



Council of Europe
Language Policy Unit
DGII – Education Department
www.coe.int/lang-migrants

Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants



Literacy

General remarks and clarifications

Literacy can be seen as a fundamental human right according to Article 26 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights concerning the right to education “directed to the full development of human personality” (26.2). A number of international agreements, such as the “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights”, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1996, underline the importance of this human right, which is not limited by age (see article 13 d). The “International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families”, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1990, explicitly confirms this right to education in the case of migrants (Art. 43, 45).

Reading and writing are essential skills for survival in the modern world and there are strong links between illiteracy, poverty and exclusion: the ability to use the written language adequately to perform everyday tasks and make use of the resources of society is a necessary competence. This explains why access to education is also stressed in the European Social Charter (rev. 1996) as “the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion” (Part II, Article 30).

Not addressing adult illiteracy can be seen as a strong violation of this right to education; migrants have the right to equal treatment as far as fundamental education is concerned.

As for migrants different types of illiteracy are relevant:

- a) Illiterate people who have never learned to read or write, perhaps because they did not receive proper education in their country of origin.
- b) Functionally illiterate people: although they were taught to read and write they are not able to use these skills to meet the requirements of daily life. This category of functional illiteracy is culture-specific because literacy requirements differ from country to country as debates on health literacy or media literacy show. People who belong to this group have usually had only a limited education.
- c) Those who learned to read and write in their language of origin but have lost these skills through lack of use and further training constitute a special sub-group, the so-called secondary illiterates.

Sometimes migrants who can read and write in their language of origin are treated as illiterate because the language of the host community uses a different writing system. But of course they are not at all illiterate. For practical reasons they may attend the same courses as illiterate people because they have to learn a new writing system from the very beginning, but they are already familiar with the relationships between sound and written symbols and they have already developed the ability to look for meaning in a text.

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Terminology is delicate because terms such as “illiterate” and “limited language proficiency” are discriminating terms which neglect the fact that the people concerned are often fully able to participate in social life; they do not describe precisely which communicative competences people have although they are not able to reach a certain level in reading and writing. Therefore it is preferably to speak of “teaching literacy” instead of focusing on illiteracy.

Danger that illiterate migrants are excluded from educational programmes

There are three main reasons why illiterate migrants are often excluded from educational programmes (for details see L.-M. Rinta 2005: Literacy for Special Target Groups: Migrants“, UNESCO-Institute for Education)

- Language programmes for migrants are usually designed for migrants who are literate in their mother tongue and can make use of literacy skills from the very beginning. Only a few countries offer special programmes for illiterate migrants and little is known about their specific needs.
- Illiterate migrants often have especially difficult working conditions: long hours, work that is physically exhausting, more than one job.
- Because they cannot read they do not benefit from written information about programmes designed to meet their needs. Sometimes they are ashamed of their illiteracy and thus reluctant to admit that they cannot read and write; and sometimes they are not aware of the importance of literacy, so that when asked whether they are competent in a language, they say yes, because they can speak it.

Consequences for language tuition

Illiterate adult migrants urgently need to access elementary education and instruction in basic literacy skills (see also Francois Audigier: Basic concepts and core competencies for education for democratic citizenship, Council for Cultural Co-operation. Project on “Education for democratic citizenship”; Council of Europe, 2000 (DGIV/EDU/CIT(2000)23 ; Y.37.035.4). Programmes to teach literacy therefore have to be a necessary part of any integration programme.

Research shows that it is easier to acquire literacy in one’s mother tongue than in a second language because the language itself is already familiar. Simultaneously learning a new language and literacy skills is much more difficult and time-consuming. Acquiring literacy in the new language is easier for people who have already learned to read and write in their language of origin. Practical considerations - for example linguistically heterogeneous groups of learners or a lack of qualified teachers competent in migrants’ languages - often mean that literacy is taught through the medium of the new language. In these circumstances specialist training for teachers, team teaching with teachers from a migrant background, and the development of special materials seem to be necessary.

Illiterate migrants cannot be subject to the same linguistic requirements as other migrants. They need special courses and much more time to reach the required levels. Testing them in all skills at the same level is counter-productive because their oral skills are necessarily more developed and it is a complex task to learn a new language and literacy at the same time. Assessment is especially problematic because even listening tests usually require that the test takers can read and write. To make family reunification dependent on language tests is to exclude illiterate migrants from the fundamental human right to live together with their family.

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Related Resources

- Italian Language for adult migrants. *Syllabus and descriptors for illiterate, semi-literate and literate users. From illiteracy to A1 level*, Alessandro Borri, Fernanda Minuz, Lorenzo Rocca, Chiara Sola, 2014. Loescher Editore, Italy. Original version: *Italian*. [This extract and its translation were kindly provided by the publisher].
- Case study: *Language learning in the context of migration and integration - Challenges and options for adult learners*, by Verena Plutzer/ Monika Ritter, 2008, Council of Europe
- *The role of literacy in the acculturation process of migrants*, 2008, Hervé Adami
- *Tailoring language provision and requirements to the needs and capacities of adult migrants* - Hans-Jürgen Krumm / Verena Plutzer, 2008