

Cultural Orientation for Refugees

Anne Costello and Sanja Bebic, Center for Applied Linguistics

The United States is a country founded and built by immigrants who have fled persecution and sought freedom from injustice. Typically, family, friends, and ethnic community organizations have provided new arrivals with initial support and orientation to American culture. Only for the last three decades has the U.S. government sponsored cultural orientation (CO) for newly arriving refugees. This CAL Digest will review the recent history of refugee CO and provide a primer on overseas and domestic orientation efforts.

Who are refugees?

According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is a person who has fled his country "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (*Convention relating to*, 1951). Refugees are protected under international law by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. A signatory of the Convention, the United States passed the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1952, one provision of which is the authorization of refugee admissions and resettlement to the United States. In 1980, the Refugee Act codified new U.S. policies and procedures for admissions and established an appropriations cycle for funding refugee assistance programs, including cultural orientation.

Distinct from other newcomers to the United States, refugees are approved for admission overseas and are sponsored by the U.S. government in partnership with voluntary resettlement agencies. To gain admission to the United States, refugees overseas are interviewed individually by an officer of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Citizenship and Immigration Service to determine whether they meet resettlement criteria.

What is CO?

Cultural orientation is the education provided to U.S. refugee newcomers to help them acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed in early resettlement. "The purpose of CO is to help refugees acquire the information and skills necessary to gradually adapt to a new society and culture. CO helps refugees incorporate elements of American culture into their own system of values and beliefs" (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982). Communities that receive refugees report that effective CO is needed to help refugees integrate and adapt to their new life in America. Recognizing this, the U.S. government and its partner non-governmental organizations provide both pre- and post-departure CO, making orientation an ongoing process. Although government-funded CO is not comprehensive, it is an important first step in the successful resettlement of refugees.

What is the history of CO?

How did CO begin?

In 1975, with the fall of the governments of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled their countries and sought asylum across borders throughout Southeast Asia. Many of these refugees had supported the U.S. war effort in Indochina, and the United States responded to the crisis with an unprecedented refugee resettlement program. The resulting influx of newcomers presented a formidable challenge for U.S. communities, especially in schools and in the workplace.

The U.S. government felt an obligation to provide the linguistic and cultural orientation training needed for these Southeast Asian refugee groups to resettle successfully. So agencies overseas were funded to develop pre-departure CO, and voluntary agencies in the United States were funded to develop early resettlement CO that augmented and complemented overseas CO. The government also funded English classes for adult refugees, where students learned about their new communities while learning English. Some adult refugee programs provided extensive employment services, which generally included an orientation to the U.S. world of work.

Refugees' need for highly practical language training led to the development of a new subspecialty in the field of teaching English as a second language: *competency-based adult ESL*. Instead of focusing on aspects of language such as grammar, competency-based instruction teaches learners how to use the language; so, for example, refugees learned to read a want ad, follow directions in a manual, or take a telephone message. A new subspecialty also arose in the field of cross-cultural communication, which had long been the domain of international studies and business. *Refugee cultural orientation* emerged to address the very different cultural orientation needs of refugees.

A wealth of new ESL and CO materials were developed for U.S. schools, resettlement agencies, and refugees themselves. There were testing tools, cultural profiles, and linguistic information for teachers; guides on teaching English to Vietnamese speakers; English-Vietnamese phrasebooks; and orientation guides, such as *Your New Life in the U.S.*, in the native languages of the refugees. New ESL, cultural orientation, and pre-employment training curricula were developed along with content standards and reference materials. The *Basic English Skills Test (BEST)* was created and became a widely used assessment tool in U.S. ESL programs. Specialized CO curricula were developed for specific populations, such as elementary school students, refugee youth, young adults, pregnant women, and young mothers.

Overseas and in the United States, these materials were used in conjunction with pedagogical methods specifically designed for refugee learners. In addition to being linguistically and culturally appropriate, refugee cultural orientation was practical, interactive, and experiential. In pre-departure training, refugee children and youth studied English in simulated American classrooms, and refugee women learned to cook dinner in a typical American kitchen. In the United States, thousands of Americans volunteered to provide initial orientation to refugees in their communities.

How has CO changed?

Today, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration continues to fund and oversee CO for U.S.-bound refugees, which is now provided in over 40 countries. Instead of a 6-month period of language and cultural orientation training as in the 1980s, refugees now receive a very brief, intensive cultural orientation, ranging in length from 1 to 5 days.

In the United States, beginning with the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980 and continuing with subsequent government standards for refugee resettlement, agencies have relied less on their volunteer networks and more on an agency-based case management staff that understands refugee needs and records and tracks

agency services. Cultural orientation, then, came to be provided within the same context.

How is CO provided overseas?

Overseas CO is provided by a variety of international and U.S.-based organizations as well as by some U.S. embassies. All refugees above the age of 15 are eligible for CO. In addition, some programs periodically conduct classes for refugee children and youth.

Most CO programs rely on a mix of local, international, and U.S. staff, some of whom may be bicultural. Depending on the availability of trainers and interpreters, the language(s) spoken by refugees, and the size of the group, CO will be delivered in English (with or without an interpreter), in the refugees' native language, or in the refugees' second language (other than English).

Based on U.S. State Department guidelines, 11 essential topics are addressed by the majority of overseas CO programs: pre-departure processing, the role of the resettlement agency, housing, employment, community services, education, health, transportation, money management, the rights and responsibilities of refugees, and cultural adjustment. The particular topics to be covered in individual CO training cycles depend on the number of hours that trainers have at their disposal and on the needs and characteristics of each group being trained, such as their literacy levels, their exposure to modern urban living, and the support network they are likely to have in the United States. Training can last anywhere from 2 to 30 hours.

Although there are State Department guidelines regarding CO content, overseas CO providers have latitude when it comes to the design and delivery of their CO programs. Curricula are designed by the program staff based on logistical considerations, the needs of the groups to be trained, and the training philosophy of the implementing agency.

Overseas CO delivery includes a variety of approaches ranging from lecture based to activity based. The majority of CO programs offer instruction in a classroom setting. Programs with logistical and staffing constraints may rely on trainers presenting topical clusters of information to refugees while reserving a portion of class time to answer refugees' questions. Other CO programs seek to develop refugee knowledge, skills, and attitudes by engaging them in experiential activities based on major CO topics. Lecture is very limited in this model and is usually used to introduce and summarize topics.

How is CO provided in the United States?

All refugees arriving in this country are sponsored by a resettlement agency in their new communities. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration funds initial refugee orientation in the United States as part of its Reception and Placement (R&P) cooperative agreement with voluntary resettlement agencies. R&P core services include sponsorship and pre-arrival planning; the provision of basic needs support—housing, furniture, food, and clothing—for at least 30 days after the refugees' arrival; community orientation; referral to social service providers (including health care, ESL, and employment); and case management for 90 days. The State Department requires that refugees receive orientation to housing and personal safety issues within 5 working days after arrival. Orientation on other topics should be provided within the first 30 days.

CO is most frequently provided by agency case workers, but employment counselors, ESL teachers, and, in a few agencies, designated trainers also conduct orientation. These staff positions are usually funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement. Volunteers, including refugees' family members, are also involved in CO. The U.S. government requires that refugee services be provided in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner, so most agencies try to identify

appropriate bicultural staff. When this is not possible, agencies may rely on native-born Americans who work with translators. Funding for U.S. resettlement prioritizes the early employment of refugee adults, so CO is focused primarily on refugees between the ages of 18 and 65.

Because the R&P agreement funds services for only 90 days and orientation is only one of many services provided, early orientation sessions are short. Agencies rely on refugees' early resettlement experience as their best teacher. Initial orientation sessions, usually within 24 hours of refugees' arrival, range from 30 minutes to 2 hours, with ongoing sessions conducted on an as-needed basis, usually for as long as 90 days and sometimes for up to 1 year.

U.S. programs address the same set of basic topics as overseas programs but utilize the resettlement context to conduct orientation as part of the development of a refugee's individual resettlement plan. For example, health orientation is conducted when addressing refugees' immediate health needs, employment orientation is done as part of the job search, and so forth. CO takes place at resettlement agency offices, in refugee homes, and at various locations throughout the community, often in conjunction with a given topic. For example, transportation orientation may be conducted while riding a public bus. Volunteers are especially helpful in providing this kind of on-site orientation. As with overseas CO, emphasis on a given topic depends on the refugees' individual needs and general understanding of the topic.

Most resettlement agencies use a case management model for orientation. That is, because R&P services are provided on a case-by-case basis, orientation is provided first and foremost within the context of the refugee-case manager relationship. Most orientation is conducted either in family groups or one-on-one, and case managers utilize lecture, interview, hands-on, conversation, or question-and-answer techniques. However, some agencies have also developed workshop or classroom models that utilize additional staff, such as designated trainers.

What can we learn from CO practices?

Preparing refugees for life in the United States requires the concerted effort of both overseas and U.S. CO trainers and staff. The CO continuum is especially effective when both overseas and domestic orientation help refugees establish realistic expectations, gather knowledge, and develop relevant skills and attitudes.

Reference and Resources

- Center for Applied Linguistics. (1982). *Planning and implementing cross-cultural orientation programs for refugees*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2004). *Welcome to the United States: A guidebook for refugees* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State.
- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2006). *Cultural orientation for refugees: A handbook for U.S. trainers*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Convention relating to the status of refugees*. (1951). Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons.
- Costello, A. (2004). *Current refugee orientation practices in U.S. resettlement agencies: Phase one of the refugee orientation impact study*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Pfleger, M., & Ranard, D. (Eds.). (1995). *From the classroom to the community: A fifteen-year experiment in refugee education*. Washington, DC, and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.

The Cultural Orientation Web site (www.culturalorientation.net), sponsored by the Cultural Orientation Resource Center at CAL with funding from the United States Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, provides more information about these efforts as well as invaluable resources for conducting refugee CO.