

Connecting newcomers and locals in times of COVID-19

With the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing many are feeling more isolated than ever before. With limited movement being the norm across Europe and other regions, the social and economic consequences are devastating, particularly to the most vulnerable groups of our society such as migrants, refugees and the elderly.

According to Eurostat, in 2018 almost 35% of Europeans lived alone. Several months into 2020, we don't have an updated statistic, but we can certainly assume that the imposed social distancing and forced isolation will have a long lasting impact on people's lives. That's why we shouldn't let such measures cause social and emotional distress, too.

SPEAK's language learning framework is fostering the creation of spaces where newcomers have the opportunity to share the value they bring and develop meaningful relationships with locals as equals, not letting them feel they are disempowered receivers as in some integration initiatives. Having this bottom-up approach generates a feeling of self-worth, as newcomers or refugees feel responsible for their own transformation and integration process. Furthermore, this helps build stronger support networks and a greater sense of belonging throughout the language learning experience.

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Due to the forced isolation measures, we adapted our

methodology to an online model where anyone can sign up to learn a language for free from anywhere, and if available, they can also share their own language, thereby actively contributing to combat social exclusion and loneliness and helping SPEAK community members build relationships of support, trust and loyalty.

Social integration has become an even greater challenge. Newcomers and refugees are struggling more than ever to stay connected, learn the local language and culture and build support networks that can help them with the process of integration. They are facing longer delays when processing their legal status, fewer employment opportunities, and increased difficulties when accessing legal and administrative services.

In addition to this challenge, perhaps one of the most important dimensions when we are talking about one of the most tragic public health situations of the last decade, is the scarcity of culturally and linguistically accessible information about COVID-19 and how to protect oneself and others. This greatly increases the risk for refugees and migrants as well as host populations.

Hence, building a strong community that fights social isolation together and actively contributes to create solutions and make sure no one is left out is absolutely necessary. Making sure that locals, newcomers and refugees are surrounded by solidarity, support, guidance, information and empathy can significantly lessen the daunting social, economic and political consequences of this pandemic.

One of the key aspects that makes SPEAK resilient is adaptability. SPEAK was able to transfer its learning methodology to the online environment in order to stay relevant. The situation that we are living in does not have to lead to disconnection and make integration into a new community, culture or language more difficult.

With online language sessions, everyone, no matter where they are located, can learn a new language and meet new cultures while still helping to flatten the curve. This is SPEAK's solution to fight social isolation and make sure everyone can feel connected, avoiding an abrupt interruption in the integration process.

Implementing an offline model into the online world is not an easy process and we are improving it as we go. In three weeks, more than 3.000 people joined the

community, more than 20 languages are being shared and refugee families located in Portugal, Greece, UK and Syria are enrolled in online language groups.

Everyone can be part of this online SPEAK community as a *buddy* - people who are willing and able to give some of their time to help people learn a new language and culture - or as a participant and help fight social isolation and promote cultural diversity. For both groups, it has proven to be an enriching and comforting experience, especially in times like these.

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When we are talking about integration challenges, it is essential to ensure that policies are designed with a community-based approach. Solutions like SPEAK are extremely cost effective, accessible and proven to be impactful. Scaling its impact and promoting it within cities and across regions is something that the EU could help achieve.

The challenges we face are not bound to borders and solving them requires everyone's involvement. This is our small contribution to make sure that we can continue learning about each other's language and culture from our homes. Borders might close, but our minds are still free to travel and more open than ever.

Stay safe. Stay connected.

Hugo Menino Aguiar, Co-Founder & CEO of SPEAK

About SPEAK

SPEAK is a crowd - sourcing language and culture exchange programme that connects newcomers and locals living in the same city.

