

Top Tips for Asking Refugees Questions

Make a difference with your life by encouraging refugees as they learn to speak English. Transform a student's life and your own as you get to know and enrich each other! Asking questions is a key part of getting to know people, so enjoy these tips we've learned along the way.



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Embrace a slower pace! Before you ask, think about and plan the exact question. Does it have words or expressions the student may not know? How about the verb tenses? The best time to make adjustments is before you actually ask it.

If you need to repeat the question, say it **exactly** the way you said it the first time. Here's why:

1. The student hears the question and translates it to his/her native language.
2. The student thinks about the answer.
3. The student translates the answer from his/her native language to English.
4. The student begins to answer the question in English.

That process may feel like a long time, and you may try to clarify by asking the question in a different way. To the student however, this becomes a brand new question and then goes back to step one of the process. This takes more time to think about, which may prompt you to ask the question in a third new way. Now we have three questions to process! You can see how this can be frustrating for both parties.

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When you ask the question one way and take your time, the student may still have difficulty. Consider slowing down your speech (not speaking louder, right?) or clarifying an unknown word. After all that, then perhaps it's time to reformulate the question. Hint: Slow your speech by stretching out the vowels, not putting spaces between the words. Putting spaces between words models an unnatural way of speaking English, although pausing between sentences or natural phrases can be helpful.

Did you make a mistake asking a question? Good news! Awareness of it shows that you're on the right track.

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Slowly ask a simple question that begins with a *Who*, *What*, *Where*, *When*, or *How*. Then wait for the answer. If the student does not understand he/she will let you know. Your student's answers will guide you in determining how basic your questions need to be. As you get to know each other, it will get easier.

Suggestions:

- When did you come to America? (Rather than "How long have you been here?" which asks them to do a calculation.)
- What country are you from? (Sometimes they answer with the name of the country they were last in, where the refugee camp was. You can learn if that was not the country they were born in. Ask again.)
- What is the name of your husband/wife? (They can probably write names, so ask them to write, both the student's and the spouse's.)
- What are your children's names? How old are they?
- What do you like most about America? What is a problem for you here?
- What do you want to do when you learn to speak English?

Questions with "Why" may take some time to build up to. While Why questions can yield rich and rewarding answers, they often require more vocabulary, understanding, and can be more abstract. They can also inadvertently seem judgmental. Perhaps you can recall a time when a parent asked, "Why did you do that?" Aside from that, we can get to know people with Why questions.



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In conversation, remember that the students are refugees. This means they have all been forcibly removed from their homes and country, probably separated from family members, and perhaps have experienced violence and death. Some will be able to talk about these experiences, and others not, particularly to a stranger. So, at least begin by talking about the present. They honor us by sharing their stories. If they tell us about traumatic past events it is often difficult for us to listen to it. We need to hear them, nurturing their honor and dignity.

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When helping them understand the meanings of words do not ask, "Do you know what this means?" If they say, "Yes," you will not know whether it is true and it may also embarrass them. Instead, simply ask, "What does this mean?" If you get a blank look go on to explain. If they try to explain you will get feedback.

A good way to utilize a yes or no question is to check to see if the student understands the concept. For example, when discussing what a US state

is, a concept checking question might be, “Is Phoenix a state?” (No) “Is Arizona a state? (Yes). Then have some fun! Is New York a state? Aha!

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With more typical questions, some students will reply with one or two-word answers (An exception would be yes/no concept checking questions). Yes, they can “communicate” in the sense that you have an idea of what they want to say, but we want more than that. Help them answer in complete sentences. This may be difficult for them. Their native language may be backwards from ours with the subject at the end, not at the beginning. And they may pay little attention to our small but important words like “a” or “the” because their native language does not have words like that.

So, help them formulate their answers into short, but complete, sentences. “I have two sons.” “My mother and father are in Nepal.” “I work at Ranch Market.” “I work in the produce department.”

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Clarify new vocabulary by using words the students know. Or to say it negatively, don’t use words they don’t understand to describe a word they don’t understand. Sounds very simple, but we all do it sometimes. Use as few words as possible but use a lot of gestures. Draw or look things up in the Oxford Picture Dictionary or Google images on your phone and relate it to something they already know.

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Relax, have fun! Laughter is good. The more fun you both have, the better.



Come and see all this in action—[email](#) or call/text me at 480.229.8842.
I want to visit with you and hear your difference-maker stories!

Blessings,



Gary

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