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THE LANGUAGE NEEDS OF ADULT IMMIGRANTS

by

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1.0 Introduction

A recurrent topic of discussion both before and during the St. Wolfgang Symposium and indeed one of the recommendations of the Symposium has been that special consideration should be given to the language problems met by immigrant workers and their families. It is arguable that this social group has more urgent language needs than any other in the CCC countries. The aim of this paper is to give an assessment of the size and nature of these language needs, to outline what is known of existing provision for the teaching of languages to adult immigrants and of relevant research already undertaken and in progress, to consider how far the unit/credit system as so far envisaged can cater for these language needs and, finally, to suggest what policies can be followed by the group of experts in promoting a systematic approach to the setting-up of objectives for immigrant language learning. Since time for the preparation of this paper has been short and since no financial resources have been available, it has not been possible to carry out a programme of comprehensive research and documentation in support of the statements made in this paper.

2.0 The social situation of immigrant workers

During the last twenty years or so the more highly industrialised countries of Western Europe have experienced serious labour shortages and have sought to overcome them by encouraging the immigration of workers from less industrialised countries. In Germany these workers have come principally, though not exclusively, from Turkey and Yugoslavia, in France from North Africa and in Britain from the Indian sub-continent. Sweden, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland have also been major importers of labour.

Since the work force in the host communities has generally been more highly trained, immigrant workers have largely been confined to jobs which are less skilled, worse paid and of lower status than those followed by indigenous workers. The result has been the creation of a new social class, underprivileged in their potential for social mobility. The reasons for their underprivilege are diverse and complex and it is evident that no single, simple solution exists to the problem of their social handicap. As well as their lack of advanced training of any kind, they have often received a relatively poor general education, which makes further training very difficult anyway. They live in the poorest housing available in the community. They face general social discrimination against them and, in some cases, the discriminatory practices even of governments themselves.

Employers may believe that they have a vested interest in keeping a pool of relatively cheap labour available and may therefore do nothing that would encourage their advancement. There are in many cases cultural differences that reinforce the discrimination of the host community and also make it difficult for the immigrant community to exploit even those opportunities that are available to them. Even trade unions have been slow to promote their interests since the presence of the immigrant workers has been seen as a threat to the living standards of indigenous workers. While the inability of the immigrant workers to speak the language of the host community can be said to be an element in all these considerations, it would be naive to think that these problems would disappear once the language problem had been solved. Nonetheless the development of a considerable command of the host language is a necessary precondition for the solution of many of these problems.

The fact that there is now a more general awareness that the situation cannot be left as it is arises from the recognition that immigrants can no longer be regarded as a largely transient population. As long as an immigrant worker was expected to stay for no longer than two or three years, it could be argued that the question of the opportunities available to him was an academic one. However, increasingly, the families of immigrants are joining them and, in any case, even where workers do return after a time to their own country, they are replaced by others. In most of these countries, therefore, there now exists an easily identifiable social group, which is permanently in the most disadvantaged situation in the society. Even though it sometimes happens that immigrants themselves accept their position, since it still has more to offer them than they can obtain in their own countries, it is not a situation that could be allowed to become a permanent feature of the social stratification of those communities which now contain a substantial number of immigrant workers.

3.0 Adult immigrants and their language needs

We can understand the language needs of immigrant workers more easily if we distinguish between short-term and long-term needs. By short-term needs are meant those that are felt immediately on arrival in the country concerned and those that must be met if the immigrant is to perform those limited social functions that the host community at present expects of him. By long-term needs are meant those linguistic needs that must be provided for if the immigrant worker is to have the opportunity to play a full role as a member of the wider society to which he now belongs and not only as a member of the immigrant group itself.

Meeting the short-term needs means providing the immigrant with a linguistic survival kit. This will be a relatively low-level competence in the target language through which he can handle those communication situations in which he is most urgently and necessarily involved. On the one hand there will be the language that arises in unavoidable social situations; on the other hand there will be language needed to communicate in situations which are avoidable but where it is in the individual's own interests that he should be able to communicate effectively. If he works as a cleaner in a factory, the nature of the job can be demonstrated rather than explained to him and he will need virtually no language in performing his job. However it is highly desirable that he should be familiar with the safety regulations and that he should understand his health insurance and neither of these is possible without some knowledge of the language.

We do not really know what these first-stage language needs are, since the necessary research has not been carried out. However even without the benefit of empirical analysis, it should not be difficult to predict a good deal of what will be valuable for the immigrant at this level. It has been suggested, for example, that a writing ability will have low priority at this stage, whereas listening and reading might assume greater importance than is commonly given to them in the initial stages of language courses.

Where language learning is left to what can be achieved through the natural process of language acquisition without the assistance of any language instruction, it will usually be the case that the attainment goes no further than a kind of pidginisation which proves adequate for the more rudimentary types of communication. Communication can take place through grossly incorrect language and it is important that the criterion of success in learning, even at this stage, should not simply be "ability to communicate in certain well-defined situations". It has to be remembered that language is a way of identifying the social group to which the individual belongs and if a person uses language in a way that is distinctively different from the way it is used by the host community, he marks himself out as not being fully a member of that group and thereby renders himself less acceptable to it.

In any case there is frequently a marked "plateau-effect". Having mastered a form of language through which the more obvious communication situations can be handled, the learner may come to accept this as the highest level of language proficiency that he really needs to reach. No further progress in the language is then made. However, if the forms of language are restricted, it follows that what can be communicated in the language is also limited. The criteria of success even

at this level must, therefore, be most carefully determined so that they do not have the effect, albeit the unintentional effect, of placing a permanent limitation on the individual's range of communication. In other words, the goals set in the provision of this linguistic survival kit should not in any way vitiate the possibility of subsequently meeting the immigrant worker's long-term language needs.

The definition of long-term needs given above obviously implies the progressive approximation of the learner's general language competence to something approaching that of the native speaker. The aim must be to ensure that the immigrant worker is not barred by language alone from playing whatever role in society he has the innate ability and the inclination to play. The same social opportunities should be open to him as are open to the native speaker in his society. These will be opportunities for further education, training and qualification, for enjoying the cultural life of the host community, for playing a part in public life, and so on. It is wiser to avoid saying that the aim is social integration, since this phrase is often taken to imply a rejection of the mother-tongue culture and to suggest the desirability of social and cultural assimilation into the host culture. Rather than this, the aim is to ensure that language does not present any barrier to the immigrant worker's freedom of choice. He should be free to accept what he wishes of the host culture, to play as full or as limited a role in the life of the host community as he chooses, to be satisfied with his present, limited, but perhaps undemanding occupation or to be ambitious for advancement.

Such an aim is clearly a very high one. It is even possibly unrealistic in the immediate future. It is nonetheless a necessary aim if we are to prevent the existence of a class of underprivileged immigrant workers becoming a permanent feature of the more industrialised societies. It is an aim that will not be met by the provision of vocational language courses. These can be valuable, but they risk confining the immigrant worker to the only, and the lowly, occupation for which he has the linguistic competence. It is an aim which immigrants themselves may be reluctant to recognise. They may well see in it a threat to their cultural and, in some cases, religious values. They may be content with the material advantages of their present situation over the situation from which they came. They may not see any long-term future for themselves in their new environment and therefore may be unconcerned at the lack of opportunities for them. They may see no material benefit to be gained from the considerable investment of effort

involved. It cannot be assumed that any provision made for language learning by adult immigrants will be eagerly taken up by those for whom it is intended.

There remain some further considerations which are relevant to the meeting of both short- and long-term objectives. So far the discussion has been entirely in terms of the needs of male immigrants. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to deal with children, since their needs should presumably be catered for within school systems. It should not be forgotten, however, that the wives of immigrant workers form another group with language needs that might not be identical with those of their husbands. It could also be that the educational and social backgrounds of the wives are even less conducive to successful language learning than those of their husbands. Added to this is the possibility that there might be a marked reluctance on the part of husbands to letting their wives attend language classes.

Finally, it must be remembered that many factors, some of which have not yet been mentioned, influence success in learning. Immigrant workers themselves will differ in social, cultural and educational background. They will speak different languages. They will vary greatly in age. They will be weakly or strongly motivated. Generalisations about immigrant workers are, therefore, dangerous. Since they are almost all underprivileged in one way or another, it can be expected that most will find learning more difficult and a more lengthy process than would be the case with more advantaged groups. If they are weakly motivated, they may need intermediate goals that are easily identifiable, clearly understandable and readily attainable. If they are speakers of certain languages, they may have greater difficulty in reaching certain predetermined goals. Speakers of Arabic or Urdu are going to find reading French or English a more difficult task than speakers of Italian. It is important, therefore, that in setting both short- and long-term goals a realistic assessment is made of what is likely to be achieved in the time available.

4.0 Adult immigrant language teaching and research

Information about the scope of the provision for teaching languages to adult immigrants is not available and could not be obtained without a large-scale survey being undertaken. In some countries steps have already been taken to ensure that language learning facilities are available. In Britain the BBC has provided regular English language programmes for adult immigrants for some years.

Immigrants have also attended courses provided by Colleges of Further Education and by special Immigrant Language Centres. It is reported that in Sweden a law has recently been passed requiring employers to release immigrant workers for one day a week for the purpose of language instruction. In Germany the Volkshochschulverband has recently been concerned to extend its teaching into the field of German for immigrant workers. It was reported at the St. Wolfgang Symposium that Denmark has introduced a low-level language qualification for foreign workers.

It is likely that the teaching of languages to adult immigrants is undertaken in varying degrees in the other countries concerned. What is of interest to the group of experts is not so much whether or not there is any such provision, but whether it is of a more or less systematic nature and more particularly whether it involves more than a simple extension of conventional language teaching procedures to a new population of learners. It is certain that in some cases the approaches adopted do not take into account either the special needs or the special characteristics of immigrants as a class of learners. On the other hand it is likely that, in some places at least, the unfamiliar characteristics of the learners will have provided a stimulus to the development of new materials and new techniques and that these could be of interest to the group of experts. Informal mention was made at St. Wolfgang of work being done in Frankfurt, Berlin, Liège and Brussels.

In the field of research the group of experts would be interested in any work that threw more light on the exact nature of the language needs of adult immigrants. In Britain it is known that one such project has recently been begun in Coventry. No results are yet available, but if the principles according to which the research is conducted are at all compatible with the approach that has developed from the group's work, it is possible that information could be provided which would prove extremely useful in the design of a learning scheme for immigrant workers. Research and development into certain specifically vocational language needs has been carried out in Germany and Britain, but the results are likely to be of only marginal relevance in establishing the nature of immigrants' general language needs.

Perhaps of greatest interest are two projects which have recently been begun by CREDIF and the Goethe Institute. These organisations are now planning the creation of courses in French and German respectively, specifically aimed at immigrant workers. Since these projects must

have been set up from an awareness that existing courses were not what was needed for this class of learner, there is every prospect that they will contain much that is innovatory. There would be little point in the group of experts continuing to work towards the promotion of a learning scheme for adult immigrants if it ignored developments such as these and the possibility of European co-operation that they offer.

5.0 Adult immigrants and the unit/credit system

There seems to be no reason in principle why the needs of adult immigrant workers should not be catered for within the unit/credit system, at least as far as can be judged from the present early stage in the elaboration of this system. Certainly, designing the system to meet the long-term needs of immigrants does not present problems that are any different in character from those that arise in connection with any other group of learners.

With the short-term needs the situation is slightly different. The first step in the setting-up of the unit/credit system is now likely to be the specification of an initial general competence level (hitherto the "threshold level"). The reasons for this are essentially practical. It is likely to have the widest general appeal; specialised uses can be developed from it; and, although it is recognised that more limited objectives can and eventually will be set, these are not going to concern us in the immediate future. However, the initial general competence level is not a suitable objective for the majority of immigrant language learners. It is too distant an objective to be easily attainable and the motivation of the learners is likely, therefore, to be difficult to sustain. In view of the special learning difficulties that many immigrants will have, they will take longer to reach the objectives than many other classes of learner. Finally, and most importantly, their immediate language needs do not coincide with those that are being catered for at the initial general competence level. Many of their needs are characteristic of their situation only and any general language course would provide much that was not essential to them and would fail to provide precisely those things that were most urgently required. It follows that any decision to provide for immigrant language learning within the unit/credit system cannot be put into effect through the specification of the initial general competence level. A totally different exercise in the analysis of objectives needs to be undertaken.

The question that then arises is whether the means that the group of experts has developed and adopted for the specification of language learning objectives is suitable for analysing and stating the needs of this particular group.

The answer would seem to be that if they cannot be used to specify the learning objectives of a group such as this, then it is doubtful whether they can be used at all. For example, a statement of objectives in terms of the situational and notional parameters that have been developed should produce a far more relevant learner's profile than could be obtained through any more conventional approach, since the important factors in determining the immigrant worker's immediate language needs are what is going to be communicated to him or by him and under what external conditions this communication will take place.

One thing that is not clear is how learning units specifically designed for immigrants could contribute to a system of accumulating credits. However, since it is far from clear how or even whether a system of credit accumulation can be developed for adult language learning as a whole, it is a question that is relevant to much more than the low level language units that are being considered here.

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

The views expressed here are necessarily more personal than the above, but they take into account decisions that have already been taken by the group of experts about the future direction of their work and conclusions that can be drawn from the experience of the group's work in the last few years.

It is the latter point particularly which leads me to begin with two negative recommendations. The group has already had great difficulty in co-ordinating the work undertaken by different individuals. Any major extension of the group's activity into a new field of interest could well threaten the coherence and the cohesion of the group. It is right that the group should offer its expertise in an attempt to overcome the language difficulties faced by immigrant workers; but I do not feel that the group should concern itself with the wider social issues involved. Reference was made at St. Wolfgang to the need to consult research conducted by sociologists, educational psychologists, social psychologists, linguists and social workers. This would be far too large a commitment. It can be claimed that by providing resources to overcome linguistic aspects of the social disadvantage suffered by immigrant workers, we are making a genuine contribution, without it being necessary to suggest that linguistic needs are the only ones that need to be overcome. So vast are the social and political problems involved that, if the group was to become engaged in finding solutions to them, the whole nature of its work would be changed.

Secondly, although it is, as ever, desirable that more underlying research should be undertaken, for example into the exact nature of the language needs of immigrants and their families, the time comes when the more practical steps have to be taken in the light of what is already known and not in the light of what, ideally, needs to be known. Since so much of the group's work so far has been devoted to establishing the foundations on which the unit/credit system is to be built, it would seem inadvisable for the group to assign any more of its limited resources to further background studies. I would recommend, therefore, that the group should not itself commission research into the language needs of adult immigrants. It should, however, keep itself informed of any such research that is being undertaken; it should be prepared to encourage individual members of the group to carry out such research in their own institutions if they wish to; where requested it should be prepared to advise on how such research might be conducted in such a way as to be of greatest relevance to the group's work as a whole.

To look more positively at the contribution that might be made by the group of experts, since the social needs for adequate language learning provision is evident and since there is no incompatibility between the needs faced by immigrant workers and the principles on which the unit/credit system is to be based, the group should take the decision to recognise as an integral part of its work the specification of language learning units designed to meet the most pressing communication needs of immigrant workers and their families.

Since closely related work is already in progress in France, in Germany and perhaps elsewhere, the group of experts should not begin by launching an independent project. Instead it should ensure that the respective project leaders are informed of the group's interest in their work and also of the work that has already been done by the group itself. The group should ascertain how far the research and development being undertaken in the different centres fits in with its concept of the unit/credit system. In the event of there being some similarity between the group's own analysis of the needs of immigrant workers and the analyses underlying the production of the different language courses in Paris and Munich, there obviously arises the possibility of co-operation between the different bodies involved.

The immediate implication of this proposal is that the group of experts needs to be more fully informed about the work referred to and that for this purpose one or more members of the group should visit the institutions involved

for discussions with the project directors. There is no reason why this should not be quite quickly done. Indeed it is important that there should not be any long delay if all possibility of influencing the direction of the projects is not to be lost. On the basis of these visits a report with recommendations as to further action should be presented to the next meeting of the group. If the indications are favourable, there is the possibility that the group could act as a co-ordinating agency for the different projects, ensuring that the approaches adopted are compatible with the unit/credit system. Thereby a part of the system could be brought into effect with minimal deployment of the group's own resources.