

## Chapter Four

# Crucial Role of Language Skills in Ensuring Access of Unaccompanied Minors and Young Adult Migrants to Basic Services: Challenges and Effective Approaches

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### Introduction

Language learning is a key aspect that promotes the inclusion of unaccompanied minors to the host society and their access to basic services. However, as it is mentioned in the UNESCO paper 'Language and Literacy Programs for Migrants and Refugees' (Hanemann, 2018, p. 57), the usual policy of the governments to promote language learning is to subsidise formal language courses and to have a system of sanctions for those that are not following them. This usually leads to one-size-fits-all solutions that usually do not motivate the migrants and do not support their learning since formal language learning typically assumes confident literacy and study skills which many migrants, due to several reasons, do not have (lack of confidence, limited contact with speakers of a language, limited literacy, lack of time/money, lack of learning support, lack of effective personal learning strategies, lack of motivation to persist with language learning activities, difficult personal situation).

As a result, many immigrants reach level A2 of the Common European Framework (CEFR), but far fewer reach level B1, which is considered the minimum level needed for full access to services. Moreover,

as it is mentioned in the article ‘What Measures Are in Place to Ensure the Long-Term Integration of Migrants and Refugees in Europe?’, published on the European Website on Integration (2020), the offer of public funded free courses for migrants and refugees decreases significantly as the level increases. The need to develop low-cost educational offers for immigrants and refugees at intermediate and advanced levels that will not depend on the availability of public funding is therefore evident.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the recommendations of the Council of Europe (2014), which were made in the framework of the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LIAM) project,<sup>1</sup> we learn a new language primarily by interacting in it and consequently, communication in real-life situations is extremely important. It is therefore very important to promote non-formal and informal language learning methods which are going to be flexible and consider the heterogeneity between the learner profiles. Recent research has also highlighted the connection between language learning and other forms of literacy, such as digital literacy and financial literacy, to ensure the access of unaccompanied minors and young adult migrants to basic services. This is particularly important in the Covid era with the increasing digitalisation of all services and social interactions and represents another aspect that is not considered in most of the formal language courses. However, language teachers alone cannot have all the knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate access to a wide and differentiated range of services. Non-formal and informal learning requires the cooperation between different actors to achieve the best possible result. For this reason, it is especially important to promote networking and cooperation between various actors (language teachers, employers, public services, communities etc.) that would eventually lead to ensure better access to services.

### **The Limitations of the Formal Education Model**

The provision and subsidising of formal language courses are the main strategy that most governments follow to develop the language skills of the migrants they host. The formal education model usually follows a ‘one size fits all’ approach which is often ineffective. In formal education, learners from different countries, of different ages, and with

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants>.

different linguistic needs follow a standardised language learning programme which usually leads to a formal qualification. This system has many limitations and makes the linguistic inclusion of the migrants more difficult.

First, this system does not consider the linguistic biographies of the learners. Some of the migrants speak several languages, they have lived in multilingual environments and therefore they have a greater capacity of language acquisition from others that know only their mother tongue.

Second, this system does not consider the specific needs of the migrants related to language acquisition. Some migrants need more skills related to language learning in the workplace and work-related vocabulary, others have more needs in relation to dealing with public administration etc.

Third and most important, formal language learning typically assumes confident literacy and study skills which many migrants do not have, due to several reasons:

- *Limited contact with speakers of a language.* Migrants, especially newly arrived, often tend to have contacts only with other migrants coming from their country of origin. This leads to a ghettoisation and reduces the times where these migrants would need to use the language of the host country.
- *Low literacy.* Frequently, migrants that arrive to Europe have a low general level of literacy as they had limited schooling in their country of origin. This means that they also have low study skills, and they would need special support to be able to cope with formal learning approaches.
- *Lack of time/money.* The lack of time and money is an important constraint, especially for young adult migrants that need to work. Formal education needs more dedication in terms of time and many times, since they cannot combine both, many migrants drop the language courses or are unsuccessful in them.
- *Lack of motivation.* Formal language learning requires great motivation. When migrants consider their host country as a transition country, as for example is the case with the majority of the migrants coming to Greece, or if their political status is uncertain, a lack of motivation is frequently observed.
- *Lack of confidence.* As it was demonstrated by Yeşim Sevinç and Ad

Backus (2017), language anxiety is a particularly important issue in the context of migration. Many times, migrants avoid using the language of the host country because they do not feel confident in it. This leads to further problems in terms of language proficiency, and the migrants may feel trapped in a vicious circle.

### **Connection between Language Learning and Digital Literacy**

Language learning is of key importance for migrants in order to be included in the society of their host country in an independent way. The good knowledge of the language of the host country is important in order to gain access to basic services, including access to employment, health care, education, and housing without depending on the availability or not of relevant support services. However, with the increase of the digital technologies as well as with the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, the access to services increasingly requires digital skills. The development of digital skills goes hand in hand with the development of language and literacy skills in order for the access to the services to be effective. Even if most of the migrants have basic digital skills and are able to use smart phones for connecting to social networks and communicating with their families, they are not familiar with using digital skills for learning or for accessing services. This was particularly evident and also led to a worsening of the situation of migrants during the pandemic.

### **Non-Formal and Informal Language Learning for Migrants**

The above limitations and considerations make the development of non-formal and informal language learning for migrants particularly important. Non-formal and informal learning consists of a series of approaches that promote tailor-made and flexible solutions that could allow the language learning acquisition in a non-formal context in cooperation with native speakers of the language (language partners). In this way, several of the above-mentioned limitations can be overcome. Morice (2016) has proved that non-formal and informal learning methods not only develop the language skills of the migrants better but also allow them to better understand the culture of the country in which they live and have more contacts with people from the mainstream community.

There are many methods that are used in order to develop the language skills of the migrants in a non-formal or informal way. These

methods include organising language cafés for migrants or the promotion of Tandem exchange in couples or in groups. While in traditional Tandem exchanges two people exchange their language skills, in the case of migrants, language skills can be exchanged with cultural knowledge that migrants bring with them. In the framework of formal and informal language learning in relation with the issue of the access to basic services, the following areas have been identified as of particular importance.

### *Work*

- Searching for a job in the newspaper
- Calling to ask information about a new post
- Giving information about one's profession
- Undertaking a work interview
- Writing a personal CV
- Addressing a cover letter to an employer
- Asking for information at work in the office/consultancy office
- Giving information on one's work-related qualifications
- Understanding an employment contract
- Understanding employment laws and regulations
- Asking about work ethics, rights, and professional rights
- Filling in and signing an employment contract
- Selling a product
- Giving orders, directions, and guidelines to a colleague
- Narrating to a friend how the work is going
- Reporting to the boss how the work is going

### *Public Services*

- Asking for information at the tax office
- Understanding an official form at the tax office
- Declaring tax refund
- Giving and asking for information at the immigration office
- Asking about recognition of professional qualifications
- Sending and receiving a letter/a parcel at the post office
- Declaring a loss at the police station
- Registering with the Municipality asking for a visa

- Arranging permit formalities
- Applying for a driver's license
- Paying driving fines
- Dealing with funeral arrangements and inheritance

### *Health*

- Calling a hospital or a private doctor to ask for or change an appointment
- Asking a doctor information about the results of a health test
- Asking a doctor about rehabilitation issues
- Narrating to a third person because someone is in hospital
- Describing the health system/the conditions in a hospital
- Talking about alternative medicine
- Asking questions about the health issues of a pregnant woman
- Giving information to a doctor on one's pain(s), symptoms, and psychological problems
- Registering in the health system

### *Housing*

- Searching for a new house to rent or to buy
- Asking for information about a new house to rent or buy
- Describing a house
- Signing a contract for a house to rent or to buy
- Understanding conditions and regulations relevant to living in an apartment building
- Understanding a house insurance document
- Understanding house bills
- Complaining about damages in a house
- Arranging moving to a new house
- Negotiating with a roommate

### *ICT and the Media*

- Asking about ICT services
- Understanding the interface of a PC in the host country's language
- Explaining problems about technology
- Communicating through e-mail in the L2

- Complaining about a TV programme
- Surfing the internet
- Understanding a news report/broadcasting

### ***Financial Issues and Services***

- Opening a new bank account
- Asking about different bank products
- Understanding a bank report
- Understanding insurance needs, policies and making claims
- Understanding about payment of pensions, and investments

These skills are usually offered to migrants up to A2 level. However, it is particularly important to offer the skills at least at B1 level because this is the minimum level required for the access to services to be effective.

### **Conclusion**

The provision of formal language learning is the usual and the easiest choice for migrants to develop the language skills and allows them independent access to basic services. However, this approach has many limitations and is ineffective for many migrants. Non-formal and informal language approaches are not very frequent but have proved to be highly effective. It is especially important to promote the provision of informal and non-formal language learning opportunities at least at the B1 level to allow them to improve their access to training but also develop their networks and become better included in the host society of the country in which they live.

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