

# Working With Immigrant Communities in Libraries

**A Practical Step-by-Step Guide Based on the Nordplus Project Experience (Haapsalu, Estonia)**

## **Purpose of This Guide**

This guide is designed for librarians who want to develop or improve services for immigrants and multilingual community members. It presents a structured approach that can be adapted to different local contexts.

Our key principle: **Co-create services together with the target group.**

## **Practical Implementation Order**

Our work followed this sequence:

1. Semi-structured interviews (1:1)
2. Community seminar
3. Language clubs
4. Follow-up activities and service development

## **Step 1: Semi-Structured Interviews (Individual Conversations)**

### **Why start with interviews?**

Before organising larger group activities, we wanted to understand real needs and challenges on a personal level.

### **Format**

- Semi-structured interviews
- Conducted **1:1** (not in groups)
- Four different age groups

### **Example Questions**

- What is most difficult for you in everyday life in Estonia?
- What kind of support would make your life easier?
- What role could the library play for you?
- Do you prefer formal courses or informal meetings?
- What prevents you from participating in activities?

## **Finding the Target Group**

We actively collaborated with:

- Local municipality
- Local integration network
- Our own community contacts

Information spread through:

- A created WhatsApp group
- Local Facebook groups
- The library's website and social media
- Word-of-mouth communication

**Recommendation:** Personal invitations are much more effective than general announcements.

## **Step 2: Community Seminar**

### **“How Can the Library Help?”**

After the interviews, we organised a seminar to:

- Present initial findings
- Broaden the discussion
- Strengthen trust
- Involve local authorities

### **Why the seminar was important**

The seminar created:

- Dialogue between immigrants and the library
- A space for the municipality to share practical information (administrative procedures, available support systems, services)
- Visibility for the issue of integration

### **Format**

- Short introduction
- Open discussion
- Focus on listening rather than presenting

- Documentation of recurring themes
- Parallel program for the children

### **Step 3: Language Clubs**

Based on feedback from interviews and the seminar, we identified a strong need for:

- Informal language practice
- Social contact
- Support with everyday communication

#### **Structure**

- Small groups (5–8 participants)
- Weekly meetings (after initial high interest)
- No grammar focus — emphasis on communication
- Friendly facilitators, not teachers

#### **Reducing Isolation**

Language clubs:

- Reduced social isolation
- Helped participants integrate into the local community
- Created meaningful social connections

Interestingly, we discovered that:

People who belonged to the same immigrant community often did not know each other before meeting in the library — even if they lived in the same small town.

#### **Children and Families**

We learned that families are often very close-knit.

Lack of children's activities can become a barrier to parents' participation.

In future initiatives, we recommend:

- Assessing clearly whether a children's program is needed
- Planning parallel children's activities when possible

## **Practical Tips for Language Activities**

### **Use Hands-On Activities**

Practical and playful activities lower language anxiety.

Examples:

- Board games (e.g., Dixit)
- Craft workshops
- Collaborative creative activities

These methods make participants feel safer and more willing to speak.

### **Facilitator Skills Matter**

In the early stages, it is helpful if the facilitator:

- Speaks the local language
- Also speaks at least one foreign language

This allows light support when needed without switching entirely away from the target language.

If possible:

- Have more than one facilitator
- Participants often have different language levels and need different pacing

### **Keep Groups Small – But Open**

Small groups:

- Allow personal attention
- Build trust

At the same time:

- Keep the group open
- Avoid creating a closed circle

#### **Step 4: Follow-Up and Service Development**

The project did not end with the language clubs.

Follow-up activities proved to be essential.

We have already organised language club reunion meetings, and these have been both necessary and highly successful. Participants expressed a clear need to reconnect, continue practicing, and maintain the social bonds that were formed.

This showed us that:

- Integration is not a one-time activity
- Social networks need continuity
- Trust requires regular contact

Based on feedback and experience, we developed:

- Multilingual leaflets about library services
- Plans for a Language Buddy System
- Stronger cooperation with the municipality and integration networks

We also realised that not only newly arrived immigrants participated. Some participants had lived in Estonia for years but still lacked confidence in the language.

In future, we would aim to engage this group more actively.

#### **The Importance of Follow-Up**

One of our key lessons is that follow-up activities are crucial.

Short-term projects can create connection, but without continuation, the impact weakens.

Reunion meetings:

- Strengthen relationships
- Prevent renewed isolation
- Encourage long-term engagement with the library
- Provide a natural way to introduce new services

For other libraries, we strongly recommend planning follow-up meetings already at the beginning of the project.

Sustainable integration work requires continuity.

### **What Worked Well**

- Strong collaboration with volunteers and community members
- Use of volunteer facilitators
- Small group meetings
- Continuous openness to new participants
- Cooperation with local authorities
- Practical and playful learning methods

### **What We Discovered**

- People who appear to belong to the same community may not know each other.
- The library can become a neutral meeting ground that connects them.
- Isolation is often social, not only linguistic.
- Informal language practice can significantly increase confidence.

### **What Could Have Been Done Better**

- Earlier and clearer assessment of the need for children's program
- Even more systematic documentation of outcomes
- More structured follow-up with long-term residents with limited language skills

### **Key Recommendations for Other Libraries**

- Start with listening, not planning
- Use 1:1 interviews before group work
- Collaborate with local authorities
- Spread information through personal networks
- Keep activities informal and practical
- Include families where relevant
- Build trust before building programs