

# Language learning in the context of migration and integration – Challenges and options for adult learners

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## Abstract

When talking about the language learning of adult migrants it has to be remembered that we are dealing with an extremely complex phenomenon. The language learning process itself is already determined by a huge range of factors that interrelate in various ways. The context of migration and integration only increases the variety to an extent that is not covered by existing instruments designed to support language learning. The following paper focuses on two relevant aspects in the field of language learning in this context: the needs of illiterate migrants and the link between language learning and orientation in the receiving country. Examples of good practice are included.

The first part contains case studies on the needs of illiterate migrants and shows how literacy programmes could respond to them. The second part points out the specific learning requirements for insertion in the community and the vocational sphere, and introduces the use of “open questions” as an appropriate tool for supporting the language learning and orientation process of adult migrants. The questions concern the specific linguistic status of migrants mentioned by Krumm & Plutzar in the paper on *Tailoring language provision and requirements to the needs and capacities of adult migrants*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Study prepared for the Council of Europe Seminar on the linguistic integration of adult migrants (June 2008). Available online [www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang)

## **1. Case Studies on Illiterate Migrants - Examples of Good Practice from Vienna**

### **1.1. Background**

Illiterate people want and need to be literate for several reasons: They want to live autonomously without depending on others, they want to get a job or a better job, they have to pass an obligatory test that allows them to stay in Austria or to apply for citizenship, and perhaps literacy has also been a lifelong goal. Many have valuable competences. Many of the learners on literacy courses are plurilingual: they speak two, three or four languages, although they cannot write any of them. They also have the experience and skills that come from coping with the difficulties they have lived through.

Reasons for illiteracy are various. It may result from living in extremely poor countries or regions where there are no schools within reach, or living in a war zone. Family or individual situations may have led to poverty. Unemployment or the death of a parent, or even divorce, may increase the risk that children will remain illiterate, especially in the case of girls. In such cases, children may either have to substitute their mother or father in their own household and as carer of their siblings, or earn a living outside the family.

For detailed literacy rates in countries and regions worldwide, see the international literacy rates published by UNESCO<sup>2</sup>.

### **1.2. Some Cases**

#### **1.2.1 *Mira from Serbia***

Mira could not attend school in Serbia when she was a child because her mother died when she was only 7 years old. As she was the eldest daughter, she had to deal with the household and care for her siblings from then on. This enabled all her brothers and sisters to go to school, while for Mira this was not possible.

Mira came to Austria 17 years ago with two young children. Her husband got work on a construction site, and was in and out of work for years, until he had an accident on a construction site that left him deaf. Mira herself worked for 11 years in the kitchen of a Viennese restaurant. Her children went to school, and she managed to deal with all the necessary applications for scholarship. Her 6 children are well educated. They now work as a clerk, hospital nurse, nursery schoolteacher and mechanic respectively.

Mira has managed life without literacy skills. She has handled everything: the schooling of her children, the hospital and the insurance company after the her husband's accident, applications for scholarships for the education of her children, psychologists for her daughter. She did all this in German, which she learned at work.

Since all her children are settled in Austria, Mira and her husband want to stay there as well. But Austrian citizenship will be out of reach for her because of her low level of literacy: she could not pass the obligatory test for citizenship. Mira also wants to continue working in Vienna, maybe even get a better job that is less physically demanding. So she wants to be able to read and write.

Her oral abilities are fairly good, so she is not starting from scratch. She is attending the first level (out of four) of a literacy and advanced oral German course three times a week for 3 hours weekly. Each level takes one 15 week semester.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=10938&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=10938&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

### **1.2.2 Sheyda from Turkey**

Like Mira, Sheyda could not attend school as a child. Her mother died very young, so Sheyda had to stay at home, doing household chores, and taking care of her siblings while her brothers went to school. She arrived in Austria eleven years ago.

Sheyda is plurilingual and speaks Aramaic, Turkish and German. She is interested in politics and current affairs, and is also relatively well-informed because she watches TV and listens to the radio conscientiously. She and her husband own a restaurant.

Sheyda started to attend a literacy class because she wanted read and write fluently. This had been her dream and her goal since childhood. Her more down-to-earth goals were: to be able to deal with public authorities, read the official letters she received, take and read notes at work, read notes from her children's teachers and write replies to them.

Unlike Mira, Sheyda was able to learn the Roman script on her own. When her children started school, she took the time to learn as much as she could from them. When she started to attend the literacy course at AlfaZentrum, she could read and write, albeit very unsurely and slowly. She started at level 3 and her oral German was already very good. She has been attending the course twice a week for three hours per session, for three 15-week semesters.

Although Sheyda has integrated very successfully at work, has dealt with the education of her children, and speaks very good German, she still encounters discrimination. Because good manners are very important to her, she feels hurt each time she is treated disrespectfully. She is lucky to have taken Austrian citizenship years ago, since with the new regulations she would not be able to pass the test, although she speaks German very well and reads it quite well (but not well enough for the test for citizenship which is at the level of a secondary school leaver).

### **1.2.3 Yousof from Afghanistan**

Yousof came to Austria as an asylum seeker 5 years ago when he was 35, with his wife and two children. Recently his application for asylum was granted. He is now allowed to work in Austria and is desperately looking for a job to make a living for himself and his family. Like over 50% of male adults and over 87% percent of female adults in Afghanistan (UNESCO-Institute for Statistics 2006)<sup>3</sup>, Yousof did not go to school. In Afghanistan he worked as a mechanic for many years, learning from a master of the trade, like many illiterate male immigrants. While in Afghanistan he was a craftsman sustaining his family, but in Austria it is hard for him to get a job because of his low level of literacy.

As he needs to support his family, Yousof cannot spend years going to school. He needs to get a job soon and has to improve his language skills while working. So he will need a course that he can attend in the evenings two or three days a week. Also, he will sometimes not be able to attend the course for some months, so a modular course system would meet his learning needs.

Yousof began his level one (of four levels) course with no knowledge of reading and writing at all. He had not been to school in Afghanistan and cannot read his first language. The course combined literacy and German as a second language. Next he attended the second level course for people with a basic knowledge of German, 3 times 3 hours weekly for a 15 week semester. In autumn 2007 he was in his third semester.

Although Yousof has made good progress during his 8 month as a participant on the literacy course for immigrants, his reading and writing are still uncertain. His oral language skills are

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<sup>3</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=10938&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=10938&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

at CEFR<sup>4</sup> level A2, but he still needs to improve his oral skills, most urgently for use at work. And he is especially interested in written texts related to working life. But since he has a family, he also wants to be able to deal with matters concerning their life in Vienna.

Yousof faces discrimination when looking for a job. He finds that his German or his literacy skills are not good enough, even if the job does not require a high level of language competence.

#### **1.2.4 Maka-Laye from Ivory Coast**

Maka-Laye is 21 years old, and came to Austria four years ago as an asylum seeker. He is plurilingual and speaks Tula (mother tongue), Arabic, Yoruba, some Fula, very good oral French and intermediate oral German. He is partially literate having had three years of schooling in the Ivory Coast. He wants to do the school-leaving exam, which would enable him to start an apprenticeship. But he does not yet qualify for a secondary school course because of his lack of reading and writing skills. A further obstacle is that in Austria there are few language and literacy courses for asylum seekers. Even though he is young, very eager to learn but, as a fast learner, Maka-Laye's opportunities are limited.

He is now on a youth course which involves German language and literacy training combined with content from the secondary school curriculum. He has a daily schedule of 4 hours 5 days a week for 4 months, having previously attended a similar course for 300 hours at a lower level. The course is part of a European Social Fund second-chance programme for young adults at the adult education centre. It consists of three levels of preparation to enable illiterate young people to enrol in a secondary school leaving course: Level 1 offers "Literacy and German for beginners", Level 2 "Literacy and advanced German", Level 3 "Basic skills for young adults". Each level takes 300 to 500 hours. The curriculum is cyclical because only the fastest learners are able to progress straight through all three levels. The others have to repeat levels.

The course meets Maka-Laye's needs because it will prepare him for the secondary school-leaving exam, which is necessary to get a job or to start an apprenticeship, and because it is intensive. Part-time courses designed for adults would only frustrate him.

### **1.3. Good Practice: The Alfa-Zentrum for Migrants, Vienna**

#### **1.3.1 The Course Participants**

The course participants are adult migrants from countries all over the world (Europe, Asia, Africa, India) who have not attended school in their childhood, or not for long enough to achieve sufficient literacy in their mother tongue. But many of the course participants are plurilingual; they speak two, three or four languages, although they cannot write any of them. Learners from Turkey often speak Kurdish or Aramaic besides Turkish; participants from African countries generally speak more than one language: a migrant from Gambia, for example, speaks Mandika, English, and Woloff; migrants from the Ivory Coast speak Tula, Arabic, Yoruba, French, and sometimes Fula as well.

They are mostly women (60 to 85%). Most of them are mothers of 4-6 children, but in every class of 15 learners some are single or working mothers. Some of the course participants have arrived in Vienna recently, and they are beginners in German. Some have been living and working in Vienna for 10 years or more and speak German quite well.

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<sup>4</sup> Council of Europe, 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. CUP. Online: [www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang)

The course participants' goals are to learn German and to become literate enough to participate in Viennese/Austrian social and political life, but also to get a better job, to be able to help their children with their homework, to be able to deal with administrative matters, etc.

- Some of the course participants need to improve their reading/writing for their current job, e.g. as a hospital worker, driver, cleaner, or warehouse worker.
- The younger ones want to be able to enrol in second chance courses; their goal is a school-leaving certificate.
- A few just want to learn German, but without being literate they cannot take a regular German language course.

Course participants can progress through four levels of the Literacy Course (90 to 120 hours each semester, offered at two language levels). After that, they can continue German as a second language courses at the Adult Education Centre or within the second-chance course aiming at the school leaving exam (30 hours weekly). This goal is achieved by the 10% of participants who are young people (16-20 years) who have good support from their families. A majority of the adult learners (the other 90 %) are not able to attend the intensive second-chance course because of jobs and children. Their goal is to read and write well enough to deal with the requirements of the workplace and everyday life.

### **1.3.2 Combined Literacy and Language Courses for Migrants**

Fluent reading and writing is needed to enrol in any adult education course, so this is the primary goal of any literacy course. Due to the amount of time needed, it is best if literacy courses for immigrants meet two needs simultaneously: literacy and language learning. The idea of learning how to read and write before taking a German course has proved unworkable: acquiring literacy takes so long that it makes sense to combine literacy and language. Immigrants who want to live and work in Austria need to participate in society. In order to achieve these goals numeracy, computer literacy and learning strategies must also form part of the course.

Some course participants speak German quite well when they start the course, while others understand no German at all, so it is best to offer literacy separately for both groups. Four levels of literacy course are offered twice - for beginners and for more advanced speakers of German. Another adult centre in Vienna provides literacy courses for people with German as their first language.

All courses are learner-orientated: the themes, method and goals of the courses are derived from a curriculum framework, but these are specified and developed during the course in negotiation with the actual course participants, who bring with them their own domains and needs. No textbook is used: texts also come from the course participants, whether they write them or bring them from their workplace or from home. Learner-centredness also means responding to the different languages and cultural backgrounds of the participants, and letting these flow into the course in various ways. Autonomous learning is also promoted and learning strategies to facilitate this are worked on.

## Outline of Courses at the Alfa-Zentrum for Migrants, Vienna

Courses for adult learners (all courses involve a combination of literacy and German)

For beginners in German	For intermediate / advanced speaker of German	
Literacy level 1	Literacy level 1	120 hours in 15 weeks
Literacy level 2	Literacy level 2	120 hours in 15 weeks
Literacy level 3	Literacy level 3	90 hours in 15 weeks
	Literacy level 4	90 hours in 15 weeks
	„Basic skills“ for all learners from literacy level 3 (dealing with issues, texts, and mathematical tasks that are brought up by the participants)	45 hours in 15 weeks

Courses for young adults (20 hours weekly for 15 weeks):

For beginners in German	For intermediate / advanced speaker of German	For advanced speaker of German	
Literacy level 1 and 2			300 hours in one semester
	Literacy level 3 and 4		300 hours in one semester
		“Basisbildung”: preparation for the second chance course	500 hours in one semester

All these courses have a cyclical curriculum, so that slower learners can take the same level twice if they need to. Learners can also change from courses for beginners to courses for intermediate/advanced speakers of German.

### 1.3.3 Counselling and evaluating rather than testing

In individual counselling sessions (of 30 to 60 minutes), learning needs and goals are evaluated and a suitable course is recommended to the learner. This information about the goals and needs of the learners is also used for planning the courses and the whole literacy course. In the last third of a literacy course, a further counselling session is run to find out whether individual goals have been achieved and/or how the learner can continue his or her learning.

A testing procedure would not have as useful an outcome as the individual counselling sessions. Testing illiterate people is difficult and unreliable because existing testing procedures for adults in Austria are designed for literate people. Instead of spending time and money on developing a new testing procedure, it makes more sense to further develop a model of counselling. Individual counselling is more valuable because it may lead to the further development of literacy courses that meet the real needs of adult learners. Such counselling needs to identify in a sensitive, affirmative way what skills, knowledge and experiences have already been acquired by course participants prior to and during migration, and in the process of building a new life in a foreign country with a foreign language. When doing counselling, it is important to avoid patronising course participants, but also important not to minimise the advantages of literacy and a formal education.

During the course, course participants can, if they feel the need, take advantage of individual counselling sessions to deal with learning difficulties or social problems.

#### **1.4 Summary: the Need for Specialised Literacy Courses for Migrants**

Literacy provision for migrants is more successful if it is combined with language support. For such provision to be successful, specialist teacher training and the development of specialised materials are needed, as is the development of open curricula and literacy portfolios.

##### **1.4.1 Courses in basic skills such as literacy, language learning, and numeracy at different levels are needed, both in urban and rural areas. Desirable features of such provision are:**

###### **1. Courses of different intensity and differing content**

- at least two **levels**, **one** for beginners and one for more advanced learners, that take into account existing language competence and literacy.
- **Intensive courses for people under time pressure**, e.g. for adults who are unemployed at the time, but want to get a job soon.
- **Intensive courses with specific goals** such as a school leaving certificate, or vocational training. **Young adults need** a formal school leaving certificate and apprenticeship or vocational training (Berufsausbildung), so need a very intensive course with these aims.
- **Open, ongoing and more general courses** for learners who are in difficult circumstances, for example working long hours or looking after young children, but want to improve their literacy nonetheless.
- Women migrants often find it easier to learn in women-only groups.
- The Vienna experience suggests that recent immigrants who are older or are young mothers often wish to take an initial **course in their own ethnic community** before taking a literacy course in an adult education centre. If no such course exists, they often just stay at home. The younger among them might try an adult centre later on.

###### **2. Learner support that has proved useful**

- **Social welfare:** learners on literacy courses should have access to social workers. Otherwise teachers may be confronted with social or financial problems which are generally beyond their competence.
- **Vocational counselling** during and after attending courses can provide useful information about jobs that do not require a high level of literacy, and also on developing (better) strategies to deal with staff at the job centre or potential employers. This is useful because becoming literate in a second language takes years, even for fast learners.
- **Tutoring** after the literacy course in order to support further learning and to help such migrants to deal with the literacy issues of everyday life.
- **Practical support:**
- **Child care** during the course: many migrants with literacy problems have 3 – 6 children;
- **Low course fees and/or funding for courses.**

- Courses at **different times of the day**: in the morning (e.g. for mothers of schoolchildren), in the afternoon (e.g. for restaurant workers), or in the evening for other employed people.
- **Easy access** to registration.

#### **1.4.2. Developments needed in the provision of literacy support for migrants:**

- **Combined courses on literacy and language** (low-cost courses, supported by childcare and social and vocational counselling)
- **Specialised teacher training courses**: so far only one literacy teacher training course has been available in Austria (at Alfa-Zentrum since 2002). Such courses should preferably focus on learner-oriented, intercultural and autonomous learning.
- **Curricula**: open, learner-centred curricula need to be developed in negotiation with learners and in the light of successful practice, with an eye to the real needs of learners, and focusing on reading and writing skills for everyday life. Course participants' time is precious as the course has to be fitted round work that is often strenuous and not well paid, as well as childcare and other domestic duties. The development of open curricula will ensure that literacy and language courses focus on the real needs of course participants. Compulsory and nationwide courses with one curriculum for all courses, perhaps with a mandatory test, would be less beneficial for participants than courses tailored to their needs as described above.

There is a working curriculum in Vienna<sup>5</sup> and there is also the two-page Austrian compulsory national curriculum<sup>6</sup>. The latter assigns 75 hours for literacy and is much criticised. In Germany a draft literacy curriculum exists which adopts the concept of the combined literacy-language approach used at Alfa-Zentrum Vienna and specifies 630 course hours.

- Instruments like the **European Language Portfolio**<sup>7</sup> could and should be developed as an instrument to record the development of literacy. This would allow migrants who are on literacy courses to demonstrate, for example, good oral competence (in more than one language) along with a lower level of competence in reading and writing.

#### **1.4.3 Further positive developments in language and educational policy would be:**

- **Plurilingual resources**: further development of plurilingual resources for oral skills and for plurilingual literacy or 'biliteracy' would be very useful for people who already speak three or more languages.
- **"First-language-literacy"**: migrants often learn the target language script before mastering the script of their mother tongue. In the long term it would be a good investment to support migrants in learning their mother-tongue script as well. European countries will in the end benefit from the plurilingualism and pluri-literacy of second generation migrants.

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<sup>5</sup> Fritz/Faistauer/Ritter/Hrubesch (2006)

<sup>6</sup> *Verordnung der Bundesministerin über die Integrationsvereinbarung. IV-V. Anlage A (2005)*

<sup>7</sup> Council of Europe: [www.coe.int/portfolio](http://www.coe.int/portfolio)



## **2. The Language and Qualifications Portfolio for Migrants and Refugees: *the Use of Open Questions***

### **2.1 Introduction**

As language and integration are connected, it is necessary to put language learning goals in the context of orientation to the host-community, especially job-related areas. Open questions seem to offer an appropriate way of meeting the needs of individuals and very different groups of migrants. The use of open questions aids the individual migrant's integration by providing language-learning options, and by helping him or her to adjust to new social realities. The questions not only point to areas of action but also explore the person's background to assess competencies that are useful in the integration process. Making the individual aware of his or her learning and language learning competencies and basic skills increases their confidence. In addition, the questions aim to underpin and/or develop intercultural competence. But the focus is not just on competencies. To get along in the new society knowledge about political and educational matters is needed.

### **2.2 Language and Integration**

When considering what an instrument to support the language learning of migrants should look like, it has to be remembered that language learning and the process of integration are inextricably linked. So an instrument is needed which makes integration easier through learning the language of the host community. Key questions include:

- What does settling in a new country involve?
- What skills are needed?
- Which of these have to be learned and which may have already been acquired before arrival?

The analysis of language skills has to be related to these questions rather than to the traditional educational goals of language learning. If migrants start to think and talk about these questions, first in their own language, and then step by step in the language of the host community, a process of language acquisition towards integration has started which should be sustainable.

This paper is based on the idea that the needs of individual migrants are similar and very different at the same time. The similarity comes from the process of integration, which is from the individual point of view a process of change and adaptation to the new environment which at the same time allows the individual to maintain the values, habits, attitudes, and life styles which he or she needs in order to feel at ease. All migrants have to face similar crucial challenges: communication, housing, health, work, education and last but not least integration with the host community. Determining factors in all this are the legal and political framework, the prevailing socio-cultural rules and values, and the expectations of the host society. This reality can be described, but it is seen from very specific points of view relating to the distinct background, circumstances and expectations of the individual. Thus for the integration process to be successful it is very useful and important both to support individuals in finding their personal way of coping with the reality they face, and at the same time to give them the chance to demonstrate their skills and abilities to the host community.

## 2.3 Open Questions

### 2.3.1 How to use them

The aim of open questions is to provide a starting-point for reflection on one's own abilities and competencies and for considering the challenges one faces in the host community. This should support learners and teachers in identifying learning-goals as well as an appropriate course, so open questions can be used in class as well as in counselling. As a facilitator of the learning-process (whether a classroom teacher or a counsellor), one can choose from the list the questions that seem useful. As a portfolio-user, the student can choose those that are appealing or seem to be necessary for the next steps, or may supplement other learning-materials.

A learning facilitator using the portfolio and the questions should ensure that the reflection-process is systematic. The following guidelines may help:

1. Ask students to read a question and think about it giving their own answers.
2. Ask them to talk to another person about what came to mind and what the other person thinks or knows about the question. The other person could be a fellow student, the teacher, the counsellor, a friend at home – whoever. The important thing is that the student talks about it in order to make sure that s/he really thinks about the question and gets another point of view.
3. Ask them to make notes, which fix their status quo of awareness. With this awareness they will look at things differently, by for example noticing something that they had not noticed before, or by acting in a different way, or identifying a learning goal.
4. Some weeks or months later, some of the questions can be raised again. The learner will become aware of what he or she has learnt by comparing his/her new insights with the previous answers.

### 2.3.3 Rationale

#### *1. Open questions and integration*

Raising the awareness of migrants to improve their understanding of and orientation to the host society is not the only benefit of work on open questions. It also has an impact on their actions. For the language-development of migrants it is crucial to talk about their experiences, their competences, their concepts and their goals, especially if they do this in the target language.

The language of the questions mirrors the culture of the host-society which they are joining. As the questions require the portfolio-user to think about individual and collective perspectives, they raise his or her awareness of the cultural framework of the host-society and give space for intercultural comparison.

Talking about oneself helps to build up and stabilize the concept of identity because it leads to self-awareness. Migration, like education, is a process where the identity undergoes change and is destabilized. When the biography of the individual is considered from the point of view of his or her potential rather than deficiencies, self-esteem and self-awareness are strengthened, and the individual is "empowered". Assessing their competences through reflection on their biography may help migrants to talk about themselves in a job interview without referring to documents, which could be important for them, especially if they are refugees.

This approach complements work with the already established European Language Portfolio using descriptors and checklists.

## **2.4 Abilities and skills relevant to integration**

The following open questions are focused on language which is useful for getting along with the host community by talking - or answering questions - about one's qualifications (formal and informal), the labour market, the school system, healthcare, key-competencies for the labour market, and lastly about citizenship<sup>8</sup>. Culture, but in particular cultural learning, is a transversal aspect of the questions.

### **2.4.1 Learning**

*Talking about learning experiences and how to learn is especially important for people who have not been in education for many years but have nevertheless acquired knowledge and skills. It should open the range of learning possibilities migrants have besides going to school.*

- How do I connect with new and unfamiliar things? How do I develop new skills?
- How and when did I learn what I can do well? Who taught me? What else do I want to learn?
- Do I have role models? Who? Why?
- Which classes at school were easy and which difficult? Why? What would people from my educational background (teachers, schoolmates, family members...) say about me?
- Where did I acquire the knowledge or abilities to do my job and carry out other activities? Which tasks and activities were easy? Which were difficult? Why? What would people around me (boss, colleagues, co-workers, customers, family members...) say about me?
- Which learning activities do I know about?
- In which situations did I learn the most?
- What is my ideal study environment?
- Am I sure about what I want to achieve with learning? How will I assess my own learning success?

### **2.4.2 Learning languages**

*Learning the language of the host-community is mostly done at work and in daily life rather than on a language course. Most migrants are plurilingual so it is useful to refer to their language-learning experiences in other languages, which they probably also learned in daily life. But their plurilingualism could be overshadowed by experiences of suppression and discrimination if they were members of a minority, which migrants often are. For this reason, it is critical to refer to the mother tongue, which has positive emotional connotations. This may also enable migrants to refer back to the experience of being helpless like a child, which is analogous to the situation of migration as well as to that of the language-learner. This in turn may highlight learning strategies which are effective in this situation. It is well known that the affective dimension is crucial for language learning, so it is relevant to discuss students' feelings about the target language.*

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<sup>8</sup> Competences related to citizenship are here the social competencies and by the way also the competence of reflection as well as the competence of getting information and orientation in a foreign system (following the project "Education for Democratic Citizenship" (2000) of the Council of Europe (see References).

- When learning a new language I will try to be aware of the language learning strategies I have already successfully used, and of the relation I have developed towards the new language. I will ask myself:
  - How did I learn my mother language?
  - How did I learn other languages?
  - What feelings do I have about the languages I speak?
  - What feelings do I have about the language(s) of the host community? Do I like the language(s) of the host community?
  - What may help me to learn the language(s) of the host community?
  - Which situations will I have to handle in the language(s) of the host community? Which are easy? Which are difficult? What might help me to handle these situations?
- Where and when do I want to be able to use the host community language? Why?
- What conditions enable me to speak the language without help? In which situations would it be good to be able to communicate by myself, without assistance?
- How do I get help from interpreters when dealing with bureaucracy? Is there any official support?
- How can I get support for further language learning?

#### **2.4.3 Getting along in the host community**

*The importance of networking and gathering information is well-known. Questions like the following should encourage migrants to work on it actively and find new ways of doing it. Used in class, the questions facilitate the exchange of crucial information between the learners and strengthen the bonds between them.*

- Identifying a network: who am I in touch with? Who can I speak to and/or learn the national language from? Who could help me to find a job? Who could support me once I find a job? Who could support me in other aspects of my life here? How can I develop my network?
- Getting information: how do I get basic information:
  - About the job market, jobs and education
  - About schooling and the possibilities for my children
  - About healthcare
  - About legal issues
- Where is the nearest advice centre for migrants?

#### **2.4.4 Formal education, working practices, and orientation to the labour market**

*Most migrants undergo a process of “dequalification”: their job in the host country does not correspond to their education and training. This is due to the lack of recognition of educational achievements outside the host country. Nevertheless, it is important to refer to these achievements when looking for employment. Also, in the case of those who do not have formal educational qualifications but have worked, for example, as a mechanic or a shopkeeper, it makes sense to assess the competencies they have gained from their work-experience that might help them find a proper job or enter further education. Often women migrants have done things outside employment which have given them valuable competencies, such as helping in a family business, raising children or nursing old people.*

- Which schools, courses, universities etc. have I attended? Which abilities and knowledge have I developed in formal education? Which have I already used in my professional life? Which could I use in my future professional life?
- What kind of work have I done so far, paid or unpaid (in employment, helping in a family business, housekeeping, work for political organizations, associations, senior citizen care...), and what knowledge and abilities do I have that helped me to develop?
- What interests, passions or hobbies do I/did I have, and what knowledge and abilities did they help me to develop? Which of these have I used in my professional life? Which could I use in my future professional life?
- Are my qualifications recognised here? How and where can I go to get them recognised, and will they be useful?
- Can I work here in my own occupational field? If not, are there similar occupations here which would give me better opportunities?
- Where do I get information about jobs? How can I apply for a job?
- How can I find out which jobs I am suited for?
- What duties and rights does the employer have? What duties and rights do I have as an employee (e.g. notice, insurance, punctuality)

#### **2.4.5 Cultural Learning: observing and talking about the host community**

*Like any stay abroad, migration involves “culture shock”. The migrant soon realizes that some ideas and hopes about the benefits of migration may not be realistic. Instead, it becomes clearer that things are different, and what migrants bring with them may only be useful in a limited way. Migrants undergo a kind of crisis, which involves four distinct phases: hope, disappointment, orientation and adoption, and stabilization and integration in the new environment. If the phases are not well managed, the migrant may get stuck at a given phase, which could have negative effects on the process of language learning and integration in general. Orientation is crucial in order to overcome disappointment. So it is important for migrants to reflect on and talk about the differences and similarities between their ongoing integration, and their experiences within the host community.*

##### **2.4.5.1 Working life**

- a. What does “work” mean to me? What do I think about jobs, achievement, success and satisfaction? What am I going to tell my grandchildren about what really matters as far working life is concerned? Can I see differences between my ideas and the reality I am experiencing?
- b. Working life is determined by rules. Observing them is a prerequisite for my vocational (re-) entry. What would I have to do in order NOT to be successful in working life here? Can I see any differences compared to the rules I am used to?
- c. What do I expect from a “good” boss? What do I expect from a “good” colleague or a “good” co-worker? Why? Can I see any differences between my expectations and what I have observed in my surroundings here? What would be absolutely unacceptable, and why?
- d. Women and professional life: how does this fit into my concept? What are typical occupations for women and for men? Can I see any differences between my experiences and what I have observed here? How does this affect me? How is my family-life affected?

- e. How do I get basic information? Which strategies work best? Can I see any differences between what I am used to and what is useful here?
- f. How does communication in the workplace function? How are decisions made? Who communicates decisions and how? Can I see any differences in what I have experienced so far?
- g. Does working life here seem slow or fast to me? Why?

#### **2.4.5.2 Key-competencies for the labour-market<sup>9</sup> (selection):**

*The concept of the so-called key-competences is a western one, and needs to be understood by many migrants coming from other regions. They have to understand what these competencies are and discover them in their own lives, so that they can present them well in job interviews. It is useful to assess key competencies via a biographical approach, because most such competencies are needed for migration. The challenge is to make migrants aware of this by reflecting on their own lives.*

*This raises another cross-cultural issue: life in Europe, especially working life, is governed by increasing individualism, which is different from the experience of collectivism in most regions migrants come from. For many migrants, questions about their perception of themselves are strange and hard to answer. So it is important also to take their perception of the group into account.*

- a. Which abilities have I developed in the process of migration and while living in other cultures, and how can my knowledge and my skills be useful to me now?
- b. Sense of responsibility: I am used to completing all my assignments carefully, sticking to agreements and bearing all resulting consequences. What were my previous assignments and which ones do I have now? What was easy and what was difficult?
- c. Ability to communicate: I recall situations where I managed to solve problems by talking about them and where I got some new important insights through communicating with other people. In which situations did this happen? Who was involved in such discussions? Did I do more listening or more talking? Which role do I prefer?
- d. Ability to cooperate: I remember a task/activity I did together with other people which was successful due to the fact that we worked together. Why did we work in a group? Who did what, and why? Which role did I take? Is it easy for me to ask others for help or to offer others help?
- e. Conflict management: When I have had differences with others, in cases of misunderstanding or when I have been aware of disagreements between other people such as friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, superiors, how have I dealt with these situations? Have I tried to find a solution? How?
- f. Self-motivation: In my life I have come up against difficulties and barriers and have had to overcome them on my own, continuing to believe in my goals, searching for information and holding firm despite the difficulties. In motivating myself in this way, what have I found easier, and what more difficult?
- g. Self-organization: I have attained some goals in life and have had to use my time and strength wisely. When have I been successful? How did I manage it? In proving that I can organize my resources, what was easy, and what was difficult?

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<sup>9</sup> The list of key-competencies is based on the “Kompetenzbilanz des Deutschen Jugendinstituts” (2003), with some migrant-oriented modifications, and also on an internal survey in a multinational company in nine different countries concerning the key-competencies of co-workers.

- h. Stress management: There have been situations where I was under pressure and stress, but I managed to do what was needed. How did I feel? How did I manage the pressure and stress? How can I transfer this ability to my present situation?
- i. Solution-orientation: If there is a problem, do I concentrate more on the problem than on the solution? Can I recall situations where I found a good solution?
- j. Flexibility: Throughout my life I have repeatedly shown that I am able to change my plans. How have I felt about doing this? Who else did the changes affect? What was the result of being flexible, and was it positive?
- k. Ability to organize: In what situations have I adapted my plans according to changing requirements and made things work well? How did I organize this? What was easy and what was difficult?

### 2.4.5.3 Competencies relating to citizenship

*The core competencies related to citizenship are social competencies, the ability to reflect, and the ability to obtain information and orientation about a foreign system. Citizenship is not just the responsibility of the migrant: “[Citizenship] is always a matter of belonging to a community, which entrains politics and rights, notably political rights. In this sense, the citizen is always a co-citizen, somebody who lives with others.”<sup>10</sup> This community can be defined at two levels: the local level and the state level. Citizenship is connected with equal rights and dignity. In the socio-political situation of migration in Europe, becoming a citizen and thus acquiring equal rights and dignity is a question of time. Migrants have to wait several years before they are allowed to apply for citizenship. During the waiting period migrants have to adapt to a situation which gives them limited access to the labour market, housing market, and education system, and in addition may have to face racism and discrimination. It is therefore important for migrants to reflect upon the political aspects of the host-community, to acquire knowledge, to think about its similarities and differences with other systems, and to reflect on different ways of coping within the host community.*

- What did I know and think about the host country and society before I came here? Which expectations have been fulfilled? Which have not?
- Where and how did I learn about the host community? Which other sources could I use to get a more balanced picture of the host community?
- What is still unclear to me? What would I like to know more about?
- Where can I get information about the areas I am concerned with e.g. housing, health, education, and work?
- Where can I get information about the political system?
- Which historical events or periods and what cultural heritage do people talk about, and what do people I know think is important for the host community? Why? Where can I get information about that?
- What does “freedom”, “equality” and “solidarity” mean to me? How do I think they are exemplified in the political and legal framework of the host community? Can I see any differences when comparing this to the political and legal framework of my country of origin? To what extent is my life in the host community affected by these values?

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<sup>10</sup> (Council of Europe / CDCC 2000, 16ff)

#### **2.4.5.4 School-attendance**

- When my child is old enough to go to school I have to research the possibilities. What kinds of school are there? What are the differences, and what consequences does the choice of school have for my child's future?
- What are parents expected to do for the child, and what do teachers rely on them doing? What can I do to support the education of my child?
- What are the main differences between the school system in the host country and the school system in the country where I went to school?
- Where can I get support when my child has difficulties at school?
- What advantages will bilingual education give my child? How can I support bilingual development?

### **2.5 The Language of open questions**

Language mirrors concepts, and so the language of the open questions is sometimes quite difficult to understand because the meaning and the concepts behind it are not clear to learners. In addition, the complexity of the process of language learning in the context of migration, and the need for migrants to understand and express themselves properly, make it necessary to provide these questions in different languages. Communicating well is especially fundamental at the beginning of the process of integration. Migrants experience a phase of disorientation and helplessness. Being unable to communicate intensifies this feeling and, if it is not handled well, the migrant may withdraw and his or her chance of getting to grips with the new language early on may be lost. For these reasons, in the *Language and Qualifications Portfolio for Migrants and Refugees* the questions are in 9 languages: Arabic, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, French, Turkish, Farsi, Kurdish, Russian and finally German. Experience shows that migrants want to work with the questions in the target language because they know that they have to learn it, but they need the translation in their first language because they don't always understand everything, and understanding is a crucial part of the learning process.

### **2.6 Conclusion**

The lists of 'open questions' are devised for use in language-classes, in language-tutoring and in counselling for integration purposes. Their purpose is to encourage and support migrants during the process of integration. For this reason they have been translated into the migrants' languages.

As described above, open questions offer a broader approach to language and integration. They cover the areas of learning, language-learning, working-life, key competencies, knowledge about the labour market, the school system and the political system. The open questions method gives individual migrants the opportunity to talk about issues that are important to them. The questions raise their awareness of language and integration issues, as well as enabling them to talk about the host-community, their experiences, their perspectives, their goals and strategies, and to discuss integration itself. In this sense the questions help to develop language skills that are relevant to integration and support the language learning process. At the same time, migrants' self-confidence and awareness is increased. An intercultural approach is adopted throughout since the open questions explore opinions about differences and similarities between the host community and countries of origin. In addition, the questions take account of cultural bias when talking about oneself by including the collective point of view.



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