DIGITAL INNOVATION FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION – AN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE ON ICT-BASED SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

G. Città, M. Allegra, V. Dal Grande, M. Gentile, D. La Guardia, S. Ottaviano

National Research Council of Italy - Institute for Educational Technology (ITALY)

Abstract
What are effective approaches and campaigns for improving basic reading and writing skills in a country's society? Which actors foster literacy and which methods and applications are especially profitable in the literacy of adults with a migration background? This paper is an attempt to provide answers to these questions thanks to the research conducted within the Erasmus + project "D.I.S.I. – Digital Innovation for Social Inclusion". Within this context, the structures that are particularly important for literacy in the five partner countries of the project (France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom) were analysed.

Keywords: Second Language Learning, ICT-based learning, Social Inclusion, Writing Skills, Reading Skills.

1 INTRODUCTION
The proportion of people with low literacy has risen dramatically in Europe – there are still some 55 million adults in Europe with no basic reading and writing skills [1]. Taking into account this state of affairs people who after attending school lose all or most of these skills (functional illiteracy) and people who have not acquired any writing or reading skills (primary illiteracy) can be identified. Specifically referring to the latter, reading and writing skills issues emerges as increasingly linked to the issues of multilingualism and migration through increased mobility in Europe: in some countries, such as Italy or Portugal, the proportion of young adults with migration background increased by a factor of five or four between 2000 and 2010.

For this reason, research in second language learning (L2) and in ICT for L2 learning can provide important information about which methods and applications are especially useful in the literacy of adults with a migration background [2], [3].

The main purpose of the present paper is to outline the current state of the art in the field of ICT-based second language learning activities for illiterate/un-alphabetized adult migrants/refugees as well as to shed some light on prospects and possible methodological approaches and practice-oriented solutions [4].

Expert interviews were conducted with key literacy activists of adult migrants to identify the relevant structures, actors and tools in the context of the participating countries (France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, United Kingdom) developing common criteria for collecting and interpreting data as well as identifying EU-relevant best practices, drawing conclusions and elaborating common proposals for possible further actions. In addition, an assessment of the tools and activities to improve second-language ICT-based learning for illiterate / non-literate adult migrants/refugees was conducted both from a technical and a methodological point of view and by comparing the critical feedback of regular users of these instruments. The results of this evaluation were used to implement new ICT-based learning scenarios for the target.

2 METHODOLOGY
Focus groups were carried out in each country. Each focus group focused on a different topic and in particular on:

- the evaluation of existing activities using ICT for second language learning aimed at illiterate adult immigrants/refugees;
- experiences with these types of target subjects;
• critical analysis elaborated by subjects who habitually use ICT-based learning environments;
• definition of the elements that should be taken into account in order to be successful in the implementation of ICT-based learning scenarios for adult immigrants/refugees who are illiterate.

During focus groups, similarities and differences have been identified across the five counties participating in the D.I.S.I. project.

3 RESULTS

Observations and experiences in all project countries confirm that even the non-alphabetized and poorly educated are quite frequently adept at using ICT devices. Nevertheless, active using ICT devices as a means of communication with families, community members and other persons does not necessarily mean an affiliation and readiness to use them for the purposes of learning.

All focus groups argue that the use of ICT contributes to easier access to educational resources, supports learning and teaching processes and consequently enables access to up-to-date contents. Media-aided learning scenarios overcome time and place barriers and simultaneously foster media competence. Ensuring that especially young adults acquire the skills to use ICT effectively, confidently and safely should be a key priority. Moreover, providing IT access to asylum seekers is extremely important to prepare them for their new life in the new society. It gives them better access to online L2 learning as well as an appropriate platform for preparing themselves for the new labour market. Finally, ICT-based teaching and learning activities offer diverse options for promoting and effectively using internal differentiation and self-controlled learning in lessons, particularly in foreign language lessons.

In the following subsections, the current state of affairs about ICT-based second language learning activities and tools is reported as emerged from the reports of the different focus groups.

3.1 France

Digital skills are increasingly recognised as basic skills necessary for everyday and working life. So, ICT tools have been used for training courses and/or testing on a wide scale. In 2014 decree redefined the procedures for self-training entities, partly at a distance, for vocational training (Decree No. 2014-935 of August 20th, 2014 related to open or distance learning.). Consequently, during recent years there has been a growing interest in developing educational programs that aim to integrate ICT into different levels, within formal and non-formal education as well as in urban and rural settings [5].

These programs and efforts have been led by several stakeholders such as state services, territorial authorities and organisations.

Pilot projects were launched in late 2009 by IDAP - Institut de développement des activités de proximités (programme intégr@dom, modules for home care & assistants) and by the Cned – Centre National d’Enseignement à Distance (CD-Rom to be used in the Public Internet Spot – Espace Publique Numérique). Moreover, it should be noted that the French Office of Immigration and Integration (OFII) also assessed ICT-based solutions for CIR (Contrat d’Intégration Républicaine) courses.

The use of ICT in L2 education for adult migrants is gradually growing.

3.2 Germany

Media use by migrants is part of a larger field of research. Numerous national research projects have been performed on media use in recent years. This relates to comprehensive studies on behalf of broadcasting institutions, as well as work dealing with the specific aspects of media use, such as reading behaviour or use of the Internet by migrants.

With the Integration Report of 2017, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) determined the following key results. Television is the most important medium for all population groups. In television, private channels with high shares of entertainment are given preference, which is related to the age structure of the immigrants. German-language public-sector channels have a positive image (information competence) but are switched on less in practice. However, generally, the complementary use of German and native-language media is prevalent. Younger migrants, who are born in Germany and are better educated with good German language skills, particularly tend towards
this pattern or even towards the exclusive use of German media. In contrast, older migrants, who were born abroad and those with a lower level of education, tend to use media services in their native language more frequently. In the meantime, the Internet is being used more intensively, whereby the German language services or bilingual “ethnoportals” are dominant.

3.3 Italy

Most graphical and interactive “tools” used in L2 teaching to illiterate or lowly educated adults are primarily developed by the educators themselves (e.g. “Piano piano” [6]). Or at least they rely on proven, nationally (or regionally) trusted textbooks and resources.

There are some good and working examples of technological tools and platforms in actual use and integrated into basic reading-writing lessons. These include textbooks for adult migrant L2 learners integrated by audio and video examples and exercises such as “Andiamo” [7] and “Ponti di Parole” (http://www.pontidiparole.com/), PC platforms and an Android Apps which actually starts with the phonic and syllabic bases of building and reproducing words and phrases such as “Fare Parole 1 & 2” (http://www.fareparole.it/) and online/offline Android interactive dictionaries (for children), with engaging designs made by professional illustrators – in English, Italian and Arabic (e.g. “Benvenuti ABC” - https://www.pubcoder.com/BenvenutiABC/BenvenutiABC).

3.4 Portugal

From the national panorama and from the studies that have been carried out, it emerges that there are some measures and support programs for the integration of immigrants, namely in language teaching. However, the use of new technologies is not yet a widely used tool in promoting language teaching. Nevertheless, some important initiatives are to be considered as a good starting point.

A platform, developed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Migration, allows the learning or deepening of the Portuguese language and foster a kind of learning can be done in an autonomous way, respecting the rhythm and the needs of each one.

Another platform, on the one hand, provides for the teaching of Portuguese for students who have attended the Portuguese system of education and who intend to return to study and, on the other hand, also intends to provide the learning of Portuguese for young foreigners who wish to learn Portuguese. Through this platform, those interested can have access to Portuguese classes, enabling them to choose the cycle and the year they want to learn. This platform was created by Instituto Camões and Porto Editora.

Finally, SPEAK (https://www.speak.social/en/) is noteworthy. It is a language and cultural program designed to bring people together - a sharing of languages and cultures between migrants and locals that breaks down barriers, promotes multilingualism, equality and democratizes language learning. Anyone can sign up to learn or teach a language or culture, including that of the country where they reside.

3.5 United Kingdom

Language skills are critical to integration in UK society, to social and academic development, and to meeting basic needs. Successive UK governments have repeatedly identified the social and economic benefits of being able to speak English as one of the key drivers behind the provision of ESOL. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is the term used for English language courses taken by people whose first language is not English and who need English to communicate in daily life. ESOL qualifications may be taken at five levels. Often more informal ESOL classes are also provided by a range of other organisations, such as community groups, charities and faith groups. These classes are often delivered by volunteers.

Regarding the ICT education, the effective use of ICT plays a central role in all the key education policies being taken forward by the Department of Education (DE), including the curriculum and the literacy and numeracy strategy. Ensuring that young people acquire the skills to use ICT effectively, confidently and safely is a key priority for DE. Moreover, providing IT access to asylum seekers is extremely important to prepare them for their new life in the UK. It gives them better access to online English learning as well as CV writing and basic IT classes.

The current combined ICT and English learning initiatives can help with both short- and long-term people needs. They can help basic and essential needs (Housing, Social Security) and also relate to
medical care, communication, education and vocational training, employment and skill development. There are different organisations and opportunities in order to help refugees and migrants to develop their ICT skills, but sometimes there are not enough. However, there are also situations of refugees that have no literacy skills and they may find more difficult to find support and moreover, further barriers to social inclusion. Indeed, according to surveys, many refugees are illiterate, and this means without the ability to get a job.

4 CONCLUSIONS

After reflection and analysis of the data of all focus groups, one can outline the following challenges and limitations regarding the use of ICT-based learning scenarios for the target groups. In particular, it became obvious that the use of ICT in L2 teaching becomes more relevant but is not yet a recurring practice. Much of the potential of ICT remains unexplored in L2 learning activities for adult migrants. Large-scale policy initiatives are needed to improve ICT courses in this sector. In the recent decade, there has been a growing interest across EU in developing educational programs that aim to integrate ICT into different levels, in contexts of formal and non-formal education as well as in urban and rural settings. However, active and systematic use of ICT tools in this area still seems to be sporadic and not as widespread as it could be. One of the reasons is that the effective use of media and methods is also always dependent on the learning groups, the lesson situation, the objective, the learning contents and the learning preconditions and requirements of the learners.

Policy makers and other stakeholders should be aware, in a realistic way, of the ample potential of ICT for L2 learning in both structured and informal contexts. They also should be aware of the complexity for practitioners to cope with a wide and growing range of solutions and of the new “literacy” requirements (starting from digital competences of learners and teachers) and the need for innovative educational approaches they entail.

The suggestion would be to create an L2 strategy for EU, which should include funding and support for voluntary groups providing additional language and ICT support alongside L2 classes. An EU-wide platform or open bank of ICT-based L2 learning resources created by publishers, teachers and learners could be used by adult education stakeholders (teachers, assessors and tutors) for a systematic exchange of information, experiences and good practices. Furthermore, for the selection and later use of ICT-supported learning services, considerations must also always be included, of how to precisely integrate the new media into the lessons. To be able to use the potential of new media to its full extent, multidimensional implementation approaches are necessary.

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REFERENCES


