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Protocol: Feasibility study and pilot randomised trial of a multilingual support intervention to improve Norwegian language skills for adult refugees

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ABSTRACT

This protocol is for a feasibility study and pilot trial of a multilingual support intervention. The intervention's aim is to improve language training for refugees in Norway by introducing multilingual support assistants using the refugees' primary languages. The research question for this pilot study is whether a full-scale randomised controlled trial of Multilingual Support is feasible, and if so, in what way. The pilot trial will have two arms, with two-thirds allocated to the treatment group, receiving seven teaching sessions of support per week from assistants who are proficient in the participants' primary language. The control group will receive the same amount of support but from an assistant without competence in the participants' primary language.

1. Background

In Norway, refugees who receive a permanent residence permit are assigned to and settled in a municipality where they have the right and obligation to complete an introduction programme that aims to enhance their participation in working life and society. Norwegian language training and social studies are central parts of the introduction programme. Depending on the refugees' prior qualifications and needs, the programme may run from three months to two years. If necessary, it may be prolonged for another year to attain satisfactory qualifications. During the programme, the refugees are entitled to receive an introduction benefit, a flat rate social security benefit (see [Djuve \(2011\)](#) for a detailed description). To acknowledge the refugees' qualifications, needs and expectations, language training is organised in three levels depending on expected progress ([The Introduction Act, 2021](#)). Studies have shown that the higher the education that refugees have, the faster they tend to learn Norwegian. These studies have also shown that proficiency in the Norwegian language is important concerning refugees' future work opportunities ([Djuve, Kavli, Braanen Sterri, & Bråten, 2017](#); [Tronstad, 2015](#)). The Multilingual Support intervention aims to improve language skills amongst refugees with limited prerequisites for language learning (i.e. refugees with a low probability of becoming fully qualified for work in terms of language skills at the end of the introduction programme).

1.1. Significance

Learning the Norwegian language is important to create a satisfying life in Norway; however, for refugees, it is also vital for obtaining a permanent residence permit and citizenship. Hence, effective mastery of the Norwegian language has implications beyond contributing to refugees' societal functioning. The intention of this study is to explore whether and how multilingual support improves

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language learning conditions and outcomes and whether the intervention will be feasible for a full-scale randomised controlled trial (RCT). The underpinning hypothesis of this study is that multilingual support can be efficient, as language proficiency obtained in one language can reinforce or support the learning of a new language (Cummins, Curtis, Diez-Roux, & Macintyre, 2007; García & Wei, 2014).

This study will be conducted amongst refugees who are learning Norwegian as a second language. They have been granted a temporary residence permit in Norway and are learning the new language, in this case Norwegian, in a Norwegian language context. This is different from learning a foreign language in a native country, where learners are surrounded by their primary language. Although many of the refugees that will participate in this study are multilingual, the language support they receive will be in the participants' primary languages.

The teachers in the ordinary introduction programme use Norwegian when teaching and instructing, traditionally without the support of the refugees' primary language. In this setting, refugees with no or low Norwegian proficiency and little formal education often struggle in the acquisition of Norwegian, as the teachers and the refugees lack a common language in the classroom (Djuve et al., 2017; Lillevik & Tyldum, 2018). Introducing multilingual support is expected to enable refugees to participate more actively in the negotiation of meaning and utilise the possibility to contrast the similarities and differences between languages in the language learning processes (Eek, 2021).

In a Norwegian study, Djuve et al. (2017) showed that support in the participants' primary language could be useful, especially for refugees with a comprehensive need for support. Other studies from Norway found that refugees gave positive feedback when receiving instruction or training based on their primary language (Alver & Dregelid, 2016; Hvenekilde, Alver, Bergander, Lahaug, & Middtun, 1996; Isaksen, 2013). Moreover, Alver and Dregelid (2016) pinpointed that the monolingual context in a second language learning classroom is more favourable to people who have functional literacy skills (i.e. can effectively use their reading and writing skills in the language learning process) than for those with low literacy skills. Ganuza and Hedman (2019) and Makulloluwa (2016) highlighted the impact of a systematic use of the primary language in teaching the new language. Learners receive help in their primary language to clarify the meanings of words, concepts and structures, as well as grammatical differences between the primary language and the new language. The primary language can also be used to help learners grasp the cultural, emotional and social aspects of the new language (Debreli & Oyman, 2016; Eek, 2021). In foreign language learning classrooms, people learn languages in educational settings from a teacher who most commonly shares the pupils' primary language. By contrast, in second language learning classrooms, people learn languages in educational settings where the teacher is unfamiliar with the pupils' primary languages. Hence, the learning contexts are different in second language learning classrooms than in foreign language learning classrooms. However, the use of primary languages in foreign language learning classrooms has been debated. Critics argue that time spent using one's primary language displaces training in the foreign language to be learned, that empirical studies have not shown the anticipated effects of using primary languages in foreign language learning classrooms and that people might bring bad language habits from the primary language into the new language (Debreli & Oyman, 2016; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). It is unclear, however, to what extent these criticisms apply to a second language learning classroom and the target group for this study.

Tshabangu-Soko and Caron (2011) conducted a study on adults without literacy skills learning English in second language learning classrooms and found that the absence of using the primary language in the language learning process was a factor that might explain the ineffectiveness of the language training. The feedback from the adult learners revealed a need for instruction in the primary language. Hvenekilde et al. (1996) found similar results in Norway, where refugees said that they have problems understanding classroom instructions.

Skill transfer from one language to another does not happen automatically. The use of a primary language as a tool in second language acquisition should be designed as a systematic pedagogical tool where a teacher identifies elements from the primary language that can be applied in learning the new language (van Wyk & Mostert, 2016). Condelli and Wrigley (2006) found that using the language learners' primary language when explaining and giving instructions enabled the participants to focus on the learning task rather than trying to understand what the task required. Using the primary language enabled the teachers to address more complex situations in everyday life. The participants needed to handle and discuss the options and consequences, compared to what was possible when only using English, which was the language being learned. The use of both languages in the classroom supported reading comprehension and oral communications skills in English. More specifically, Butzkamm (2011) emphasised the techniques of double comprehension, idiomatic translations and mother tongue mirroring that clarify the grammatical functions of languages, all illustrating the need for systematic use of a primary language while learning a new language. The qualitative study by Samar and Moradkhani (2014) showed that teachers experienced switching into the language learners' primary language as beneficial for learning outcomes. Although there is a growing interest in using primary language as a means for second language acquisition, both in the field and theoretically (Dávila & Bunar, 2020; Duarte et al., 2020), few studies have empirically investigated the effects of such interventions in foreign language classrooms (Rubio-Alcalá et al., 2019).

A qualitative study and a literature review have shown that multilingual support has the potential to improve language skills amongst refugees (Søholt, Liødden, Aasen, Vilhjálmsdóttir, & Staver, 2020a). To test the feasibility of a full-scale RCT of intervention effects, the researchers recommended a pilot trial of the intervention (Søholt, Malmberg-Heimonen, & Tøge, 2020c).

1.2. The intervention: multilingual support

The Multilingual Support intervention is based on the Mother Tongue Support intervention, which was developed in an adult education centre in a middle-sized Norwegian town, by teachers and docent Fondevik at the Institute for Language and Literature at Volda University College, Norway (Fondevik, 2021). The project involved teachers who had Norwegian as a primary language and

language assistants in Arabic, Swahili, Kinyabwisha and Tigrinya. The target group for the project was refugees at early stages of their language learning (i.e. below A2 level). After the first year of the project, the teachers found that the mother tongue was not only useful for translating in the classroom setting but that it was also a resource for other aspects (Søholt, Liodden, Leirvik, Vilhjalmsdottir, & Staver, 2020b). The intervention design takes this into account. The Multilingual Support intervention that we will pilot and assess is a further development of the Mother Tongue Support intervention, but the name of the intervention has been changed to illuminate the use of primary language, which is not necessarily the mother tongue of the participant, as a means of second language acquisition. Hence, Multilingual Support reflects the function and goal of using a primary language as a method to bridge the gap between the primary language and Norwegian, both linguistically and socially, in the process of acquiring functional language skills.

Multilingual Support is a classroom intervention, where assistants will use the learners' primary language as a means for second language acquisition. It is designed to be delivered in classes of adult learners of Norwegian. In the current study, we will implement the Multilingual Support intervention in the language training of literate adult refugees with little or no educational background within the Norwegian introduction programme.

The refugees who will be recruited for the study will be below the breakthrough or beginner level (A1), which is the first level of the established language skill scale, "English in the Common European Framework of Reference" (CEFR). However, the target group for the Multilingual Support intervention is a group of people with heterogeneous country backgrounds and cultures, ages, genders and life situations (Djuve et al., 2017). What they have in common is that they all need basic training in Norwegian. Some are literate in their primary language, while others have been through literacy training in Norway and are newly literate. To create a homogenous learning environment, only refugees with functional literacy skills will be included in the target group.

The Multilingual Support intervention will introduce language assistant(s) with the intention of supporting the participants' second language acquisition through their primary language. The language assistants must be independent users (B1) of the Norwegian language and fluent in one of the refugees' primary languages, orally and in writing. According to the language proficiency scale of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR), the B1 requirement implies that the assistants can express themselves in familiar situations and participate in discussions on their area of expertise and daily life matters.

The language assistants will collaborate with the Norwegian language teachers and use the participants' primary language as a tool for adapting the learning activities and the learning tasks to the participants' prior knowledge and needs to develop and expand their Norwegian language proficiency. The language assistant will be in the classroom for seven teaching sessions a week.¹ The same number of assistants will be in both the intervention (treatment) and the control classrooms. In addition to the Norwegian teacher, the language assistants (one assistant for each language) will give instructions and facilitate learning activities using the primary language in the classroom during the teaching sessions in the treatment classrooms.

Another core activity is collaboration between the teachers and the language assistants. The teachers and the language assistants plan and coordinate the classroom activities. They discuss the curriculum and learning tasks, including topics, core concepts and contextualisation of the curriculum to refugees' cultural experiences and daily life in Norway, such as the personal (family and health), public, occupational and educational domains. For the teachers and the assistants to collaborate, they need to address how to organise and cooperate when teaching in the classroom and how to follow up learning tasks. Part of the cooperation between the teachers and the language assistants includes assessments of the refugees' progress during the previous week and adaption of future activities to anticipated needs. The teachers and the language assistants have one hour each week for collaboration. In addition, the language assistants have one hour each week for team collaboration and adjustment of activities in the classroom. To ensure that the intervention activities are carried out, planning and collaboration are mandatory and conducted at the same time every week. Following Funnell and Rogers (2011) Fig. 1 presents a summary of the theory of change of the Multilingual Support intervention.

This pilot trial will run for two semesters (autumn and spring). During the school year, staff from Oslo Metropolitan University will provide supervision to the teachers and the language assistants providing multilingual support. The teachers and language assistants delivering the intervention will also participate in peer supervision across the participating adult education centres.

The materials for the implementation of the Multilingual Support intervention include a short manual describing how to implement and deliver the intervention. The developer of the Mother Tongue Support intervention will provide information material to help monitor the Multilingual Support interventions across the three adult education centres in the pilot. To learn how to provide the Multilingual Support intervention, the teachers and the language assistants will receive eight hours of online training sessions (provided by Oslo Metropolitan University), where they will receive information on how to implement the intervention, including pedagogical approaches prior to implementation. Table 1 summarises the main content and activities of the Multilingual Support intervention using the template for intervention description and replication (often referred to as TiDier, Hoffmann et al., 2014).

2. Research plan

2.1. Research questions

This protocol describes the feasibility and pilot trial of the Multilingual Support intervention within the Norwegian Introduction Programme. The main research question is whether and in what way a full-scale RCT of Multilingual Support is feasible. To evaluate this, several questions need to be answered regarding the intervention and trial design. Regarding the intervention, what is required to

¹ One teaching session is 45 minutes. If there is more than one assistant, they will teach in the same class at the same time, but for different language groups.

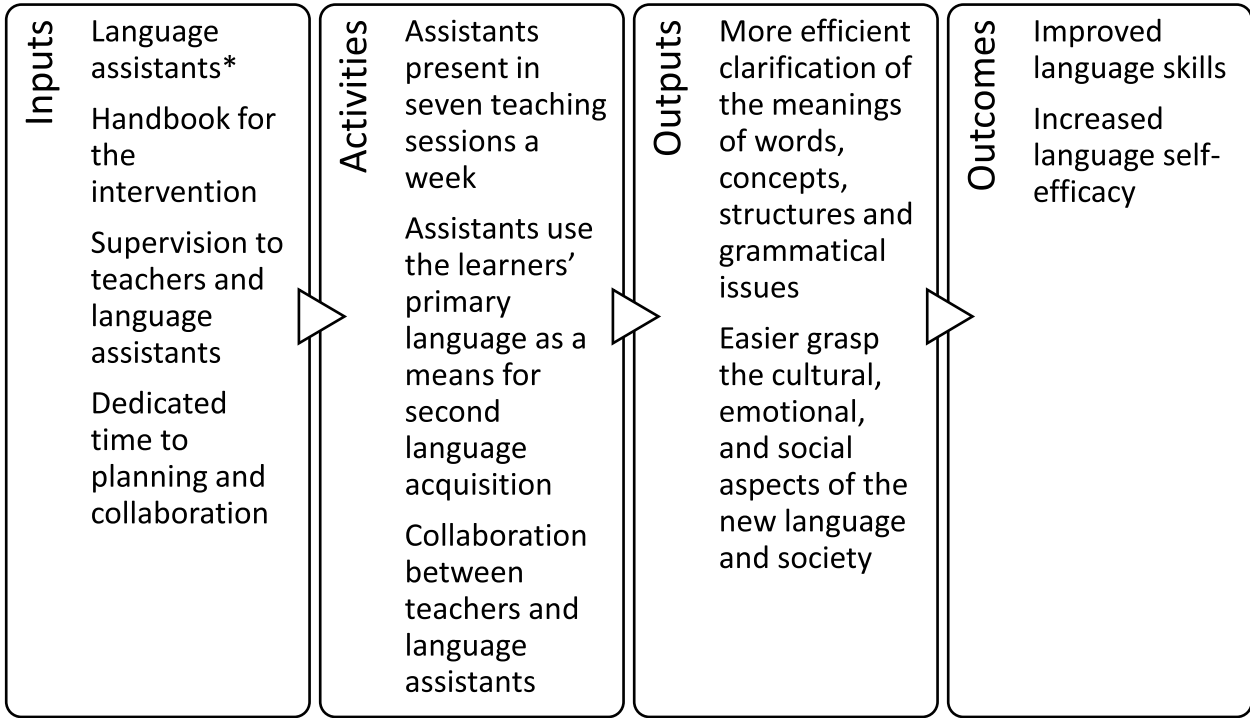


Fig. 1. Logic model for the theory of change of the Multilingual Support intervention.

Table 1
TiDier Checklist for the Multilingual Support intervention.

Item	Description
1	Brief name Multilingual Support
2	Why To facilitate comprehensible transmission of knowledge and promote learning outcomes for adult literate language learners.
3	What Materials Multilingual Support Manual Multilingual Support training and supervision
4	Procedures Eight-hour online training session for staff Ongoing supervision of staff (online)
5	Who will provide? Professional staff at Oslo Metropolitan University will provide the training sessions Professional staff at Oslo Metropolitan University and experienced teachers from the pre-pilot project will provide supervision
6	How The teachers will teach and organise learning activities in the classroom and collaborate with the language assistants regarding refugees with the relevant primary languages.
7	Where The intervention is developed for literate language learners. In the current study, we will implement the Multilingual Support intervention for language training of adult refugees within the Norwegian introduction programme.
8	When and How Much The Multilingual Support intervention will be delivered in 7 out of 21 teaching sessions per week for two semesters per school year.
9	Tailoring The Multilingual Support materials and trial routines will be piloted to test the feasibility of the intervention and the RCT trial design.
10	Modifications The Multilingual Support intervention will be implemented according to the described plans and materials. However, the intervention may be modified based on the findings from the pilot study.
11	How Well Planned: How well the Multilingual Support intervention is working will be based on assessments amongst the teachers, the language assistants and the refugees.
12	Actual: Informed by the results.

make Multilingual Support acceptable to the teachers and the leaders at the adult education centres? What adjustments, if any, are needed? When implemented, what are the potential learning outcomes of Multilingual Support? Regarding the trial design of Multilingual Support, what kinds of procedures for individual randomisation are feasible? If features of the piloted design of Multilingual Support is not feasible, what adjustments could be made to upscale to a full RCT?

2.2. Design

The pilot trial is designed as an individually randomised study at three sites to be conducted from August 2021 to June 2022. Eligible refugees who consent to participate constitute the study participants and will be randomised to the treatment or the control group. The study participants randomised to the treatment group will receive language training with multilingual support. The study participants randomised to the control group will receive language training without multilingual support. The number of assistants in the classrooms will be equal for the treatment and the control groups; however, only the assistants in the treatment group will use the study participants' primary language and follow the Multilingual Support manual.

2.3. Participants

To be eligible for participation, refugees must be at early stages of their language learning (i.e. below A2 level) with eight or fewer years of education in primary and lower secondary school. To limit the number of languages provided by the multilingual assistants, and hence reduce the complexity of the study, we will pilot the intervention and trial with the first and second largest language groups (if applicable) at each site (i.e. Arabic and Kinyabwisha/Swahili in pilot 1; Arabic and Dari in pilot 2; and Arabic in pilot 3).

2.4. Recruitment

From June to August 2021, staff at the local adult education centres will identify eligible study participants. When an eligible refugee has been identified, the staff will provide the refugee with information about the study. This information will be provided written and oral in the person's primary language. In addition, the information will be given orally, in the eligible participants' primary language, so that they can ask questions about the project. If the refugee agrees to participate in the study, he or she provides their written consent through an online survey client ([Nettskjema.no](https://nettskjema.no), 2021). They will thereafter be directly transferred to an online questionnaire (baseline) in the eligible participants' primary language.

2.5. Randomisation procedure

When responding to the baseline questionnaire, the participants will not be aware of their allocation to the treatment or the control group. The survey client includes a function to randomise participants (Nettskjema.no, 2021), which will randomise the participants into two groups, with a 2/3 probability of being allocated to the treatment group. Randomisation is stratified by language. After the participant has submitted the baseline questionnaire, the researchers can obtain information about the participant's treatment allocation. The researchers inform the staff at the local adult education centre about the randomisation result; thereafter, the centre will invite the participant to the Multilingual Support group or the control group.

To obtain a treatment group equivalent to the default class size, we will randomise two-thirds of the participants to the treatment group and one-third to the control group. To ensure that the treatment and the control groups are situated in classes of equal size, the control group will include persons in the target group who declined the invitation to participate in the study, and persons beyond the target group. These persons will not be part of the study.

2.6. Outcome measures

The intention of the Multilingual Support intervention is to improve language training for adult refugees. The primary outcome of the study is language skills. The secondary outcome of the study is self-efficacy in the Norwegian language.

The study will use the A1/A2 language test administered by the Norwegian Directorate for Lifelong Learning. The test is mandatory in Norwegian language training, as an instrument for measuring the primary outcome, i.e. language skills. We will measure the primary outcome prior (September 2021) and post (May 2022) the intervention period. Through the previous mentioned online survey client, which also includes the randomisation procedure, all the study participants will receive a baseline questionnaire measuring the secondary outcome, i.e. self-efficacy in the Norwegian language. We will measure the secondary outcome using a short Norwegian version of the Questionnaire of English Self-Efficacy (QESE; Wang, Kim, Bai, & Hu, 2014). The QESE consists of 32 seven-point Likert scale items measuring the respondent's self-perceived ability to read, write, listen to and speak Norwegian. As some items are not applicable in the context of adult education in Norway, we will restrict the QESE to 27 items. This study follows the recommendations by Wang et al. (2014) in combining instruments to measure both self-perceived efficacy (the QESE) and achievement (the A1/A2 language test). The baseline questionnaire will also include questions on demographic background, employment history and perceptions of classroom teaching. We will repeat this questionnaire at the end of the school year (May 2022).

We will conduct interviews amongst the participants, teachers and assistants from each site in both the treatment and the control group. This approach allows for highlighting contrasts and comparative analysis of teaching conditions as well as teachers and assistants' assessments of their teaching in both the treatment and the control group across the pilot sites.

Interviews of the teachers and the language assistants in the treatment group will be conducted online during the third quarter of 2021 and in spring 2022. The interviews will focus on the teachers' and the language assistants' assessments of the Multilingual Support intervention, including the training and supervision received. These assessments will include progress in language proficiency and cultural understanding amongst the participants and thus complement results from the national standard language tests. We will ask participants about their experience of participating in the pilot trial and assess the feasibility of the outcome measurements.

The interviews with the participants will be conducted in autumn 2021 and late spring 2022, but only if it is possible to do the interviews face to face. The interviews will focus on the participants' views on learning Norwegian with multilingual support. An interpreter will participate in the interviews if necessary.

We will use the same questionnaires and language tests in the treatment and control group, both in terms of timing and content. However, the staff (the teachers and the language assistants) delivering the intervention (in the treatment group) will be asked to respond to some extra questions, covering fidelity and dosage regarding the use of multilingual support in the classroom.

2.7. Sample size calculations

This is a feasibility study and hence not powered to determine robust treatment effects of multilingual support. However, sample size calculations have been conducted for unadjusted t-tests of a two-armed individually randomised design, pooled for the three sites, whereby two-thirds of the eligible course participants will be randomised to the treatment group and one-third will be randomised to the control group. We used conventional alpha ($\beta = 0.05$) and beta ($\beta = 0.20$). The power is $1 - \beta$, i.e. 0.80. The sample size calculations have been conducted for dichotomous outcomes, whereby 45 per cent of the course participants in the control group are expected to achieve language level A2. All the calculations follow Rosner (2015) and have been conducted using the sample size calculator provided by ClinCalc.com. If 75 percent of persons receiving the Multilingual Support intervention achieve test results at level A2 or above, the pilot study (90 course participants (60 in the treatment group and 30 in the control group) will be sufficient for identifying significant effects.

2.8. Analysis plan

The experimental data will be reported descriptive. Further, we will report differences in means (t-tests) as effect sizes and differences in proportions as odds ratios. Emphasis will be placed upon study design attributes, i.e. attrition and response rates, and whether these vary between the treatment and the control groups. Regarding outcome measures, any hypothesis testing of the results will be reported as preliminary and interpreted with caution. The researchers will not be blinded to the conditions when analysing the

results. The experimental data from the pilot trial will be analysed using the statistical software Stata 16 (or newer).

To assess the reliability of language tests as a primary outcome measure, we will compare the results from the language tests and the questionnaire items to the information derived from the interviews. Throughout the data collection and analyses, we will emphasise the participants' involvement and their assessments regarding further developments and improvements of the outcome measures.

2.9. Success criteria for progression to a full-scale randomised controlled trial

Regarding the trial design, we require that 70 per cent of the participants complete their allocated treatment (two semesters), that response rates and completion of language tests are above 70 per cent, and neither completion of the semesters, response rates nor completion of language tests vary significantly (<0.05) between the treatment and the control group.

Regarding the implementation of the intervention Multilingual Support, all sites must be able to recruit staff needed for the implementation and retain at least 70 per cent of assistants throughout the two semesters.

2.10. Personnel

This pilot project will be implemented by a team of interdisciplinary researchers from Oslo Metropolitan University – OsloMet. Tøge is the project leader and has the main responsibility for the research. Tøge (PhD) is the principal investigator and associate professor at the Work Research Institute. She has been engaged in several randomised trials in Norway, investigating the effects of interventions aimed at improving the follow-up of low-income families, reducing school dropouts and improving interprofessional collaboration. Malmberg-Heimonen is a professor in Social Work with extensive experience of RCTs. Together with Tøge, she will have the main responsibility for the experimental data collection and analyses. Vilhjálmsdóttir, a senior adviser at the National Centre of Multicultural Education (NAFO), who has extensive experience as a teacher and a principal at an adult education centre, will organise the supervision provided to the leaders, the teachers and the multilingual assistants. Sørholt is a research professor at the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research and an expert in immigration and integration research with a special focus on qualitative approaches. She will have the main responsibility for collecting and analysing the qualitative data. Representatives from the Norwegian Directorate for Lifelong Learning, Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), experienced adult education centres and experienced researchers constitute a reference group with extensive expertise in field experiments, language training and skills testing amongst adult language learners.

2.11. Timeline

Table 2 provides a timeline for the specific study tasks.

2.12. Ethics

The researchers have registered the protocol for the study at ClinicalTrials.gov (Identifier: NCT04935047). The Norwegian Centre for Research Data has granted ethical permission (case no. 914633). All the participating teachers, multilingual assistants and refugees will be asked to provide active and informed consent and are free to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason and without explanation.

All reporting of the results will follow the CONSORT standard for pilot and feasibility trials (Eldridge et al., 2016). The researchers adhere to professional secrecy related to all data and analyses. No refugee, teacher, multilingual assistant or adult education centre will be identifiable in the study publications or dissemination.

Table 2
Specific study tasks.

	2021			2022			
	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Ethical approval	x						
Workshops with staff	x	x					
Development of manuals and materials	x		x	x			
Training and supervision of language teachers and assistants		x	x	x	x		
Development of questionnaire for baseline and follow-up	x						
Adjustment of manuals and materials	x	x	x				
Interviews and observations to assess fidelity and acceptability of practices		x			x		
Recruitment of participants to the study		x					
Randomisation of study participants		x					
Baseline questionnaire and language tests		x	x				
Follow-up questionnaire and language tests					x		
Data analyses					x	x	
Writing of final report and submission to funder							x
Submission of manuscript to peer-reviewed journal							x

Funding and approval

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this protocol.

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