

Furio Bednarz

# Professional and social integration of migrants and language learning: convergences and challenges at the European level

**Abstract:** Based on the “Vintage” project, this article reports the results of research focused on policies and practices regarding the language training of migrants. It deals with common trends informing policies, linking the certification of linguistic skills with the duties and rights of migrants, making linguistic training more of an obligation than an opportunity for social and professional development. The article shows how policies influence language training and provide opportunities or obstacles, defines the stakeholders supporting effective training, and highlights methodological and pedagogical lessons emerging from good practices.

**Résumé :** L'article présente, en partant du projet « Vintage », les résultats d'une étude sur les politiques et pratiques mises en œuvre pour promouvoir les formations linguistiques pour les migrants. Il analyse les tendances communes qui servent de base à l'élaboration des politiques, à la corrélation entre certification des compétences linguistiques et devoirs et droits des migrants, à la formation linguistique considérée comme une obligation plutôt que comme une opportunité de développement social et professionnel. Il explique également en quoi ces politiques influencent les formations linguistiques et créent des opportunités ou des obstacles en définissant les acteurs qui soutiennent une formation efficace et valorisent les méthodologies et les pédagogies tirées des bonnes pratiques.

## 1 Introduction

This article is based on a Lifelong Learning Programme project (“Vintage”) that includes research on national policies and practices in language training, with a particular focus on four key contexts: France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies characterized the study. Policies and good practices were analyzed through focus groups and inter-

---

**Furio Bednarz**, ECAP Foundation – Responsible Research & Development, Via Industria, 6814 Lamone, Switzerland, E-mail: furio.bednarz@ti.ch

DOI 10.1515/9783110477498-010,  © 2017 Furio Bednarz, published by De Gruyter.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License.

Unauthenticated

Download Date | 10/16/18 3:27 AM

views with experts and practitioners, as well as by exploiting the literature, informal contacts and observations. The study took into account three dimensions of analysis, considering the policy level, stakeholders and actors involved in training, and concrete practices.

## 2 Macro dynamics: language mastery as a gatekeeper

Immigration trends, together with the evolution of policies and job markets, are producing a wider need for language learning. Policies converged a lot during the last decades, aiming at establishing shared frames for regulating migration flows, permits, and access to citizenship. EU citizens enjoyed freedom of mobility, while restrictive norms regulated immigration from third-world countries. Controls and compulsory measures, including language courses, have been set up, producing further fragmentation. In addition, at least before the refugee crisis of 2015, specific regulations have been applied to asylum seekers, in order to limit their recognition as refugees, postponing active measures fostering integration.

Assessment of language mastery became in this context a “gate keeper” for selecting access to basic rights of non-EU migrants. They must make efforts to integrate, according to the philosophy of “promoting and demanding” (*fördern und fördern*). This policy defines obligations, foreseeing optional or even compulsory training: in 29 out of 36 countries responding to a Council of Europe survey, adult migrants are legally required to take a language course and/or a language test prior to entry, for residence or for citizenship (Pulinx, Van Avermaet, and Extramiana 2014). Obligations and supportive measures are expected to speed up integration processes, fostering integration in the job market, according to evidence of a positive link between language proficiency, access to the job market and social integration (de la Rica, Glitz, and Ortega 2013).

Certification of language mastery corresponding to a certain level of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) became a key learning driver for migrants. Used as a reference tool for classifying linguistic skills to be certified in order to gain a stable permit or additional rights, the CEFR finally influenced methodological approaches to language learning, fostering the appraisal of languages “in action” and the assessment of communicative skills.

### 3 Meso level: emerging stakeholders and actors

In order to implement policies, almost all European countries developed a mixed system of language training, based on public and private provision. Supportive measures and financing are defined by public authorities, and conditions vary a lot. Cooperation between public institutions and private providers (both NGOs and profit companies) characterizes central and north European countries. Non-profit organisations and associations work on behalf of public bodies offering training to lower qualified migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. An unstructured mix of actors and funds – often distributed on the basis of projects and special initiatives (which works against continuity) – characterizes Mediterranean countries; sometimes (see Italy) it is also the public sector which directly provides language training facilities and social integration courses, working independently of charitable organizations.

Certification is normally delivered by accredited institutions, on the basis of diverse regulations provided by norms, syllabi and standards aligned with the CEFR, and established by independent competence centers supervising the assessment of language learning. Practices of validation of non-formal and informal learning – using portfolios and passports – are slowly gaining some respect, but they are still rare.

## 4 Micro dimension: lessons learned from practice

### 4.1 Focus of the study

Innovative practices have been evaluated against the following criteria:

- respect for adult learning principles;
- balanced mobilisation of learning drivers, considering cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions (Illeris 1999);
- presence of key elements of inclusive learning, such as *proximity*, in terms of content and learning objectives close to the concerns and needs of the learners, a *holistic approach to learning*, and *participative design of learning outcomes and learning paths*.

## 4.2 Balanced learning drivers

At first glance, innovative practices seem to ensure a good balance between learning drivers. Practices try to cope with constraints deriving from policies. Language training is often planned under the pressure of time constraints, according to objectives defined by administrative obligations. Practices identify realistic solutions in order to make training more profitable: free choice of participation and flexible intake arrangements; involvement of stakeholders in orienting participants and facilitating access; activation of exchange face to face and at distance (social networking), enhancing motivation and relational dimensions of learning.

A certain level of proximity is always considered. Courses aim at helping learners deal with everyday life, complementing language training with basic civic notions. Communicative skills needed at the workplace are taken into account; however, practices very rarely focus on more ambitious learning objectives in which the acquisition of linguistic skills could be seen as a driver towards professionalization or personal development.

## 4.3 Language in action

Practices define a shared approach for innovative learning settings and outcomes. Learning activities are designed on the basis of scenarios and considering recurrent events characterizing specific fields of action. Outcomes are defined by “can do” descriptors. Flexible didactic resources are made available to trainers and learners: web tools are exploited in order to create communicative settings and to find examples and didactic solutions; structured libraries of artifacts, documents, exercises are developed in order to link language training to a specific professional context.

Despite the focus on communicative skills, practices take into account the four dimensions of language mastery (listening, reading, speaking, writing), trying to integrate oral and written communication. They define personalized learning objectives, moving from the simple evidence that a communicative task can be accomplished exploiting diverse resources and reaching different levels of complexity. Sometimes assessment procedures also follow this approach: learners are asked to deal with communicative situations, instead of passing a test aimed at verifying learning outcomes corresponding to a specific level.

## 4.4 New didactic frameworks

Practices provide examples of innovative didactic strategies. Books and exercises are replaced by the use of authentic materials (such as forms, manuals, leaflets, magazines, etc.), valuing the familiarity of the learners with sectoral micro-languages. Learning is facilitated by the use of visual glossaries. *Chunks* and *scripts* are gaining momentum. Learning occurs in groups, but also at distance, valuing new technologies: posting, answering, exploiting blogs and other social networking tools. These strategies pave the road to an inductive approach to grammar and language structures. Learning by practising and by exposure to a diverse language context does not represent an alternative to achieving a solid mastery of the language, but is intended as a route for reaching accuracy of expression, including intonation, without causing blocks and obstacles to communication, due to anxiety and refusal attitudes arising from the sanctioning of grammatical errors.

## 4.5 Assessment as a means of promoting learning

Self-assessment, peer-to-peer revision and formative feedback emerge as powerful resources to cope with the risks of *pidginization* of language learning, valuing at the same time the specific linguistic repertoires of the learners and informal learning. The use of portfolios facilitates formative evaluation by teachers, helping learners gain awareness of their progress as well as recurrent errors. At the same time, continuous assessment of communicative performance, based on evidence and proof, enhances the capacity of the learners to make their linguistic proficiency visible and updated.

# 5 Linking language learning and qualifications: an open challenge

Work-related language learning plays a role of growing relevance. However, language mastery is still conceived as a prerequisite rather than a component of a qualification. The challenge remains related to the higher level of linguistic skills required for participating in a formal qualification procedure, with respect to the skills needed to do the same work and communicate at the workplace. And despite much innovation, the world of language training shows persistent difficulties

in dialoguing with the world of vocational education and training (VET). This reality frustrates the learners, whose motivations are both social and professional.

Interesting progress can be gathered from some experiences. In Germany, the recruitment of foreign apprentices (MobiPro Program) helped to integrate language learning and VET content, valuing informal learning by immersion and also complementary e-learning opportunities, in order to speed up the acquisition of a sufficient mastery of the German language to enable learners to follow VET lessons. In Switzerland *fide*-oriented courses provide examples of goal-oriented language learning. In France and Italy, at a local level, it is also possible to find examples of courses addressing specific professional environments, improving linguistic skills as a component of a qualification.

## 6 Final remarks

Over the past few years, policies have placed much emphasis on language learning as a key to integration but have underestimated the role of vocational qualifications in fostering social inclusion, professional mobility, active citizenship and participation of the learners. Structured practices aimed at developing the linguistic skills needed for participation in a formal qualification process are still very rare. On the other hand professional trainers are more and more faced with the challenge of making their communication appropriate to non-native speakers, imagining the use of glossaries and the assignment of tasks as an integral part of their teaching, facilitating the development of linguistic skills in parallel with the acquisition of vocational content.

Constraints have emerged. Interdisciplinary work seems to be difficult, the shift towards personalisation of learning and tailor-made didactic planning implies huge investments in time, often felt to be incompatible with the achievement of short-term learning outcomes. Therefore teachers and trainers should be supported accordingly. The feasibility and effectiveness of innovative methods and models should be demonstrated through effective piloting. Adequate resources should be provided, including training of trainers, libraries, materials and tools ready to be activated along the process.

(For more information on the results of the study: <http://www.vintage-language.eu>)

## References

- de la Rica, Sara, Albrecht Glitz & Francesca Ortega. 2013. *Immigration in Europe: Trends, policies and empirical evidence*. IZA DP No. 7778, Bonn, November 2013.
- Illeris, Knud. 1999. *Laering*. Roskilde: Roskilde University Press. English translation: Illeris, Knud. *How we learn: Learning and non-learning in school and beyond*. London & New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Pulinx, Reinhilde, Piet Van Avermaet & Claire Extramiana. 2014. *Linguistic integration of adult migrants: Policy and practice*. Final report on the 3rd Council of Europe Survey. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016802fc1ce> (accessed 6 June 2016).

