

Developing Language Buddy Mentors: Training for Inclusive Educational Practice

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Abstract: This article examines the design and implementation considerations for training programs for language buddy mentors supporting students with migration backgrounds. Drawing on ongoing experiences and preliminary observations from the AMIF Language Buddy project, it discusses theoretical and practical training modules designed to prepare peer mentors for communicative support roles. Key challenges include addressing trauma-informed communication in training, balancing theoretical frameworks with practical skills, and ensuring mentor readiness for complex linguistic-cultural situations. Potential benefits explored include developing mentors' intercultural competencies, creating structured preparation for inclusive practice, and establishing quality standards for peer support. The article offers conceptual insights and design considerations for educators planning mentor training programs.

Keywords: mentor training, peer support, trauma-informed pedagogy, intercultural competence, migrant students, inclusive education

Introduction

Contemporary European educational institutions increasingly reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of mobile populations. Students from migrant backgrounds – whether refugees, asylum seekers, or economic migrants – bring a rich multilingual repertoire to the classroom, while facing the challenge of learning the dominant language of instruction. This dual reality creates both opportunities and pedagogical demands that go beyond traditional approaches to language teaching. While formal language courses provide essential instruction in grammar and vocabulary, they often cannot meet the nuanced and context-specific communicative needs that students face in their daily academic and social interactions, such as understanding informal conversations with peers, navigating institutional bureaucracy, or expressing complex emotions in a new linguistic code.

In response to these challenges, many educational institutions have turned to peer support models, recognising that language acquisition is essentially a social process that thrives on authentic, low-stakes communicative interactions. The “language buddy” approach – which pairs students with migrant backgrounds with peer mentors trained in conversational practice and social integration – has emerged as a promising

complement to formal instruction. Unlike traditional tutoring, which focuses on academic content, language buddy programs prioritise communicative fluency, cultural mediation, and the affective dimensions of language learning. However, the effectiveness of these programs critically depends on an often underestimated factor: the quality and comprehensiveness of mentor training.

The assumption that native or proficient speakers can naturally serve as effective language buddies ignores the complex skills required for this role. Mentors must navigate linguistic structures, intercultural sensitivity, and, crucially, be aware of the potential trauma carried by many students with experiences of forced migration. An informal conversation about family or “home” can unintentionally trigger painful memories; a well-intentioned correction can be perceived as criticism by someone whose confidence is already fragile. Without proper training, even enthusiastic mentors can feel overwhelmed, uncertain, or unintentionally cause harm. Thus, the question is not simply whether to implement language partnership programs, but how to systematically prepare mentors for the multifaceted requirements of inclusive and trauma-informed communication support.

This article examines the development and implementation of training programs for language mentors, exploring the design considerations and early experiences from the AMIF (Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund) project Supporting language learning of migrant children and young adults through language buddies (Language Buddy), which is running in eight European countries. The AMIF project aims to train 365 mentors from among HEI students to support students aged 12 to 17 from a migrant background. This ongoing initiative provides a valuable context for examining what effective training in this area entails. By exploring the project’s training modules – both theoretical and practical – this article discusses the key challenges and considerations in mentor training, in particular the delicate balance between providing sufficient knowledge about trauma-informed communication without overwhelming volunteers, and between offering theoretical frameworks and ensuring practical readiness for unpredictable situations.

At the same time, emerging observations suggest potential advantages of structured training approaches. Initial feedback from mentors who completed specific training modules indicates developing intercultural competencies that go beyond friendship, suggesting broader educational benefits. Establishing quality standards through formalised training also addresses concerns about the ad hoc and uneven nature of peer support initiatives that do not benefit from systematic training. Finally, this article contributes to the development of research in the field of peer learning and inclusive education by offering conceptually grounded insights and practical design considerations for educators, program coordinators, and institutional leaders who design mentor training programs in diverse linguistic contexts.

The article then presents the theoretical framework underlying language mentor training in research on peer mentoring, intercultural communication, and trauma-informed pedagogy. The following section contextualises the specific needs of students with migrant backgrounds and defines the role of the language buddy. Several aspects

related to the design of the training program are also presented. Next, the main challenges related to implementation are analysed, examining the main advantages and emerging evidence in the AMIF project. The article concludes with practical recommendations for educators developing similar initiatives, emphasising adaptability to different institutional contexts while maintaining basic quality standards.

1. A Sociocultural Framework for Inclusive and Trauma-Informed Language Learning

The cultivation of Language Buddy Mentors demands a theoretical architecture that transcends the mechanistic paradigms of traditional language instruction. Positioning the mentor as a mere grammar corrector or vocabulary dispenser fundamentally misapprehends the profoundly social, affective, and intercultural nature of language acquisition. This article is therefore anchored in a multilayered theoretical framework that places Sociocultural Theory (SCT) at its core, positing that learning is an inherently collaborative process. This primary structure is then intricately braided with the critical lenses of Intercultural Communication and the ethical imperatives of Trauma-Informed and Inclusive Pedagogy. Together, they form a cohesive vision for developing mentors who are not only skilled facilitators of language but also architects of safe, equitable, and responsive learning communities.

The work of Lev Vygotsky provides the foundational logic for this framework. Sociocultural Theory asserts that cognitive development, including language acquisition, is first social and intersubjective before it becomes internalised and individual (Vygotsky 1978). In an era of globalisation, where language learning is often a bridge to new academic and cultural landscapes, SCT offers a “powerful analytical tool” for understanding these dynamic processes (Marginson/ Dang 2017: 116).

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) – the metaphorical space between what a student can do on their own and what they can achieve with guidance – defines the purpose of the mentor’s role. The mentor’s task is to identify and act expertly in this zone, a concept that remains central to the contemporary educational structure (Yildiz/ Celik 2020). The mentor embodies the role of the most knowledgeable other (MKO), not as a supreme authority, but as a dynamic peer whose knowledge is strategically used to support growth. This interaction is operationalised through the concept of scaffolding. The effective structure is the provision of temporary and adaptable support, which is gradually withdrawn as competence increases (Walqui 2006). This can range from modelling conversational exchanges to co-constructing texts, a practice validated in various contexts, from the design of pedagogical agents (Sikström et al. 2024) to foreign language classes for children (Koyuncu et al. 2024).

This process of guided participation naturally extends to the formation of a community of practice (Lave/ Wenger 2001). The Language Buddy program is such a community, in which mentors guide learners from “legitimate peripheral participation” to a more complete and central membership in the linguistic and academic community. Through this scaffolding participation, knowledge is not transmitted, but co-constructed in a shared social space.

2. The perspective of intercultural communication

Although SCT elucidates the mechanism of learning, a complementary perspective is needed to address the complexity of intercultural interaction. Language learning is an intrinsically intercultural activity, a reality amplified by global migration and digital connectivity (Verschuere 2008; Liu et al. 2025). The mentor-mentee dyad is often a meeting point between distinct cultural schemas, communication styles, and narrative worlds. Therefore, intercultural communication theory is not an add-on, but an essential filter through which all socio-pedagogical interactions must pass.

Mentors must be prepared to move beyond superficial cultural interactions to engage with the deeper, often problematic power dynamics inherent in intercultural exchange (R'boul/ Dervin 2025). This involves recognising how factors such as high-context and low-context communication styles or different politeness strategies can lead to misunderstandings. For example, a student's communication strategies, shaped by their unique linguistic background – such as a Ukrainian or Russian child learning Turkish (Bayat et al. 2025) – should be addressed not through correction, but through culturally adapted interpretation. The mentor thus becomes a mediator who helps navigate these intercultural spaces, transforming potential communication dysfunctions into opportunities for critical reflection and mutual learning, thus ensuring that the ZPD is a culturally receptive space.

3. Ethical integration of inclusive education and trauma-informed education principles

The efficacy of any scaffolded, intercultural interaction is contingent upon the psychological safety of the learning environment. This brings us to the ethical heart of the framework: the integration of Trauma-Informed Practice and Inclusive Education principles. For many learners, including migrants, refugees, and those with diverse life experiences, the stress of acquiring a new language in an unfamiliar environment can be dysregulating, activating trauma responses that directly inhibit cognitive and linguistic processing (Liasidou 2024).

A trauma-informed approach, as articulated by researchers such as Morgan et al. (2015), is based on the pillars of safety, trust, choice, and collaboration. This aligns perfectly with the role of the mentor, requiring a shift from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you and how can I help you?”. This perspective is particularly important when working with disadvantaged students, as it prioritises relational trust and emotional regulation (Morgan et al. 2015). When a mentor offers a choice of topics, allows for silence, or provides multiple ways to participate, they are not just being accommodating but engaging in trauma-sensitive practice that fosters a sense of autonomy and psychological safety.

This ethic is synergistically linked to inclusive education. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, with its mission to provide multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression, offers a practical set of tools for implementing both inclusion and trauma-informed care. A mentor implementing UDL can offer the choice between a verbal response, a written paragraph, or a visual representation, en-

sureing that a mentee who does not communicate verbally due to anxiety can still demonstrate understanding and participate legitimately in community life. This holistic, “healing schools” approach, which combines trauma-informed care with restorative and multicultural education, is fundamental to whole-school reform (Parameswaran et al. 2024) and, by extension, to the microcosm of the Language Buddy program.

4. The Language Buddy Context

The Language Buddy Initiative is a dynamic, cross-European program designed to transform language acquisition and social integration for young newcomers. It focuses specifically on supporting adolescents (aged 12 to 17) from refugee and migrant backgrounds by connecting them with dedicated university students in a powerful, one-on-one mentoring relationship. The initiative is built on a foundation of strategic collaboration. It is coordinated through a unique partnership between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), local schools, education authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and crucially, migrant-led organisations. At its heart is a buddy system that carefully matches secondary school pupils with university students, particularly those studying education, pedagogy, languages, or literature. These HEI students receive specialised training to act as effective language mentors, participating through voluntary programs or accredited placements within their degrees.

The Consortium is led by the University of Macedonia and brings together 16 partner organisations – including 7 Universities, 8 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and 1 directorate of education – across eight European countries: Greece, Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, Portugal, Malta, and Austria. This robust partnership ensures the program is culturally relevant, widely accessible, and grounded in local needs. This innovative program moves beyond the traditional classroom, championing non-formal and informal learning methods to make language practice engaging, practical, and deeply personal. By scaling up proven mentoring frameworks, it creates a supportive environment where young learners can flourish.

The project has defined main objectives differentiated according to the category it addresses. Thus, for mentees, the aim is to expand effective mentoring systems that include a strong language learning component, improving their access to non-formal learning opportunities that complement formal schooling. In terms of student training, the project aims to equip future educators with advanced skills in innovative teaching methodologies, intercultural pedagogy, and language development. Last but not least, the community is also taken into account, so the project aims to strengthen cooperation between universities, schools, NGOs, and migrant communities, creating a unified support network for the educational journey of young migrants.

The Language Buddy Initiative is designed to generate a profound and multi-layered impact, creating a ripple effect of positive change. For participants, the program envisions the direct empowerment of at least 365 young mentees, who will gain improved language skills and academic confidence, alongside the development of at least 365 university mentors, who will acquire enhanced professional competencies through hands-on experience. Beyond individual growth, the initiative aims to strengthen entire sys-

tems by forging durable partnerships between higher education, schools, and community organisations, thereby modernising educational approaches through learner-centred methods. On a societal level, it fosters lasting social ties that break down stereotypes and counter xenophobia, while its broader impact includes reducing school absenteeism, encouraging civic engagement, and promoting the social inclusion of migrant families. Ultimately, by addressing the fundamental need for linguistic mastery, the program opens new pathways toward more cohesive and inclusive societies.

The implementation of the Language Buddy initiative follows a meticulously structured, multi-stage process to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability. The process began with a comprehensive analysis of existing best practices, which formed the basis for the collaborative design of the Language Buddy core model. Subsequently, the mentoring system was formally established within the participating universities, supported by the creation and delivery of a specialised online course for student mentors. Capacity was further strengthened through transnational train-the-trainer (ToT) workshops. The program's commitment to iterative improvement is realised through rigorous evaluation of pilot projects, which has enabled the development of an enhanced "Language Buddy 2.0 Model". Finally, to ensure long-term impact, the process culminates in national digital roundtables and the formulation of policy recommendations aimed at integrating the model into a broader educational strategy.

The Language Buddy model has its origins in a deeply collaborative and inclusive design process. Guided by a foundation of established best practices, the model was built collaboratively by a diverse consortium of experts, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness. This development coalition brings together project partners with education professionals who work directly with students from migrant backgrounds, recent high school graduates who have personally navigated this journey, and key actors at the heart of the initiative: university students and faculty from departments of pedagogy, education, and foreign languages. The perspective is further enriched by representatives of civil society organisations dedicated to supporting young migrants. This multilateral consortium, convened in each participating country, ensures that the resulting framework is not only pedagogically sound but also based on the real experiences and needs of those for whom it is intended.

The central element of this collaboratively developed model is the implementation of a structured mentoring system focused on language acquisition through non-formal and informal learning approaches. Recognising the demands of modern education and the need for flexible accessibility, the model is intentionally designed from the outset to function seamlessly through both direct interaction and a dynamic digital environment. The training program for students who will become mentors includes training workshops, organised in flexible formats, face-to-face or online. This preparatory curriculum promotes a holistic and sensitive approach to mentoring. The main topics covered in the training of future mentors are:

- Promoting intercultural understanding and dialogue to build authentic connections and navigate cultural nuances.
- Grounding their practice on the empowering principles of critical and social pedagogy.

- Understanding the role of the family in language learning and developing strategies to overcome barriers through non-formal methods.
- Using a suite of digital tools to make language learning engaging and effective.
- Harnessing the power of art as a catalyst for both intercultural dialogue and linguistic expression.
- Developing observation, documentation, and reflective self-assessment skills to guide their mentoring journey.
- Mastering the practical aspects of the Language Buddy system, including how to organise and conduct productive sessions using a dedicated electronic platform.

At the time of writing, the Language Buddy initiative is in active implementation across participating countries. The challenges, design considerations, and preliminary observations discussed in subsequent sections therefore reflect ongoing program development rather than completed outcomes. This article draws on program documentation, training materials, and initial mentor feedback to explore conceptual and practical dimensions of mentor training design.

5. Design Challenges and Implementation Considerations

The development of effective training programs for language buddy mentors confronts several interconnected challenges that require careful pedagogical negotiation. Perhaps the most delicate challenge is preparing mentors to recognise and respond sensitively to potential trauma without minimising this reality or creating paralysing anxiety. Many students with a history of forced migration have experienced violence, loss, or displacement, but mentors are volunteers, not therapists. In this project, education specialists addressed this issue through a multi-level approach: facilitating a high level of awareness of the issue – understanding that seemingly harmless conversational topics can trigger distress – while emphasising that the role of mentors is to observe, rather than to treat. Ethical boundaries were explicitly explained: mentors learned to validate emotions (“I understand that this is a difficult subject”) and to redirect conversations naturally, but never to probe traumatic experiences or offer psychological advice. However, this calibration proved difficult. In early feedback sessions, some mentors reported feeling “afraid to say the wrong thing”, while others underestimated the emotional intensity they might encounter. The challenge lies in cultivating compassionate awareness without creating therapeutic expectations that exceed the mentors’ competence or comfort level.

Training programs face a constant tension between providing an adequate theoretical basis and ensuring practical training. Excessive theoretical content – lectures on second language acquisition theories, models of intercultural communication, or migration policy contexts – can leave mentors intellectually informed but unsure of how to facilitate a real conversation. Conversely, purely practical training risks creating mentors who can follow scripts but cannot adapt when situations deviate from rehearsed scenarios. In the Language Buddy project, program designers anticipated this imbalance by attempting to combine the two aspects. However, initial mentor cohorts expressed a need for “more examples of what to do in reality”, suggesting that the balance requires ongoing calibration. Subsequent iterations integrated theory

through practice: role-playing in difficult scenarios, followed by immediate debriefings that connected the mentors' intuitive responses to basic principles. It is important to note that time constraints meant that some of the theoretical depth had to be sacrificed, raising questions about whether the mentors truly understood *why* certain approaches work or whether they just knew *that* they should use them.

Despite comprehensive training, language buddy interactions resist standardisation. A mentor might find themselves confided in housing insecurity, asked to explain complex bureaucratic processes beyond their knowledge, or faced with a mentee showing signs of depression. Training must therefore cultivate judgment about escalation: when to refer to professional services, how to maintain supportive relationships while establishing boundaries, and how to access institutional support networks.

The project design includes clear escalation protocols and emergency contact procedures as core components. However, early implementation experiences suggest that mentors may feel uncertain about “grey areas” – situations that may seem concerning but are not clearly urgent. This highlights an inherent limitation: training can provide frameworks and examples, but it cannot prescribe responses to every human complexity that arises in an authentic relationship.

Finally, training must address mentors' own insecurities. Many volunteers wondered whether their conversational skills were “good enough” or worried that they might make cultural mistakes. To boost their confidence, we believe it is necessary to normalise imperfection, emphasise that authenticity matters more than perfection, and create peer support networks where mentors can share their uncertainties. However, the limited duration of the training may cause some mentors to start their work feeling unprepared, suggesting that ongoing confidence building needs to extend beyond the initial training.

6. Program Design Advantages and Preliminary Observations

Despite these challenges, structured training programs for language mentors appear to offer significant advantages that justify their implementation and investment in resources. Perhaps the most interesting aspect emerging from early experiences in the AMIF project concerns the mentors' own transformative learning. Preliminary feedback and reflections from initial cohorts suggest that the training process itself functions as a powerful intercultural education. In debriefing sessions, mentors reported increased awareness of linguistic privileges, a deeper understanding of the realities of migration, and more nuanced thinking about cultural differences. One mentor remarked, “I thought I would be helping someone practice Romanian, but I learned to question my own assumptions about what is normal”. Such reflections indicate that mentor training produces benefits that go beyond the immediate friendship relationship, potentially cultivating graduates with improved intercultural skills that are valuable in academic and professional contexts. Unlike passive diversity workshops, linking training to real relational practice may create meaningful and concrete learning that mentors identify as personally important.

The standardised modules of the Language Buddy project are designed to ensure that all trained mentors benefit from comparable training in active listening, trauma

awareness, and conversation support techniques. This systematisation does not eliminate individual variations – mentors' personalities and styles naturally differ – but aims to ensure fundamental quality standards, making the support students receive more predictable and reliable. This greatly reduces situations where the quality of interactions varies greatly from mentor to mentor.

Formalised training also has the potential to address institutional accountability concerns. Universities and schools implementing peer support programs face questions about duty of care: Are untrained students appropriate for supporting vulnerable populations? Comprehensive training demonstrates institutional commitment to responsible practice, providing documentation that mentors have received adequate preparation. This legitimacy is important for expanding programs and securing funding. Furthermore, certificates of completion will recognise the development of mentors' skills, adding value to their participation beyond altruistic satisfaction.

Finally, the program design anticipates that well-trained mentors will create better experiences for mentees, while recognising that the training process benefits mentors themselves. The reciprocal learning – mentors developing competencies while mentees gain language practice – embodies inclusive education principles that move beyond deficit models of "helping the disadvantaged". Instead, linguistic diversity becomes reframed as an opportunity for mutual growth. At the institutional level, visible, well-supported language buddy programs signal commitment to inclusion, contributing to campus cultures where multilingualism is valued rather than merely accommodated.

Initial training is not sufficient. Consideration should be given to establishing clear availability of coordinators, creating peer support groups where mentors can discuss challenges confidentially, and implementing regular check-ins. It is also necessary to create a community of practice where experienced mentors support newly arrived mentors.

Attendance at training is not the only indicator of understanding; the mentors' level of preparation must be tested through reflection tasks or responses to scenarios that reveal their understanding of key principles. Also, given that this is a program with a strong voluntary component, it is necessary to avoid assessments that may seem punitive; the goal is to ensure preparedness, not to select volunteers.

Although the basic components remain constant, project members found that adaptation to the institutional context is necessary. In secondary schools, additional training in child protection is needed; in universities, the focus may be on academic integration; in community settings, greater attention may need to be paid to addressing the practical challenges of life.

It was also found that educators should avoid assuming that enthusiasm can replace training; overwhelming mentors with excessive theories unrelated to practice; failing to address mentors' anxieties and questions; neglecting ongoing support after initial training; treating training as an exercise in compliance rather than meaningful preparation; and ignoring mentors' feedback on gaps in training. Perhaps the most important point to convey is to frame the role of mentoring within the paradigm of facilitated partnership rather than hierarchical assistance.

These observations underscore that mentor training is not just a preparatory phase, but an ongoing dimension of program quality that requires institutional commitment, adequate resources, and continuous refinement based on participant experience.

7. Conclusions and Implications for Practice

The development of Language Buddy mentor training programs represents a critical intersection of inclusive pedagogy, intercultural competence, and practical support for linguistic integration. This article's examination of the AMIF Language Buddy project across eight European countries suggests that effective mentor preparation requires far more than enthusiastic volunteers and good intentions – it demands systematic, theoretically grounded, and ethically informed training that balances multiple competing demands.

The challenges discussed – particularly the delicate calibration of trauma-informed awareness, the theory-practice equilibrium, and the cultivation of mentor confidence within time-constrained formats – reveal the inherent complexity of preparing peer supporters for roles that are simultaneously linguistic, cultural, affective, and ethical. Learning to mentor is itself a developmental process, akin to acquiring a second language of teaching that requires both theoretical understanding and practical application (Orland-Barak 2001).

Nevertheless, these challenges should not deter implementation. Rather, they underscore the necessity of viewing mentor training not as a preliminary formality but as an ongoing dimension of program quality that requires institutional commitment and continuous refinement (Messiou/ Azaola 2018).

The potential advantages identified through program design and initial implementation extend well beyond the immediate goal of supporting students with migration backgrounds. Mentor training itself functions as powerful intercultural education, transforming participants' understanding of linguistic privilege, cultural difference, and migration realities. This reciprocal learning embodies the most promising aspects of inclusive education—moving beyond deficit models to recognise linguistic diversity as an asset and opportunity for mutual growth (Vickers et al. 2017). Research across diverse contexts, from English secondary schools (Messiou/ Azaola 2018) to university settings (Vickers et al. 2017) and transnational spaces (Bojarczuk et al. 2025), indicates that well-structured peer mentoring programs can create meaningful pathways for integration while developing mentors' intercultural competencies and critical awareness of racialization and power dynamics in educational settings (Gast et al. 2024). By establishing quality standards through structured preparation, institutions demonstrate accountability and create more equitable, predictable support systems.

It is important to note that these insights emerge from an ongoing program implementation. As the AMIF Language Buddy project continues and more systematic evaluation data becomes available, future research will be able to provide empirical validation of these design considerations and preliminary observations. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework and early experiences discussed here offer valuable guidance for educators initiating similar programs.

Looking forward, ongoing and future implementations of the Language Buddy model suggest several directions for practice and research. Program refinement should focus on developing more sophisticated escalation protocols for complex situations, and future research should investigate the long-term impact on both mentors' professional trajectories and mentees' academic integration. The evidence from peer mentoring initiatives supporting forced migrants (Bojarczuk et al. 2025) and refugee-background students (Vickers et al. 2017) provides valuable guidance for scaling these programs across diverse institutional and national contexts. As European educational contexts continue to diversify, such peer mentoring programs – grounded in robust, evidence-based training – offer scalable, sustainable pathways toward genuinely inclusive educational communities where multilingualism is valued and every learner's voice can be heard.

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