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Developing placement assessment in integration training for adult migrants in Finland

Abstract: As part of integration training in Finland, migrants are provided with Finnish or Swedish language courses. The linguistic objective is to provide migrants with the basic language skills required in daily life. To find the most suitable teaching group for learners in integration training, a placement assessment is carried out. This includes assessment of learners' current proficiency level in the target language and study skills/experience. In this article we describe a project to develop a national test system for placement assessment (see Ohranen et al. 2015).

Résumé : En Finlande, des migrants adultes suivent des cours de finnois ou de suédois dans le cadre d'une formation pour l'intégration. L'objectif est de les doter des compétences langagières de base nécessaires dans la vie de tous les jours. Une évaluation est réalisée en amont afin de trouver le groupe d'enseignants le mieux adapté aux apprenants inscrits à la formation d'intégration. Elle inclut l'évaluation du niveau de compétence dans la langue cible et du niveau de qualification/d'expérience. Dans cet article, nous décrivons les objectifs d'un projet destiné à concevoir un système national pour l'évaluation de placement (voir Ohranen et al. 2015).

1 Immigration in Finland

The number of foreign citizens living permanently in Finland has increased rapidly in the last decade. As far as language background is concerned, at the end of 2014 there were 310,000 people with a foreign language background living in Finland. Russian was the most common foreign language, followed by Estonian, English, Somali and Arabic (Statistics Finland).

The year 2015 was exceptional in terms of the number of asylum seekers in Europe in general. In Finland the number of asylum seekers was 32,476. Relative

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to Europe overall this number is not high, but proportionally the increase in Finland has been considerable, as the number of asylum seekers in 2014 was 3,651 (Finnish Immigration Service).

2 Policy documents

Integration and integration training have been promoted through legislation and work on national core curricula in various ways. The Act on the Promotion of Integration (1386/2010) and Decree on an Initial Assessment for Promoting Integration (570/2011) came into effect at the beginning of the 2010s. Furthermore, the National Core Curriculum for Integration Training for Adult Migrants and the National Core Curriculum for Literacy Training for Adult Migrants came into effect in 2012.

3 Integration training

Integration training is considered key to becoming a part of Finnish society since it includes Finnish/Swedish language and communication skills, civic and working life skills, and guidance counselling. The length of integration training is most commonly approximately ten months, taking place five days a week and for seven hours per day. Integration training is free of charge and the participants receive an integration allowance based on their active and regular participation. The number of students in this training in 2015 was 14,742.

Teachers are usually professional Finnish as a second language (L2) teachers with a master's degree in Finnish language and pedagogical studies. After integration training, the target for language proficiency is quite high, CEFR level B1.1 (according to the Finnish adaptation of the CEFR levels), and the goal is to move on to working life or continue studies in preparatory education for migrants.

4 Typical pathways through integration training

Figure 1 shows typical pathways through integration training and other possible education for migrants.

When a migrant is registered in a municipality they are usually guided to employment services for an integration plan. This includes placement assessment, which usually consists of an initial interview, a test of language skills

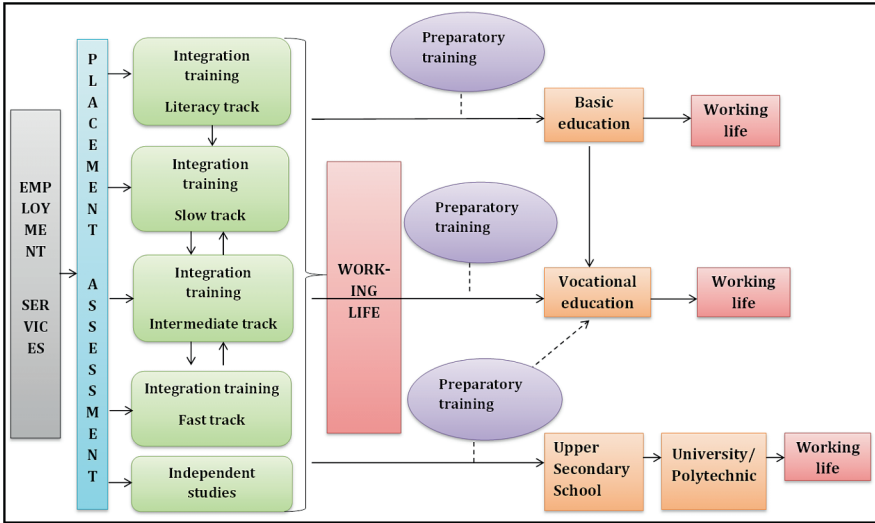


Figure 1: Typical pathways through integration training for adult migrants in Finland

and an assessment of study skills. Following this, the migrant is most often guided to a suitable form of integration training.

According to the placement assessment, the most suitable type of integration training is chosen – slow, intermediate or fast-track – depending on the student’s motivation and readiness for study. If it turns out that the recommended course is inappropriate, it is possible to switch track during training. The literacy track is chosen if a migrant is non-literate or needs to improve his/her literacy skills (e.g., by learning the Latin alphabet), after which he/she may proceed to regular integration training. Migrants also have the possibility to find suitable education on their own and receive the same benefits, i.e., the integration allowance as in regular integration training.

Naturally after the training there are different possibilities depending on the motivation and life goals of the migrant, such as moving on to basic education/vocational education/upper secondary school (via preparatory training), and then to polytechnic or university level education.

5 Our project and its aims

The project was funded by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy during 2014–2015. It was carried out by the Centre for Applied Language Studies (CALS) and Testipiste. CALS has a long history in language testing through coordinating

and developing the National Certificates of Language Proficiency testing system, and as a research institution it specialises in research-based test development. Testipiste, a unit formed by four major adult education institutions in the Helsinki area, specialises in the assessment of adult migrants with Finnish as a second language (L2).

The main aim of the project was to plan and pave the way for a more widespread, national use of the model for placement assessment developed by Testipiste. The plan would include an analysis of what nationwide use will require and a recommendation about the administrative model for the assessment system (e.g., which institutions will be involved and how work will be divided between them). A further aim of the project was to develop assessment carried out during integration training and to develop teachers' assessment literacy and skills.

6 Data collection

There was no previous information gathered at the national level in the field of placement assessment. Our data collection included

- 1) contacting 15 Centres for Economic Development, which are responsible for placement assessment in their own regions;
- 2) a questionnaire addressed to the institutions organizing placement assessment;
- 3) teacher interviews;
- 4) school visits.

7 Results

7.1 Variation in placement assessment

In our data we found that the tests are administered by different kind of institutions, both public (schools) and private (businesses). The data also revealed that there is one major organizer of placement assessment tests (4000 test takers per year), though most institutions organize tests for 100–500 test takers per year. There are also organizers who only have one hundred or fewer test takers. The largest provider organizes tests non-stop and other organizers offer testing only on certain days. Moreover, the duration of placement assessment varies significantly: between half an hour and 70 hours during one to ten days. Through a national model, quality of testing could be assured also for those who do not or-

ganize tests on a daily basis, and the length of testing would be equal for all test takers.

Language tests typically take all sub-skills into account. However, the duration of testing sub-skills varies greatly, from five to 90 minutes in different skills.

When it comes to testing readiness for study and learning, all institutions who answered the question used some kind of reading aloud/mechanical reading test and dictation test. Mathematics, visuo-spatial functions and hand-eye coordination, as well as morphological reasoning were also often tested. However, other test types were also mentioned, adding to the huge variation in what skills institutions test.

As we can see, the methods of testing utilised vary greatly nationwide. This is probably as a result of lack of clear coordination at the national level, as there are also different needs in different regions. The regions are also quite independent in how they implement placement assessment. Even though legislation and curricula are current, it seems that there is a need to examine how they are interpreted and implemented at the regional level in different parts of Finland.

From the point of view of migrants it would be beneficial to have a unified system in placement assessment so that when people move within the country, the information “follows” them, and there is no need to take yet another test. There would also be equal opportunities to be guided to the most suitable training and proceed to employment.

7.2 Placement assessment procedure

One outcome of the project is the placement assessment procedure, which is currently based on the model developed by Testipiste. Over time the model will undergo research-based development in CALS. The current model is illustrated in Figure 2.

The test day starts with an interview where background information is elicited, such as gender, age, L1, previous education, number of languages known and studied, length of residence in Finland etc. During the interview there are also tests in mechanical reading, word dictation and speaking. If a test taker appears to have low literacy it is possible to guide them to literacy tests.

After that there are tests in morphological reasoning and basic mathematics for all. If a person already knows some Finnish, they take language tests (writing, reading and listening). The end result is the track and module recommendation of suitable integration training for employment services. From employment services a person is then guided to training. This requires functional cooperation

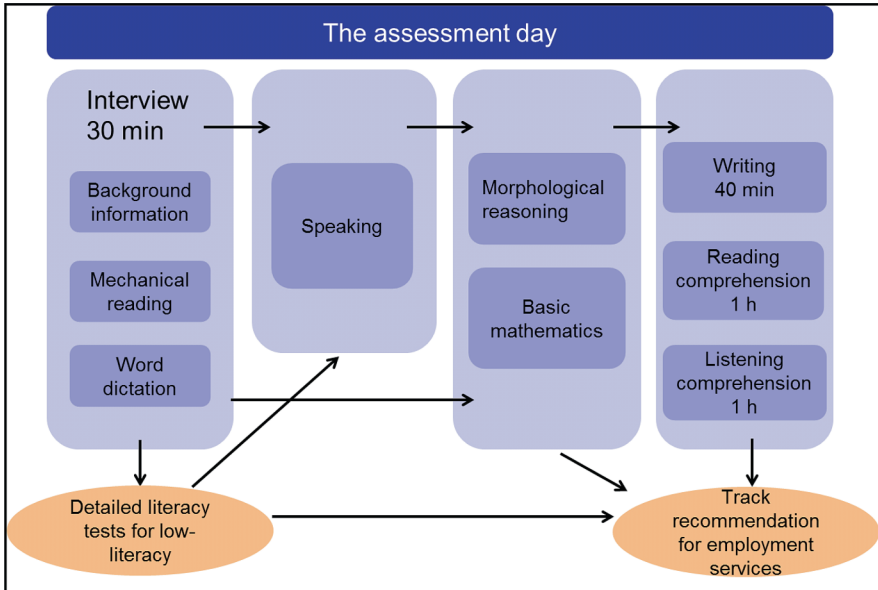


Figure 2: Placement assessment procedure

between employment services, the test administrator and schools/integration training teachers.

However, during the project we got the impression that it is possibly not always so clear if all the tests used are in fact useful or needed. More research-based information is needed, so for Georgetown University Round Table (GURT) we undertook a small-scale study which indicates that, e.g., word dictation in the Finnish language does not seem to be a good predictor of the suitable study track (Tammelin-Laine et al. 2016). We still need more data to verify this, but this is an example of the kind of research-based information that is needed to find out which tests are the most important.

Furthermore, from research (e.g., Tarone, Bigelow & Hansen 2009) we know that literacy in L1 has an effect on the development of both oral and written skills when learning a new language. Therefore, we are looking into the possibility of adding a test of reading in L1 to the test model.

8 Discussion

After the planning project presented in this article, a new project has started with the goal of implementing the national model. A network of interested adminis-

trators of tests has started to take shape, the existing test package is undergoing careful scrutiny, and training of test administrators will start in the near future. The ultimate goal is to extend these activities from their initial project base to permanent interventions.

During the planning project it became clear that general assessment literacy needs attention. The Centres for Economic Development need to be more aware of issues related to placement assessment because those who administer it are chosen based on competitive tendering in different regions. The quality of assessment should be the priority criterion for tendering rather than financial cost. If there is a national model for assessment then criteria like the competence of the testers (experience), how well testers know the region and its integration training, and whether the testers cooperate with the trainers/teachers in interpreting test results, are of paramount importance.

Finally, the goal of the national test system is to assure equality to all test takers and to develop assessment literacy in general.

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