

Immigrant Destination-Language Acquisition for Social Integration:

Challenges and Best Practices

Beatriz Coningham

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Abstract

The ability to communicate effectively in the local language is undoubtedly crucial in the process of social and economic integration of immigrants to a new country. This paper discusses challenges and best practices in immigrant integration programs throughout the world that specifically address language acquisition issues and puts forward policy recommendations to the integration of first generation adult migrants from a language acquisition perspective.

Research problem

While there appears to be consensus on the importance of destination country language acquisition for the economic and social integration of migrants (Chiswick and Miller, 2007; Esser, H. 2006; Institute for Work and the Economy, 2006), effectively meeting the specific learning, psychological and social needs of first generation adult migrants in the process of learning and teaching the destination language remains a goal difficult to achieve.

Purpose of this study

Identify best practices in language acquisition programs for the social integration of adult migrants as a way to inform policy making at the local and regional level.

Research question

What are the challenges and best practices in social integration of first generation adult migrants from a language-acquisition perspective?

Conceptual framework

This paper is based on a multicultural view of social integration of immigrants. Within this framework, social integration means the full socio-economic participation of immigrants in the destination country without their having to give up their language and cultural identity although with an expectation of adoption of certain values (European Commission, 2003). Thus, any language training offered as part of a social integration strategy, should be done in a way that respects migrants' linguistic and cultural identity, recognizing on one hand the right to be culturally different, and on the other, the need for providing conditions for social integration.

Research methodology

An initial broad search through Google using search of terms "social integration of migrants" and "social integration of migrants + language acquisition" was followed by the selection of the most relevant documents yielded within the first 10 pages of results. This was important in order to gather field-based papers and papers written for and by practitioners and policy makers. Additional searches of the same terms were conducted through the academic databases made available by the George Washington University library system.



Results

In order to address the research question, results of the above search were summarized under two headings: challenges in adult migrant destination language acquisition, and best practices. For the purpose of this paper, a 'best' practice is defined as an ethical, creative and sustainable practice that has demonstrated or has the potential to generate an effective response to one or more language acquisition challenges faced by adult migrants.

Challenges in adult migrant destination language acquisition

A number of barriers exist that can prevent or hinder adult migrants' destination language acquisition, some of the most commonly acknowledged being migrants' educational background, gender, cultural and religious beliefs, and income level. Diamantopoulou (2003) points out, for instance, that the "bulk of immigrants – particularly those arriving from countries of the developing world – have a very low education level" (p. 4). This has two potential implications, at least: a lack of learning to learn skills when it comes to languages as well as a lack of job related skills required in societies where technology and information have become highly complex. In this case, language instruction must be combined with training and education that will increase basic skills – such as computer literacy – as well as language proficiency.

Regarding gender, Diamantopoulou (2003) emphasizes the importance of addressing the needs of immigrant women since they directly influence, in turn, the successful integration of the 2nd and 3rd generations. Adult women migrants may have child care responsibilities that prevent them from leaving the house to attend classes. Cultural and religious beliefs may also make women uncomfortable attending mixed gender classes. Additionally, Bracalenti (2001), referring to the experience of social integration of immigrants in Germany, explains that migrants, particularly women, often do not learn the German language because of low income, which makes language courses too expensive for them.

The Advocates for Human Rights (2006) review of research on language acquisition among migrants to the United States finds that immigrants to the U.S. have a strong motivation to learn English. Nearly 1.2 million adults attended English as a Second Language classes in 2002-2003, representing 16% of the 7.4 million working age adults with limited English proficiency. However, typically the first generation remains dominant in their native language, even though they may make some progress towards learning English. Challenges identified for first generation migrants in this context are inadequate funding of language instruction programs leading to long waiting lists, as well as childcare responsibilities and transportation, issues that are also noted by Durán (1996). Still regarding funding, DeVoretz and Werner (2000) offer a good discussion about how, when immigrants are required to fund their own language training, low income will lead them to not start or abandon language training for immediate work opportunities, thus diminishing their chances of developing language proficiency and increasing job wages. It is also important to note that language training, if not adequately designed to accommodate for migrants work hours, may keep them out of the job market, thus delaying their integration.

From a more systemic perspective, a barrier for language learning can be the concentration of employees who share a non-English language in the workplace or in the neighborhood where immigrants live, as is the experience in the United States. According to the Institute for Work and the Economy (2006), when this happens, English skills become valued less by employers since English is not needed for communicating with co-workers, and the incentive for learning English is reduced. By the same token, immigrants who live in an area where many others speak the same non-English language will be less encouraged to acquire English fluency in comparison with immigrants who live in neighborhoods where English is the primary language.

Best practices

Facilitating early transition into employment in combination with language training

The coordinated offer of language and basic job skills training is gaining support (Institute for Work and the Economy, 2006). Australia makes substantial investments in language training – which is by far the most important item on the budget related to immigrant integration (Liebig, 2007a). Traditionally, migrants to Australia would dedicate their first years in Australia to learning English, which would delay their entry to the labor market. A recognition of the importance of reducing this delay is leading the Australian Government to fund new language training measures. In May 2008 the Australian Government announced funding of \$49.2 million over four years for the “Employment Pathways” and “Traineeships in English and Work Readiness” measures, programs that will assist migrants to learn English with an employment focus. Participating migrants will gain exposure to workplace culture and practices and will gain work experience. Pilots of the programs commenced in October 2008, and should be fully implemented in 2010 (OECD, 2008).

Attending to the specific needs of first generation adult migrants

The key pillar of the Danish immigrant integration program, according to Liebig (2007b), is the Danish language courses. Courses are offered in a flexible schedule within the three-year integration period and add to about 2000 hours. They are provided in three tracks, each meant to address the needs of specific immigrant sub-groups. A first track is for illiterate immigrants; a second track is for those with limited prior education and who are expected to learn Danish more slowly. The third track is more academically oriented and intended for students with at least secondary education who can be expected to learn Danish relatively rapidly. Each of these tracks is divided into six modules, with a test after each module. Obtaining Danish citizenship requires a Danish knowledge level to be reached after completion of Module 5 of the upper track. University access requires a level equivalent to full completion of the third tier. Courses are offered free of charge to participants and the providers are reimbursed by municipalities, which in turn receive about 4.5 Euros per student per hour from the Ministry of Integration. When an immigrant has passed a language competency test in the introduction period, 2800 Euros are paid to the municipality.

A practice that does not seem to appear in the government best practices literature yet is the creation of language programs specifically designed for women. It is however being incorporated by non-governmental organizations. In Leeds, UK, an Asian woman started a centre to teach English language and provide networking and training for women. It was able to link to other government resources. This case confirms that patterns of association are very helpful in the process of addressing exclusion, as well as having a place to meet and develop a common awareness (European Commission, 2003).

Creating incentives for immigrants and municipalities

According to Liebig (2007b), Denmark’s provisions for language training address many of the barriers identified in the previous section of this paper. The Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, created in 2001, is responsible for the implementation of several social integration measures, including the teaching of Danish as a second language and for work purposes with a focus on immigrants. It also provides grants for job-related Danish lessons offered in the workplace. The motivation to join and complete integration programs is reinforced through a formal signed contract or personal action plan between the receiving state and the immigrant. Through this instrument, the state commits to provide language and civic instruction, assuring the immigrant, in exchange, the same social and economic rights as natives. The immigrant commits to respecting the law and values of the receiving state, attend language and civic instruction and participation in other activities aimed at integration into the education system or the labor market. The contract emphasizes the mutual responsibility of state



and immigrant in achieving integration and specifies the behavior expected of immigrants regarding taking charge of his/her own interests as a new member of the host country.

Another important aspect of Denmark's integration practices (Liebig, 2007b) is the provision of incentives for municipalities to integrate newcomers into the job market. Within about two months after the granting of the residence permit, municipalities are obliged to offer all newcomers (with the exception of EEA nationals) an introduction program. The details of this are established in individual contracts and failure to follow the plan may lead to a reduction in the introduction allowance by up to 30%. Integration is promoted through language lessons, counseling and education activities as well as job training in public and private enterprises. The contract is followed up on every three months.

The Swedish government is also moving towards the provision of incentives. Sweden intends to introduce a pilot project with a bonus system for newly arrived immigrants who meet the target for Swedish language acquisition in a stipulated time. The language bonus will be based on individual performance and will be available at different levels of language proficiency. The bonus system is expected to strengthen the incentives for language learning among immigrants, as well as to speed up entry to the labor market. In 2008, Sweden announced measures to improve the "Swedish for Immigrants" (SFI) program. These measures include skills-enhancement for teachers, clearer goals for the SFI, and a three-year time limit for SFI education. The Swedish government has also charged the National Agency for Education with the development of national tests" (Swedish Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality, 2008).

Recommendations for policy making at the local and regional levels

A brief synthesis of the best practices identified for this paper might be expressed in the following recommendations:

1. The well-established vital role of language skills for social integration requires that governments take charge of guaranteeing immigrants have abundant access to high quality language instruction.
2. Language training programs must be designed to address specific needs of adult migrants and remove barriers regarding work hours, gender, differences in educational background, childcare responsibilities, transportation and financial challenges. Language training programs must be provided in different hours and the speed of content delivery must account for participants' educational background. Childcare and transportation may need to be provided depending on the situation as well as gender specific programs.
3. In order to speed job market integration, language skills training should be combined with basic job skills training including computer literacy.
4. The English Learning experience should provide the immigrant with a community in itself so as to create opportunities for informal learning and generate peer support.
5. ESL teachers in adult migrant language training programs must be required to complete training on the specific technical, social and cultural skills required for the effective facilitation of language learning for first generation adult immigrants.
6. An incentive system (contracts, bonuses, refunds) must be created to encourage both individual migrants and local governments to achieve specific language learning targets within a pre-determined period of time.
7. Desired program outcomes must be pre-defined. Programs must be evaluated systematically against outcomes and results reported.

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