

Language policies for the integration of adult migrants: tendencies in Europe

Some observations and reflections

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1 CONTEXT

Socio-economic and socio-political developments, such as the fall of the 'iron curtain', the extension of the EU, globalisation processes and continuing poverty in mainly African countries have increased migration into Western European countries. At the same time Europe is going through a process of economic and political unification. Both of these processes have an effect on the different nation states across Europe, not only on the economic and political structures of a country but also on its culture and language. Concerned about the social cohesion of the nation, the identity and the cultural and linguistic heritage of the nation, some seek answers to questions such as 'What unifies the nation?'; 'What makes someone a citizen of a nation state?'; 'What are the shared norms and values of the nation state?'. Others ask similar questions from a less rhetorical, more functional perspective and look for policies that ensure the social cohesion of a country or a region. Language and societal knowledge tend to be regarded as key elements in these policies. Instruments have been developed to measure immigrants' language proficiency (i.e. proficiency in the standard language) and their knowledge of the norms and values of the 'host country'.

For some years there has begun to be a move in a number of specific European countries towards stricter conditions for people wanting to enter or integrate the country, or apply for citizenship. New (or renewed) requirements include a knowledge of the language and familiarity with a country's cultural values and norms.

On the basis of different surveys over time, it cannot be denied that a proliferation of integration tests and courses are spreading across Europe. According to a first ALTE survey in 2002, only 4 of 14 countries that were included (29%), had language tests for citizenship. A second ALTE survey in 2007 showed that already 11 out of 18 countries – 61% - had language requirements for citizenship.

2 OBSERVATIONS ON THE 2008 SURVEY

The 2008 COE/ALTE/DGLFLF data clearly show that knowledge of the language (and culture) of a given society are key features in most of Europe's current national policies. It is noticeable that in most countries there is a shift from providing opportunities for immigrants to follow language tuition programmes to introducing obligatory programmes with tests and sanctions. In some countries it is clear that the stricter conditions are not only seen as 'strengthening social cohesion' but would also be used as an instrument for exclusion or a gate-keeping mechanism.

The data for 2008 reveal that more and more countries are introducing stricter language requirements and tests with sanctions. Variation across countries can be observed. The number of knowledge of society tests (KOS) is limited for entrance, but higher for people applying for citizenship. In many countries that have language or KOS tests, the test has to be paid for and a large difference in cost can be observed (up to €140).

A majority of countries do not offer official language courses. The initiative often lies with immigrants. As a consequence, they often have to go to the private market with high costs (up to €900). In some countries, candidates for entrance or applicants for citizenship can be reimbursed. Although the specific language needs of immigrants are acknowledged, many countries do not offer tailor-made courses. Some countries are very supportive of immigrants who are following an integration programme: tuition is often made available free of charge, there is no testing, and tuition programmes are tailor-made. A large variation - from A1.1 to B2 - can be observed in the required level of language proficiency for tuition, as well as for language testing. In most cases the CEFR levels are used to determine the required level of language proficiency. The way the CEFR levels are used seems to be not always unproblematic. Some countries that do not yet have language requirements for integration and/or citizenship are planning to introduce them and are currently revising their policies.

3 SOME GENERAL REFLECTIONS

In a majority of countries the required level of language proficiency is rather low. From a functional and ethical perspective this is a justifiable choice. We must, however, be aware of the possible perceptions by the majority group. When we look closely at the CEFR descriptors at the lower levels (A1-A2), it is quite possible that a person mastering a language at A1-A2 level, and who can officially – e.g. on the basis of a language test – be seen as ‘integrated’, is not perceived as such by members of the majority group.

Besides the possible positive effects, the negative societal impact of integration policies in which language requirements hold a central place may not be underestimated: companies who fire employees because they used their mother tongue during the lunch break; children who can be punished for using their mother tongue in the playground at school; a local authority requiring a (undefined) level of proficiency in the dominant language to be eligible for buying a property or piece of land; a municipality requiring a (undefined) level of proficiency in the dominant language for children to be allowed in the municipality playground are just a few examples.

In some countries facilitating policies to encourage social inclusion processes can be observed, while in others the policies have a more obligatory and conditional nature. This difference can have a major effect on the implementation and impact of a policy.

For example, we know from research that a policy that is aimed at the integration of immigrants in certain societal domains will lead to the acquisition and use of the language of the host country in those domains. In making language a condition for integration, there is a risk of refusing immigrants the opportunity of being active in domains where the acquisition and use of the language of the host country can be facilitated. One runs the risk of actually excluding immigrants from domains, when what was being aimed at could be achieved. By maintaining a policy of making language proficiency a condition for social participation and obliging immigrants to take language courses, there is a danger that the structural discrimination of minority groups that one wants to counteract will actually be reinforced.

In a policy of a more conditional nature, language courses and language tests have to be more uniform in format as well as in content. A universal and fixed level of language proficiency for all immigrants is a prerequisite. In an obligatory policy, failure or success in a language course or language test can function as a gatekeeper, a mechanism to exclude people.

In a more facilitating policy, language courses and language tests can be more flexible, more tailor made in format and content. The level of language proficiency can vary depending on the needs of the immigrants and on the linguistic requirement in specific domains of the host society in which an immigrant wants to function. A more facilitating policy is more encouraging than discouraging. It is aimed at integration and non-discrimination. It also offers more opportunities for acknowledgement of immigrants' plurilingual repertoires.

When making policies aimed at social inclusion and increasing opportunities for immigrants to take part in social life through imposing language requirements, one could consider taking account of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, where freedom of expression is articulated. This year is the year of 'Intercultural Dialogue'. The White Paper indicates that intercultural dialogue is promoted through the acquisition of the host language and appreciation of the languages of the immigrants. More facilitating policies of this nature aim for the inclusion of all people in a multicultural society. Diversity is seen as an added value and an asset, a source for creativity and innovation.