E-LEARNING RESOURCES FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES: 
EXPERIENCE FROM FIELD TRIALS IN ITALY

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**Abstract**

The role of MOOCs and OERs as effective resources for social inclusion of disadvantaged groups has been greatly emphasized in recent years due to the increased numbers of refugees and migrants, especially in European societies.

A recent study carried out by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission on free digital learning (FDL) opportunities for migrants and refugees identified some key features for the development of effective FDL resources devoted to disadvantaged groups: the necessity to integrate the online learning with blended and face-to-face learning, the need to target the courses’ content to migrants/refugees profiles, the focus on language learning [1].

In providing an in-depth analysis of different initiatives, carried out mainly in higher education and related to online resources development, the study stressed the lack of specific data on participation and completion of the courses. These data are deemed crucial for a comprehensive understanding of how the target group approaches and uses FDL and its effects on learning and social inclusion.

In this view, the ReGap project (Reducing the Education Gap, ref. 2017-1-NO01-KA204-034182) in developing and trialling open access e-learning resources for adult migrants and refugees, can contribute to shed light on the strengths and limitations related to issues raised in the JRC study.

The Regap online courses were created in order to foster employment opportunities and social belonging and present country specific information about work, health, social security, education and systems of justice and regulations. In line with the considerations arisen from the JRC report, the online resources also envisage face-to face activities, to be carried out with students by teachers/educators/cultural facilitators. The partners involved in the project, led by Inland Norway University of Applied Science, are LUMSA University (Italy), Porto University (Portugal) and CDI (Community Development Institute, Macedonia).

The course developed by LUMSA research team was centred on employment issues and aimed at providing refugees and migrants with information and linguistic tools on the most relevant topics related to job finding and regulations: from the CV to job ads, from permanent contracts to dismissal. In addition to the online resources, the course on employment envisaged a blended activity on employment centres.

This contribution is focused on the results of the field trials of the ReGap employment course carried out in Italy at the Astalli Centre in Rome and in several SPRAR centres (a network of local entities that are in charge of implementing hosting projects) in southern Italy. The trials have involved more than 50 refugees and asylum seekers.

Results confirmed the relevance of the face-to-face activities in motivating and fostering learning and social integration among peers. The online activities were considered by many users a valuable tool in relation to employment issues but the low levels of ICT skills have often represented an obstacle that prevented students from a full use of the resources. While the difficulty of the language was considered appropriate for the Italian target group (mainly with A1 and A2 levels in Italian language), the trials highlighted the lack of a full adaptation to the diverse refugees and asylum seekers profiles, with this stressing one of the main challenges for providing targeted educational opportunities for disadvantaged people.

Keywords: refugees, migrants, e-learning, trials, Italy.
1 INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of MOOCs and OERs as tools for social inclusion, that has occurred in the last years, can be ascribed to the massive arrival of migrants and refugees, that has involved several countries in Europe.

The recent report of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission on free digital learning (FDL) opportunities for migrants and refugees highlighted the most important elements to create effective e-learning resources targeted to migrants and refugees: the need to join online with blended and face-to-face learning activities, the necessity to focus the topics of the courses on migrants and refugees’ profiles, the emphasis on language acquisition [1].

This report analyses the different initiatives that took place mainly in higher education contexts and points out the lack of data on the participation in the e-learning experience and the achievement, i.e. the level of completion of the online resources. These data are considered relevant information to deeply investigate how migrants and refugees approach and use online courses and resources and what are the effects on social inclusion and integration in the hosting societies.

Considering the above, the ReGap project (Reducing the Education Gap, ref. 2017-1-NO01-KA204-034182) aims at developing and trialling open access e-learning resources for adult migrants and refugees, with this potentially contributing to acknowledge strengths and weaknesses related to issues raised in the JRC study. ReGap is a continuation of a previous Erasmus+ funded project, Advenus (Developing online resources for adult refugees, ref. 2016-1-NO01-KA204-022090), aimed to enhance basic skills for a successful integration into host European societies by developing and trialling open access e-learning resources devoted to adult refugees aged 18-40 [2, 3].

The Regap online courses were uploaded on a Moodle platform and tackle issues related to work, health, social security, education and systems of justice and regulations. Following the main findings of the JRC study, the ReGap courses also include face-to-face activities, to be carried out with students by teachers/educators/cultural facilitators. The project consortium is led by Inland Norway University of Applied Science, and includes LUMSA University (Italy), Porto University (Portugal) and CDI (Community Development Institute, Macedonia) [4]

This contribution presents the ReGap course on employment developed by the Lumsa research team and is focused on the field trials carried out in Italy at the Astalli Centre in Rome and in several SPRAR centres (a network of local entities that are in charge of implementing hosting projects) in southern Italy. The final section presents the future developments of the project.

2 THE REGAP COURSE ON EMPLOYMENT

The ReGap course on employment is focused on issues related to job finding and on rights and duties at the workplace. In details it aims at presenting different kinds of contracts, reinforcing students’ lexicon related to different kinds of jobs, explaining the sections and the key words of a CV/job ad. The course also presents workers’ rights at the work place and where to go to find a job (job centres/agencies). Finally, it is focused on how to use public transportation/cars to go to work, on lexicon/communicative expression to ask for information on the street and norms on driving license.

The course is made up of 6 sections:

1 Introductory video on employment: this video is focused on migrants and refugees’ points of view and experiences related to employment in the hosting country (e.g. how they found a job, what are the key elements for finding a job in a different country)

2 Finding a job: this section is focused on CV sections, job ads, lexicon on professions. Activities in this section include: putting in the right order a messy CV, identifying the sections of a job ads, a visual dictionary on professions, a video on the employment centre, country-specific information about finding a job

3 Different kinds of employment contracts: through the stories of different people (migrants/refugees), this section presents the employment contracts such as permanent/term contract, self-employment, precarious work. It also includes a section on black work. Activities encompass readings, comprehension exercises, short explicative texts on the topics, “keep it in

1 Gabriella Agrusti is author of paragraph 4, Valeria Damiani of the remaining paragraphs.
mind!” sections to enhance vocabulary, county-specific information on the employment contracts in the partners’ countries.

4 Losing your job: this section presents the dismissal. Activities include a short story on the topic, comprehension exercises, short explicative texts on the topic, “keep it in mind!” sections to enhance vocabulary, county-specific information on how to get help in case of dismissal in partners’ countries.

5 Going to work: this section is focused on the use of the car and public transportation to go to work. Activities include readings, short explicative texts on the topics (driving license norms in the hosting country, legal alcohol limits for driving, different kinds of driving licenses), “keep it in mind!” section to enhance vocabulary, exercise on dos and don’ts when using public transportation, country-specific information on the conversion of the driving license and on the road code.

6 Do you remember? This section recalls all the most relevant information tackled in the course, through multiple choice questions and cloze exercises.

In addition to this, the course encompasses a face to face (F2F) activity to be delivered in class by a teacher/educator/cultural facilitator. The aim of this activity is to enhance students’ lexicon on finding a job and on communicative expressions in formal settings in relation to job findings (describe your own skills, understand the requested documents etc.). Table 1 reports the tools, duration and main steps for the delivering of the F2F. This information is uploaded on the ReGap website (http://www.regap-edu.net/) together with examples of basic guidelines on the implementation of the role-play.

| Tools                                                                 | videos on employment centres in the hosting country language (e.g. for Italy Samira at the employment centre); or photos showing interviews at the employment centre of your country; or leaflets about the services provided by the employment centre of your country. Examples (for Italy):
|                                                                      | Video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsEBjpQTlyY)
|                                                                      | Leaflet (http://romalabor.cittametropolitanaroma.gov.it/sites/default/files/Pieghevole%2007.06.18.pdf)
|                                                                      | Cards to be distributed among students (examples uploaded on the ReGap website) |
| Duration                                                             | 45 minutes |
| Background                                                           | Before showing your students the tool you have selected, briefly recall the information about the CV sections and how to find a job in your country. |
| Step 1 - brainstorming                                               | Both the video and the photo/leaflet are meant as tools for brainstorming and for eliciting students’ knowledge on the topic (lexicon about employment, communicative expressions to be used in an interview, but also possible previous experiences in an employment centre of the hosting country).
|                                                                      | - if you choose the video, ask your students to watch it at least twice (one time for global comprehension and the second time to take notes on the most relevant information)
|                                                                      | - if you instead choose the photo/leaflet, let the students work in pairs and discuss the image/information included in the tool selected. |
| Step 2 – wrap up in plenary                                          | In plenary, discuss with your students about the meaning of the selected tool and their previous knowledge on the topic. This phase is crucial in order to understand how to set up the role-play activity, according to the students’ language knowledge level and their possible experiences in an employment centre.
|                                                                      | - if students have low language skills and/or have never experienced an interview at the employment centre, present to them the most important words related to the topic and explain how the employment centre works. You can prepare printed version of the words and dedicate a couple of minutes each to read the word aloud, or to use the word in a sentence (e.g. personal data, degree, certificate etc.). |
### Step 3 - setting up the role-play activity

Divide your students in pairs, possibly with the same level of language knowledge. One student will be the interviewer at the employment centre, the other student will be a person who’s looking for a job.

- For students with low language knowledge skills: provide them with some basic guidelines on the implementation of the role-play (e.g. repeat the useful words to use and add a list of useful expressions, indicate briefly how to interact with each other, basic issues that have to be addressed in the role-play – such as, personal data and main skills/qualification of the interviewed).

- For students with high language knowledge skills: students will develop the role-play in autonomy but they will be however asked to plan it in a structured way (e.g. starting with the interviewer personal data, the documents necessary to apply for jobs, then talking about previous jobs, skills acquired during education/previous jobs etc.).

### Step 4 – role-play plenary session

Ask each pair of students to perform their role-play in plenary (students should not read notes). Take notes about good communicative strategies/expressions and about relevant mistakes. But please do not interrupt nor have judgmental facial expression. Encourage weak students to have a go first and then the others. Give time to start (count in silent to ten before talking again).

### Step 5 – feedback

Provide your students with a general feedback on the strengths and weaknesses that you have observed during the role-play – you can do it orally or using the blackboard. Do not focus on the student but on the mistake. Explain why there’s a problem and how to solve it. If possible, ask collaboration of other students.

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### 3 THE TRIALS IN ITALY

The trials were implemented with the help of teachers/cultural facilitators/educators in order to help the refugees in properly accessing the Moodle platform, and to support them in completing the activities.

The language barriers, the lack of e-skills and the wide differences in terms of educational and cultural backgrounds of the refugees and asylum seekers in partner countries, made it difficult to use standardised tools (tests or questionnaires) to collect data. The trials thus followed a mixed-method approach, which encompassed different variables for the evaluation of the courses and were included in a trial protocol, shared by the partner organisations [3].

The objective of the protocol was twofold, aiming at identifying the achievement of the qualitative standards set for the courses and at reporting and understanding the mechanisms and processes activated by refugees through the e-learning resources.

As the ultimate goal of the ReGap courses was to foster participant engagement in the e-learning experience, enhancing their skills in ICT and literacy in the host country language, the focus of the evaluation of the courses was related to user willingness, after the trials, to be engaged in other e-learning experiences in order to boost their basic skills. From this perspective, the protocol was not entirely centred on technology but was based on three different data sources: a learning analytics review (collected by the e-learning platform); “small talk” interviews (between the researcher and the refugees after the course completion) about the usefulness of the courses, their perceived difficulty, the ease of using the Moodle platform and the willingness to repeat the experience with other courses; and direct observation, by the partner organisation researchers administering the trials [5].

The trials took place in February 2019 at “Il Faro” training centre for refugees in Rome, managed by the Astalli centre and offering Italian language courses (also courses for illiterates) and professional trainings devoted to refugees and asylum seekers, and in different SPRAR centres in Southern Italy, managed by the Cooperativa San Francesco.

In Rome, two sessions were conducted for the online trials, during regular Italian classes’ hours, in order to guarantee the highest number of participants and to make refugees consider them as a normal learning activity, carried out on computers. The ICT represented for refugees the “new” element of this learning experience: they have never been to the computer classroom for any Italian language lesson and professional courses. In both sessions, two educators/cultural facilitators took part in the trials.

It must be noted that the refugees at the centre were not used to take classes or to use the PC classroom by themselves because it has been closed for a long time – because the
educators/teachers do not use the ICT classroom for their lessons, given low levels of ICT skills of the students of the centre. Priority is given to language learning in the courses.

Two sessions were conducted (in parallel with the online ones) for the blended trials. Blended sessions took place in a regular class at “Il Faro”, with a projector and movable chairs with desks. Students had the opportunity to watch the video on the employment centre and then to work in small groups. One educator/cultural facilitator took part in the blended trials.

The same students who took part in the F2F activities in the first day of the trials, participated in the following week in the online trials (although some students were absent, unfortunately). For the F2F activities, the Moodle platform with the course was rapidly shown at the beginning of the two sessions. The students then had the possibility to navigate the course during their online trial session a week later.

The Cooperativa San Francesco manages different communities for hosting asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in Caltagirone’s area (Sicily). Refugees who took the ReGap courses came from 11 different centres in the same area. Two laptops with internet connection were available. Nine sessions were carried out. Four teachers/cultural facilitators were responsible for the administration in the different centres. Tests and courses were administered during lessons and the interest of the participants varied, considering their different background and literacy levels.

The following tables (table 2 and table 3) report the most relevant information gathered from the trials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2- Trials reports – online course</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course tested (title)</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of participants (online)</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male participants number (online)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of the group of participants</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries of origin</td>
<td>Armenia (3), Turkey (2), Bangladesh (5), Nigeria (6), Azerbaijan (2), Ivory Coast (3), Venezuela (4), Afghanistan (2), Gambia (2), Bulgaria (2), Mali (2), Sri Lanka (1), Iraq (1), Ghana (1), Cameron (3), Guinea (2), Senegal (2), Pakistan (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban / rural background</td>
<td>12 from rural background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages spoken</td>
<td>Sinhalese (1), Turkish/Kurdish (4), Bengalese (5), English (13), Azeri (1), Spanish (2), Dari (4), Bulgarian (2), French (10), Armenian (1), Bambara (1), Arab (1), Azeri (1), Senegalese (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning history / Education / Qualification</td>
<td>No education (3), elementary school (7), lower secondary school (15), high school (13), university (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural sensitivity issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No relevant elements noted during the trials in relation to cultural sensitivity of the courses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessibility issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before the trials, a brief introduction on the use of the ReGap platform was carried out, in order to help participants with low ICT skills to easily navigate through the activities. This introduction was useful: students knew were to click and the platform was accessed without any relevant problem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level and nature of learner support interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students asked for help in relation to the meaning of some words (“risparmiare” – “saving money”, for instance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with low ICT skills needed constant help for navigating the platform.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessment (comments, non-verbal behavior, perceptions)

Students with low ICT skills and low levels of Italian language knowledge were very tired after finishing just one activity. This group of students was sometimes reluctant to be involved. This issue was tackled with the help of the cultural facilitators/teachers.

Students were interested on the topics (e.g. on the topics about the contracts) and found them very useful – they were all looking for a job. They wanted to print the sections “Keep it in mind” with all the useful words to be used on the topic.

The comprehension activities/exercises were deemed useful for the understanding of complex concepts related to job contracts and also in relation to dismissal.

Some students faced difficulties in reading the texts, when they were too long and too detailed. They liked the idea of the stories in the course, that helped them in the understanding and in recognizing keywords. Students wanted to access the course from the smartphone.

Table 3- Trials reports – F2F activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course tested</th>
<th>Employment – F2F at the employment centre (the course on Moodle was previously shown to participants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of participants (F2F)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male participants number (F2F)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of the group of participants</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries of origin</td>
<td>Sri Lanka (1), Sudan (3), Turkey (3), Iraq (1), Bangladesh (5), Nigeria (5), Azerbaijan (2), Cameroon (1), Venezuela (3), Afghanistan (5), Gambia (2), Bulgaria (3), Armenia (1), China (1), Ivory Coast (1), Mali (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban / rural background</td>
<td>Five from rural background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages spoken</td>
<td>Senegalese (1), Arab (1), Turkish/Kurdish (5), Bengalese (5), English (9), Azeri (2), Spanish (3), Dari (5), Bulgarian (3), French (2), Armenian (1), Bambara (1), Chinese (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning history / Education / Qualification</td>
<td>No education (3), elementary school (8), lower secondary school (5), high school (15), university (9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Language issues

Main problems related to talking. The role play on the employment centre and the discussion on their previous experiences in education were quite difficult tasks to deal with (average Italian language proficiency level: A2).

Students did not know some key words related to the course’s topics. The video was easy to follow, the images helped them in the understanding (average Italian language proficiency level: A2).

Level and nature of learner support interventions

Some participants asked for help in planning the conversation for the role-play. Their major concern was related to effective communicative expressions. Some students also asked how to talk formally in Italian. They found difficulties in explaining their desires, their preferences in relation to the jobs they like.

Assessment (comments, non-verbal behavior, perceptions)

Most students enjoyed working in groups and having the possibility to share experiences. The classes were characterized by good empathy – they were used to work in small groups and carried out very nice and funny conversations. Everyone was fully engaged in the tasks.

Comments

In the F2F sessions, students really enjoyed working together and sharing experiences. On average, they found the activities very interesting, useful and appropriate.

One major concern, that was perceived by the researchers, was their urgency in understanding how to deal with a job interview at the employment centre, in terms of language proficiency but also in terms of documents needed. Some of them did not have the documents or any certificate (related to education/training) and students showed their worries about their current situation. Since we were asking them to simulate a possible interview at the employment centre, they really identify themselves as a person looking for a job and interviewed by an operator. And this brought out all the difficulties that their (disadvantaged) status implies.

Students asked for some integrations in the F2F activity related to employment: some information about the translation of certificates/documents, practical information on the different forms to be filled in, more information about job sectors in Italy and the Italian labour market.
4 NEXT STEPS

A recent TED Talk given by Muhammed Idris and titled “What refugees need to start new lives”, highlights that refugees do not need lots of general information, but simply an opportunity to restart their life in a different place. It can be summarized into a motto, quoted by the talk: "Don't give me information, just tell me what to do" and "getting access to the right resources and information can be the difference between life and death". In a world where information constitutes someone’s own identity, the perception of the others, the possibility to gain a job, to access to health public services, to understand how to move from one place to another, the possibility to be trained on the “right” information, not so detailed but enough to be useful, in the language of the hosting country can make a difference. These were indeed the intentions of the ReGap project and of the Advenus project prior than it.

However, trials highlighted that this is just a starting point, that it is possible to do better, specifically in terms of:

- Language level of the courses proposed online (every activity should have an entry / medium / advanced level)
- Enlarging and improving the introductory part to the F2F activities, in order to avoid an asymmetrical relationship with the adult learners (i.e. sharing basic information, setting common goals for the learning activity, expressing learning needs and expectations)
- Adopting an intercultural approach to teaching methods to foster social inclusion.

The above mentioned points offer different levels of difficulty, but they present a common element that was at the core of all the activities carried out by the international project team in these years: a learner-centred approach. This is crucial, in andragogy, as it represents the key for self-improvement and conscientization, according to Freire. It can be extremely tempting to consider the culture of the hosting countries as a model that the newcomers have to get used to, whereas an actual cultural responsive pedagogy (in this case, andragogy), should descend from reciprocity and mutual respect. Way forward could be represented by learning paths that are open to refugees, migrant but also non-migrant background citizens, based on acquiring functional skills in goal-oriented activities. These opportunities can constitute the basis for sharing and common understanding, making the responsiveness a tangible outcome of the process.

REFERENCES


