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Progress in proficiency and participation: an adult learning approach to support social integration of migrants in Western societies

Abstract: Educational courses that exist to support migrants in their efforts to participate in a host society should be properly designed with pedagogical expertise. In this paper, we clarify basic principles of adult learning, using the Themis method as an example. Instead of a fixed curriculum which aims to teach dominant and stereotypical cultural habits, a participatory approach fosters the development of new kinds of awareness and new ways of coping with the differences between cultures, and leads to more profound results in terms of self-confidence, participation, empowerment and language proficiency.

Résumé : Concevoir les cours destinés aux migrants qui veulent s'intégrer dans le pays d'accueil exige une expertise pédagogique. Dans l'article, nous explicitons les principes de base de l'apprentissage des adultes, en prenant la méthode Themis comme exemple. En lieu et place d'un programme fixe pour l'enseignement des habitudes culturelles dominantes et stéréotypées, l'approche participative encourage le développement de nouvelles formes de sensibilisation et manières de concilier les différences culturelles ; les résultats sont plus significatifs en termes de confiance en soi, de participation, d'autonomie et de compétence langagière.

1 Courses for social integration

In accordance with the policy guidelines of the Council of Europe, language education for migrants in Western countries should be guided by an analysis of the needs of the learners, and targets should be functional and facilitative, rather than discriminatory (Beacco, Hedges, and Little 2014). However, the regulations of most European countries force both educators and learners to achieve high

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standards in both oral and written language proficiency (Pulinx, Van Avermaet, and Extramiana 2014). Recent research into the experiences of migrant students has pointed out that the current system demands high-level skills to be aware of all legal requirements, find a suitable course of good quality, be responsible for the course fees, know how to learn and study, and combine the course with obligations in everyday life (Besselsen and Hart 2015). Moreover, Krumm and Plutzar (2008) have argued that social integration encompasses such a broad range of competencies that it cannot be achieved in a course and in the target language alone. In fact, intercultural competency involves a dynamic and relational process, rather than a transfer between (fictional) stable cultural systems (Martin 2015). Paradoxically, the focus on language education for migrants in European countries may frustrate progress in social integration and fails to decrease tensions between cultural groups. Even more discouraging, the current political climate forces integration by negative sanctions, such as exclusion, fines and, ultimately, eviction. More effective approaches to civic integration involve intercultural communication and a learner-centred methodology.

2 Principles of adult learning

Regular civic integration courses are focused on in-classroom teaching in the target language in highly diverse groups of students in terms of gender and ethnicity. They provide a fixed curriculum with an instructive didactic style, taking a teacher-centred approach, using mono-didactic methods and the language of instruction of the host country. Contextualisation of language, using examples which are relevant to the learners, and sometimes combining the course with excursions or work, is seen as a way of enhancing the learning process.

However, such traditional teaching methods do not take into account the specific needs of adult learners, who are in the process of constructing a new life in an unfamiliar society. Basic principles of adult learning include learning about things that matter and learning by exposure to different perspectives. By focusing on what matters to individuals, instead of teaching a predefined and fixed model of culture, learners are encouraged to interact with others to explore their identity and the context of their own cultural group, which already holds different perspectives. Consequently, through encounters with locals and exposure to the habits and language of the receiving country, other perspectives will challenge the learning process even more. One of the results of such a pedagogical method is that learners will not only experience progress in language acquisition, but also in their ability to redefine themselves as individuals, capable of learning and interaction, and confident to take part in society. The students

influence the content, speed and chosen activities of the course, while its main goal (namely, integration in a host society) is agreed upon and crucial topics are identified within the group of learners.

3 Design principles for migrant learning

Surprisingly, although participatory adult learning methods are well-known in developing countries (Chambers 2002; Freire 1994; Nieuwboer and Rood 2016; Rood 1997), they are lacking in the array of civic education programmes in European countries. Design principles of participatory methods are: 1) mapping relevant topics, 2) role model facilitation, 3) homogeneous groups of learners, 4) a multi-sensory, semi-structured curriculum, and for migrants: 5) a mother-tongue-based dual language approach.

At the start of the course and following each module, participants are invited to map the topics most pressing and stressful to them. For instance, on the topic of parenting, learners express their concerns about raising children in an unfamiliar culture, and tell about the way they guide and correct their children.

1. A similar-background role model facilitator shows feasible alternatives for perception and behaviour and serves as a cultural broker. In the case of parenting, the facilitator may expose the learners to positive parenting skills such as instruction and negotiation and encourage reflection on the consequences of rowing and spanking.
2. Forming a group of learners with similar backgrounds is advantageous, since too much diversity leads to stress and insecurity: women dare to speak about their bodies, health and parenting more freely without men present. Even in homogeneous groups mothers discover that peer learners have different solutions to everyday parenting challenges. They feel safe to experiment and accept change in the safety of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978).
3. By using many creative and playful didactic tools, the learning process is fun and leads to many experiences of success and encouragement. This is particularly important for first-time adult learners, who often have a history of failure in educational settings, resulting in low self-esteem and anxiety. Play is used as a means to learn the target language, allowing trial and error, very much in the same way as young children learn language.
4. Participants are encouraged to effectively express themselves in their native language (L1). In this way, they are understood by the facilitator and do not depend on interpreters. Their confidence to communicate with others is improved, instead of discouraged. At the same time, they are constantly chal-

lenged to learn the new target language (L2) in a functional way, mainly listening and speaking.

4 The IDEAL-programme

This approach has been successful in the Themis-programme (the Netherlands) from 2002 onwards, and the IDEAL-programme, Integrating Disadvantaged Ethnicities through Adult Learning, from 2011 onwards (Nieuwboer and Rood 2016; http://www.ideal-participation.eu).

Groups of migrant mothers choose topics like health, effective communication, parenting and taking part in Western society. These topics are used to design a curriculum with conversations, role play, story-telling and many other activating didactic tools. Out-of-class activities are organised as well, like using public transport, a visit to a library, education at a health centre, or talks with teachers at a school.

The participants reported progress in self-confidence and communications skills. They were able to prevent rows, they found themselves less impulsive in their reactions to others, they could criticize each other without feeling unsafe, and they were more likely to join in personal activities such as celebrations. One participant confessed that she used to punish her children by holding their hand over a lighter flame. She now learned how to use positive parenting skills like instructions, play and compliments, and reported that her behaviour prevented rows and arguments. We also measured progress in participation. After the programme, participants were able to structure their daily activities, become involved in school affairs, visit a doctor without an interpreter, and use public transport, visit public facilities and take up voluntary work. Finally, we assessed the language proficiency levels of the participants. They were reported to easily formulate correct full sentences, whereas others used correct words and created sentences with some minor mistakes. Most learners improved one level in oral communication.

Examples show that a standard language course, in which migrants pay per hour, can cost up to €10,000 with no guarantee of success. Some of the participants in IDEAL had previously followed standard courses for 3–5 years without making significant progress. In groups of 15 students, the cost of a participatory course (300–350 contact hours) is approximately €1500 per student. Evaluations show good results in terms of progress in language proficiency and participation, even for first-time learners.

5 Recommendations

Standard courses for civic integration focus on language acquisition only and do not aim at fundamental changes in cultural identity. As a consequence, by learning stereotypical habits and behaviours and language, the tensions between values and different cultural subsystems are not addressed. The result is that cultural groups withdraw into their own subculture, transferring tensions between marginal and dominant cultural systems to the next generation.

However, when these tensions are discussed in a safe and conducive learning environment, respecting the prior knowledge and beliefs of the learner, gradual change becomes feasible and acceptable. A participatory, social constructivist approach encourages participants to share observations, opinions, doubts, dilemmas, choices and solutions among individuals who are learning to live in a country which is not familiar to them, including topics which matter most and have a considerable impact on daily family life and future generations in the context of society. Effective adult learning programmes take these perspectives of learners into account and use them to encourage change. It is useful and feasible to reconsider and redesign a programme for social integration based on these insights. Such an approach is not contradictory to language acquisition and active participation, but instead enhances the learning process, even with first-time learners.

In Western societies, it is standard to invest 16 years of education in children. With the knowledge of adult learning processes, we suggest that, in order to relieve tensions caused by cultural discontinuity and to prevent problems arising from failed integration, participatory education should be provided as basic education for migrants, especially those without formal educational experience.

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