

ROHINGYA LANGUAGE GUIDANCE

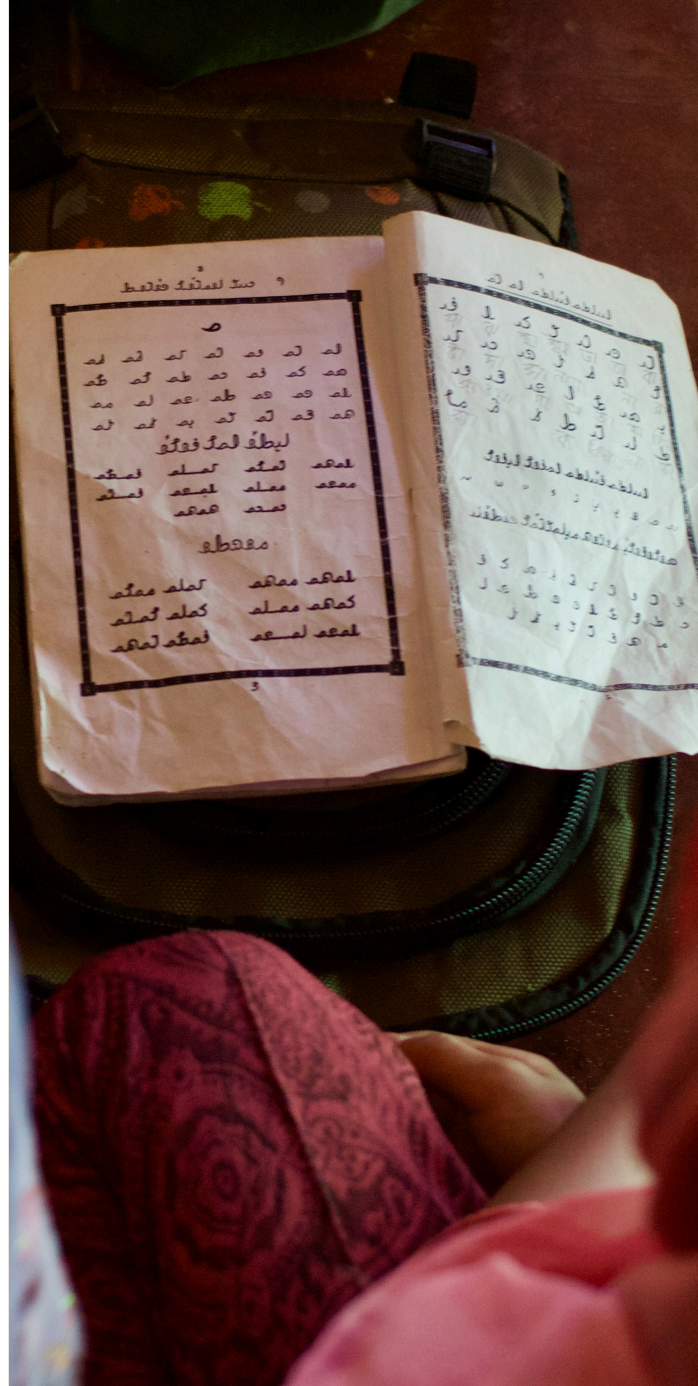


EDUCATION

These Rohingya language guidelines provide sociocultural background and linguistic context for humanitarian program managers, field workers, and interpreters who work in education programs. UNICEF helped develop this document. It accompanies the TWB Glossary for Bangladesh, which contains more than 200 education-related terms, as well as over 1,000 terms from other humanitarian sectors. It is available in five languages both online and offline via smartphone app in written and audio format.

glossaries.translatorswithoutborders.org/bangladesh

We collected data through focus group discussions, supported by complementary field and desk research.



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to discuss overall language services and
resources for communicating with
communities in need.

In the classroom

The Rohingya camps are a challenging linguistic landscape. This is particularly true in the education sector, where in every classroom you can hear many different languages. Young learners speak their mother tongue, while teachers deliver content in Rohingya, Chittagonian, English, and Burmese. In such a complex environment, it's important to consider community language and communication needs and preferences when designing and implementing your program.

While the Rohingya community is generally supportive of education for their children, cultural conservatism can limit access for girls past puberty. But the community does not have a consistent approach to this. Refugees from more conservative areas (like Maungdaw) are less likely to encourage girls to attend school than communities from Sittwe and other parts of southern Myanmar.

Many years of cultural and government education restrictions in Myanmar mean that two out of every three Rohingya refugees living in the camps in Bangladesh have no formal education. Similar numbers report they cannot read or write in any language. Rates of overall reading comprehension are much higher for those with at least some education. In general, a refugee who has completed some schooling is much more likely to understand written Burmese than someone with no schooling (**68% compared to 27%**). They are also more likely to understand written Bangla (**50% compared to 27%**) or written English (**49% compared to 24%**)¹.

Religious institutions play a central role in Rohingya community life and socialization. According to Translators without Borders (TWB) research, 87% of Rohingya refugees report that they were educated at a **moktab** (primary Islamic education) or **madrassa** (secondary Islamic education). While these centers may teach reading and writing, they focus mainly on Islamic studies. Men and women have completed at least some religious education at similar rates. This contrasts with rates of secular education, completed at much lower rates (**21%**).

¹ TWB 2018 Comprehension study, *'The language lesson: What we've learned about communicating with Rohingya refugees'*

Rakhine pronunciation

Rakhine is considered a dialect of standard Burmese and uses the same Burmese script. However, pronunciation and vocabulary in spoken Rakhine differ from standard Burmese. The Burmese language taught to Rohingya children is often pronounced in the Rakhine dialect, as the Rohingya instructors themselves learned it that way while in Myanmar. For example, the word for a female teacher in standard Burmese is **siyama**. In Rakhine, it is pronounced '**serama**.' This can be confusing for students and could lead to communication difficulties.

Teachers could also benefit from support to help them improve both their proficiency in the languages they are teaching, as well as skills specific to the teaching of languages.

Measuring with feet sticks:

The influence of English

Both Bangladesh and Myanmar were British colonies. The English language therefore has a long history of official and educational use in these countries. Even now, English is taught as a second language in both countries. Therefore, English words were, and still are being absorbed into the various languages of the region, including Rohingya. Some words are directly borrowed from English, with small pronunciation changes. For example, school is *eshkul*, slate is *sileyt* and chalk is *shok*. Some academic terms, like *konsunan* (consonant) and *bowal* (vowel) are also directly borrowed from English.

However, some Rohingya terms were influenced by English, but are not direct translations. For example, the word for a measuring ruler in Rohingya is *fit-haim*. *Fit* is from English 'feet', and *haim* is the Rohingya word for 'stick'. The back-translation of the Rohingya would be feet-stick. Another example is 'pencil', which is known as *let-holom*. *Let* is derived from 'lead' in English, and *holom* from Arabic *qalam*, for 'pen'.

The meaning of some English words changed after they were adopted into Rohingya.. For example, in Rohingya and other South Asian languages, the word 'library' (pronounced '*laibri*') does not mean a place to borrow or read books. It generally means a store where one can purchase books. Another example is the word for sticky tape. Most Rohingyas, both old and new, use the word *felashtar* from the English word 'plaster' (referring to a plaster bandage).

Considering the presence of English-speaking NGOs in the camps, the use of English and the creation of new English-based terms will naturally increase.



Talking about math

Though the Rohingya language has words for numerals, mathematical concepts are usually expressed in standard Burmese. Thus, words for addition (*pong*), subtraction (*annok*), multiplication (*amrok*), division (*assa*), fraction (*appaing king*) and similar words are all direct borrowings from Burmese.

The registered Rohingya community has been in Bangladesh for about 30 years. Therefore, they use education-related terms that are borrowed from standard Bangla and Chittagonian. This creates some vocabulary inconsistencies between the new and registered Rohingya speakers. For example, for 'addition' and 'subtraction,' newly arrived Rohingya say *pong* and *annok*, Registered Rohingya speakers say *zug* and *biyuk*, derived from Bangla *joug* and *biyoug*.

English	Bangla	Chittagonian (uses Bangla numerals)	Rohingya (no written numerals)	Burmese
0 zero	০ shun-no	০ shun-no	sifir	၀ thunya
1 one	১ ek	১ ek	ek	တ tit
2 two	২ dui	২ dui	dui	၂ ni
3 three	৩ theen	৩ theen	theen	၃ thone
4 four	৪ char	৪ sair	sair	၄ lay
5 five	৫ panch	৫ fās	fās	၅ ngaa
6 six	৬ choy	৬ so	so	၆ chout
7 seven	৭ shaat	৭ shaat	hāt	၇ khun-ni
8 eight	৮ aat	৮ aashto	āashto	၈ Shi
9 nine	৯ noy	৯ no	no	၉ ko
10 ten	১০ dosh	১০ dosh	dosh	၁၀ ts-say

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