions. This is especially the case in professional settings involving people from a range of social, educational and cultural backgrounds. Put simply, effective communication is essential to getting a task done.

In professional settings, effective communication rests on an ability to interact with others and to collectively reach understandings. Some form of Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence, then, is needed in order to ‘survive’ most communicative encounters where cultural difference’ is present in some way. Being accurate or fluent in a

language are, arguably insufficient. Speakers of an L2 must be able to do far more than produce correct strings of utterances. They need to be able to pay attention to the professional context, to listen and show that they have understood, to clarify meanings, to repair breakdowns and so on. All of this requires extreme mental and interactional ability, the kind of ability, which will not, arguably, be trained by taking part in typical language classrooms. Additional skills, related to professional interactional and intercultural competence, are required.

Methodological approaches and co-creation of materials

The theoretical orientations, and in particular the notion of professional intercultural competence, draw on a number of knowledge bases:

1. Theories of cross-cultural and inter-cultural communication, particularly the work of Byram and colleagues.
2. Sociocultural theories of learning (SCT) which emphasise the social nature of learning and the fact that all learning is mediated by language. Of particular value under SCT is the construct *co-construction* which emphasizes the 'jointness' of all communication; any communicative event entails interactional work by all parties. It is very much a two-way process.
3. Reflective professional practice and reflexivity. Here, we draw on recent research (see, for example, Mann & Walsh, 2017; Walsh & Mann, 2015), which highlights the importance of self-reflection, dialogue and collaboration in CPD (Continuing

Professional Development). CPD is most effective when it is evidence-based and data-led; important principles which are followed in the toolkit.

The materials collected in the toolkit were developed as part of a two-phased collaborative process. The four project partners worked with a number of highly-skilled refugees and with teachers across three locations (UK, Austria and the Netherlands) to co-create a set of resources that can be useful in a diversity of European contexts.

In the first phase, project members in the three national locations of the partners looked closely at the lives and experiences of people who had successfully made the transition from refugee status back into the professional sphere. We did this through ethnographic interviews which sought to discover exactly how these people had made the transition, what had helped them, what had hindered them, and what they could pass on to others like them by way of advice. A focus was on language learning and professional intercultural communicative competence – and how relevant the conceptualisation might be to the ability to re-enter the professional sphere. We found that PICC, plus factors related to affective resilience, flexibility and determination, were indeed relevant. Also important were refugee professionals' orientations towards power imbalances and their sense of agency. In general, we found these 'success' stories to be so pertinent and inspiring that we have drawn very heavily on them developing the toolkit, particularly the contextual first units. They have provided examples of what people can do to get back into professions – a key component of both the teacher and learner modules. They also helped us with its overall structure. During this initial stage we also spoke to groups of learners and teachers in the different locations of our project, to gauge current provision and their needs in relation to developing PICC.

Project members then worked with local refugees and teachers to develop learning and teaching materials. These materials are a key component of the toolkit. After the needs analysis work with refugee-learners in two of the three locations, a strong need for professional language development primarily in the English language emerged. The materials in the core units (units 2-3-4-5) were, therefore, developed to respond to this need. All these materials are designed, however, to be readily translatable for the development of other languages. The first unit for each module introduces the toolkit and it contains materials which are contextually and socioculturally specific and which often highlights issues related to local languages. The core units (units 2, 3, 4 and 5) consist of broadly the same materials adapted for learners to study independently (learner module) and for teachers to use in the classroom (teacher module). They consist of activities designed to help refugee professional learners to find, apply, being interviewed for and start a professional-level job and to support teachers in employing them in classroom settings. Each unit in both modules also includes supplementary and extension materials to support teachers and learners. All activities relate to PICC.

In the next phase, materials were piloted by different target groups—including networks of agencies working with skilled refugees, teaching organisations such as colleges of further and higher education, national and international professional accreditation agencies, and relevant employers and employment agencies –with a view of creating a model, which can then be extended to other contexts. The materials were fine-tuned according to the feedback provided by teachers and learners. The findings from the project– both the toolkit, and the co-productive practices, procedures and frameworks, which lead to their production – have been and will be disseminated to multiple international audiences.

What the toolkit is

The toolkit has been produced to empower refugee and migrant professionals and those working with them and to equip these two groups with competences and skills they need particularly in terms of intercultural communicative competence.

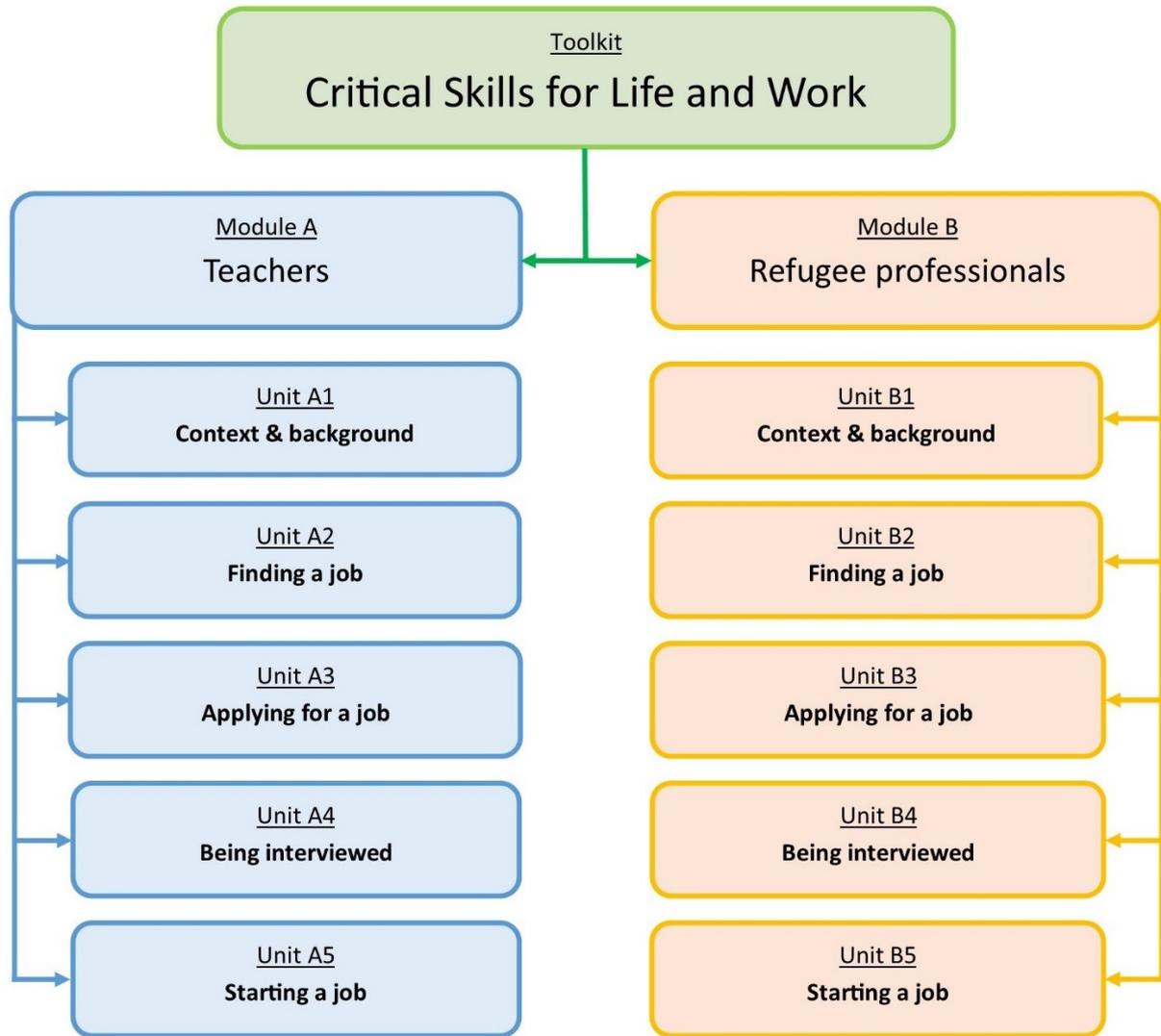
The toolkit offers two pathways aimed respectively at: supporting refugee and migrant professionals to re-enter their professions and; supporting their teachers and other professionals working with them. Each module includes five parallel units: (1) context & background, (2) finding a job, (3) applying for a job, (4) being interviewed and, (5) starting a job. Each learner module consists of materials designed for self-study plus supplementary materials to extend learning in the thematic areas of the units. Each teacher module consists of the same core materials but designed for classroom use. Supplementary materials as extensions are included at the end of each unit.

A number of examples related to context and to the professional pathways are country- and context-specific and might need to be readapted to the individual circumstances of learners and teachers. It is also possible to adapt resources and activities to different units from those for which they were designed. Overall, we recommend teachers and learners to choose and use units and resources according to their context, needs and circumstances.

Pedagogical rationale

The languages used in the toolkit reflect linguistic and pedagogical considerations. From a linguistic perspective, the toolkit is built around the assumption that refugee professionals will have some linguistic capital. Our primary aim is to build on this in order to develop PICC, as opposed to linguistic proficiency in any specific ‘target language’. An additional assumption is that the users of the toolkit will benefit most from enhancing ‘language for mobility’ skills. These will enable them to mediate meaning between their primary cultures, the cultures of the workplace and the prevailing cultures in their host country, or any future place of settlement. We envisage that, using all their plurilingual resources, learners might engage with input in one language and generate meaning in contextually appropriate ways. To that end, many activities in the toolkit are in English (chosen for pragmatic reasons as a language shared by many professionals) but are written in a way that facilitates and encourages adaptation in and translation to different languages.

Structure of the toolkit



The toolkit consists of **two modules**:

- Module A: Teachers
- Module B: Refugee professionals

Each module is comprised of **five units**. Each unit consists of around 5 hours of materials:

Unit 1: Context & background

Unit 2: Finding a job

Unit 3: Applying for a job

Unit 4: Being interviewed

Unit 5: Starting a job

The two modules are designed to be standalone and freely accessible on-line.

The introductory unit (unit 1: context & background), offers an overview of what all of the units are about and their aims. The unit also introduces the concept of *resilience*, a pattern that was apparent in all success stories, as a key theme throughout the toolkit. The core units (units 2, 3, 4 and 5) are developed thematically. They consist of broadly the same materials adapted for learners to study independently (learner module) and for teachers to use in the classroom (teacher module). The units include activities designed to help refugee professional learners to find, apply and being interviewed for and start a professional-level job and to support teachers in employing them in classroom settings. Each unit in both modules also includes supplementary and extension materials to support teachers and learners. All activities relate to the development of PICC.

All the units are self-standing. Learners and teachers can choose units and activities depending on their own specific needs and circumstances. Most learners and teachers will benefit from undertaking unit 1 for orientation and contextual help, but more confident and/or experienced teachers or learners may be able to ‘jump’ straight into the core units. Units can be taken consecutively – the structure of units 2, 3, 4 and 5 is designed to facilitate this – but can also be taken in any order. Activities within in each can be taken in the order presented, but not all activities need to be undertaken, and their order is interchangeable.

The toolkit does not offer facts and figures about refugees in Europe. It does not offer legal advice, but a list of organisations that can support learners and teachers is provided at the end of unit 1. The toolkit does not provide advice on all specific professional pathways, but gives localisable examples of how this might be done in some professional contexts where many refugees seek re-admission.

References

- Barrett, M., Byram, M., Lázár, I., Mompoin-Gaillard, P., & Philippou, S. (2013). *Developing intercultural competence through education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. (2008). *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship: Essays and reflections*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., Nichols, A., & Stevens, D. (2001). Introduction. In M. Byram., A. Nichols., & D. Stevens (Eds.), *Developing intercultural competence in practice* (pp. 1-8). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Holmes, P. (2015). Intercultural encounters as socially constructed experiences: Which concepts? Which pedagogies? In N. Holden, S. Michailova, and S. Tietze (Eds.), *Routledge companion to cross-cultural management* (pp. 237-247). New York: Routledge.
- IOM (2015). Global migration trend factsheet. Retrieved from <http://gmdac.iom.int/global-migration-trends-factsheet>
- Mann, S. & Walsh, S. (2017). *Reflective practice in English language teaching: Research-based principles and practices*. London: Routledge.
- Scollon, R. & Scollon, S. W. (2001). *Intercultural Communication. A Discourse Approach* (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishers, Malden, Massachusetts, Oxford.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Changnon, G. (2009). Conceptualizing intercultural competence. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 2-52). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- UNESCO (2016). Protecting the right to education for refugees. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002510/251076E.pdf>
- Walsh, S. & Mann, S. (2015). Doing reflective practice: A data-led way forward. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 69(4), 351–362. doi:10.1093/elt/ccv018.