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The Impact of Language Learning on Self-esteem in Adult Education

“I wanted a better me” –
one refugee’s narrative

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Abstract

Scholars have recognised language learning as important and in fact as part and parcel of the settling down process of migrants. In this paper, the author presents the narrative of a refugee who started with language classes and was attending university at the time of the research. This article emanated from empirical research the author carried out with asylum seekers and refugees in Italy. Drawing on Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition to provide an understanding of how one female asylum seeker achieved a more positive relationship to herself, he shows how participation in language learning was a search for recognition by the participant as well as how it contributed to her self-esteem. He also demonstrates how intersubjective recognition between the participant and her language teacher was important to her learning progress.

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Introduction

Many scholars have explored the role of adult education and learning in the integration or resettlement of migrants, not least asylum seekers and refugees (see Bartram et al. 2014; Kansteiner 2018; Slade/Dickson 2020; Thunborg et al. 2021). Morrice (2021) highlights the potential for learning to serve as a bridge between the refugees’ disrupted education and their aspirations to be self-reliant and participate in the host society. A major part of adult education and learning for migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, is language learning (see Andersson/Fejes 2010; Brown et al. 2020; Dalziel/Piazzoli 2018; Damiani 2019; Fejes 2019; Fejes/Dahlstedt 2017; Souto-Otero/Villalba-Garcia 2015).

The predominance of language learning and language proficiency in the adult learning provisions of migrant-receiving nations is a consequence of the notion that language proficiency provides the basis for integration/inclusion in society as well for employment (see Andersson/Fejes 2010; Fejes 2019; Gibb 2015). However, policies and practices that have focused principally on language proficiency have been critiqued by scholars (see Brown et al. 2020; Morrice et al. 2017 a. 2021). Certain criticism of this prominence given to language learning in the education provisions for migrants include the argument that it ignores adult migrants’ cultural diversity and thus encourages a homogenising approach. In essence, the approach fails to consider

the specific needs of adult migrants. Another implication of this approach is that it promotes an assimilative view of integration, and Heinemann (2017) asserts that it perpetuates hegemony and makes migrants submissive and compliant subjects. The approach is also based on an underlying assumption of deficit, i.e. that adult migrants lack something and therefore need to be helped by the receiving society (see Heinemann/Sarabi 2020). The notion that migrants should strive to attain proficiency in the language of the host society can lead to the exclusion or marginalisation of other language skills (see Fejes 2019).

Despite the criticism of the predominance of language acquisition in adult education provisions for migrants, this paper attempts to illustrate some potential benefits of language learning for migrants, not least asylum seekers, through a single story. I adopted a narrative inquiry to explore how adult learning and education, specifically language learning, improved the self-esteem of a refugee in Italy, drawing on Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition to provide an explanation of how the participant achieved a more positive relationship to herself.

Learning provisions for asylum seekers and refugees in Italy

In 2014, Italy expanded its structures for receiving, processing and accommodating asylum seekers by

establishing new centres of extraordinary reception, *centri di accoglienza straordinaria* (CAS). By 2017, these centres were accommodating 80% of asylum seekers arriving in Italy (see Paynter 2020 a. 2022). During their stay in the reception centres, asylum seekers receive an education as well as legal, social and health assistance, although as of 2018, reception centers are no longer obligated to enroll asylum seekers in language classes. While some reception centres still enroll asylum seekers in language classes, asylum seekers who are not enrolled by their centre have to pay for them. In Italy, the provincial centres for adult education (Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti, CPIA) are the major public institutions for adult education (see Daniele et al. 2018; Deiana/Spina 2021; Loprieno et al. 2019; OECD 2021). One of the duties of these centres is to provide educational offerings for immigrants, and adults seeking asylum in Italy mainly access formal education and vocational training through CPIA. CPIA also offer lower secondary school and upper secondary school qualification courses for migrants and for Italians interested in continuing education (see Deiana/Spina 2021; Longo 2019). While CPIA are meant to serve both Italians and foreigners, the learners at CPIA are predominantly foreigners who come to learn Italian due to its importance in aiding integration and it being a requirement for obtaining long-term residency (see Deiana/Spina 2021; Longo 2019). As a result, language classes for migrants are a major part of CPIA education provisions (see Deiana/Spina 2021).

Theory of recognition

Honneth's theory of recognition arose from his attempt to rethink the potential of critical social theory as a tool for emancipation (see Fleming/Finnegan 2014; West et al. 2013; Zurn 2017). He advanced the theory of recognition to show that self-realisation derives from the recognition received by others and that recognition is pivotal to both personal and social development (see Boston 2018; Fleming 2016; Honneth 1995 a. 2004; Huttunen 2007; Sandberg/Kubiak 2013). Thus, the theory of recognition is "*fundamentally based on the notion of the intersubjective constitution of the subject*" (Petherbridge 2013, p. 147). Intersubjective recognition can be expressed in three forms: love,

rights and esteem. Self-confidence is enhanced when one experiences acceptance by others. Self-respect is forged when one feels accepted as part of a community of rights. Self-esteem comes from being honoured through the acknowledgment of one's abilities (see West et al. 2013). Self-confidence follows the experience of being loved and cared for by one's immediate family and friends, which imbues an individual with both a sense of being someone who has needs which deserve to be met and the freedom to express oneself without fear. Self-realisation begins in this sphere of recognition, the familial sphere. Self-respect develops in a sphere where there is mutual recognition of and respect for the rights of others under law with the assumption that each person is an autonomous moral agent. This gives the individual the sense of being a full member of the society in which he or she has the legal right to participate in social processes. Self-esteem is fostered in a sphere where individuals are recognised for their unique contributions to society. In this market-mediated sphere, individuals evaluate themselves based on other people's perceptions of their achievements. Solidarity and collaborative activities enhance self-esteem (see Boston 2018; O'Brien 2013).

Research context

This study adopted a narrative method in which narratives are seen as data to be systematically analysed and interpreted in order to arrive at an understanding (see Bochner/Herrmann 2020). They are regarded as data to be made "*amenable to conceptual analysis and theoretical explanation*" (evt., p. 19). One important aspect of narratives to keep in mind is that participants have different reasons for what they choose to tell and what they choose to leave out (see ebd.; Formenti 2014; West 1996). These reasons include the emotions attached to such stories, for example, if they generate pleasant or sorrowful emotions (see West 1996) and the role of the context of the narration in determining the story that is told (see Galimberti 2014). It should also be noted that stories tell much more than what appears on their surface, and they do not explain themselves alone. Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to interpret them (see Merrill/West 2009).

The interview with the participant lasted slightly more than one hour. It was transcribed in full and no attempt was made to ensure the grammatical correctness of the speech. Three dots indicate pauses while four dots indicate that a speech has been shortened. Italics were used when the participant was reporting someone else's speech. The questions I asked are indicated in bold. For the sake of anonymity, the participant's name has been changed to Rukevwe. She went through the transcript and confirmed that it represents her thoughts. In keeping with the tradition of qualitative research, this research did not aim at representativeness or generalisation but at resonance, plausibility, moral persuasiveness and explanatory power (see West 1996). I read through the transcript thoroughly and considered the themes that emerged for analysis.

A search for recognition

Rukevwe came to Italy in 2015. She reported that her primary desire was to make money, so when she was enrolled in language classes, she did not attend the classes. Instead, she chose to work as a hairdresser. She later found out that she needed to attend language classes but when she eventually decided to start attending the classes, her boss would not allow her to go because there were customers to be dealt with. As a result, she decided to leave the job in order to concentrate on language classes at a CPIA: *"But end of the day, I finally dropped and I took the lessons serious for just one year."*

Rukevwe explained why she decided to take language classes seriously. Some of her experiences made her realise the importance of learning to speak Italian:

...at the time whereby I was getting some opportunities of jobs, meeting some kinds of people, finding myself in some kind of gatherings that I couldn't even explain or express myself... because I met friends then. I really made lots of friends then and it sometimes, it was like a situation whereby I was in a place...in the midst of friends, I was the only person that spoke English. And some of them even didn't understand, and even when they understood me, but they couldn't

get what I was trying to say. So, I just knew that I had to learn the language.

Rukevwe foregrounded the importance of language learning for migrants, not least asylum seekers. Though she was not interested in learning Italian initially, she came to discover that language learning was necessary for employment and integration. The scholars mentioned above have pointed out the importance of language acquisition for employment (see Andersson/Fejes 2010; Fejes 2019; Fejes et al. 2020; Gibb 2015; Morrice et al. 2021). It is therefore not surprising that Rukevwe's desire to get a job was a strong motivation for her to take language classes seriously. The reason she did not attend language classes at first was because she wanted to work and earn money; dissatisfaction with her first job due to the low pay and the realisation that her chances of getting a better job would improve if she could speak Italian was what spurred Rukevwe to start attending Italian language classes.

Personal aspirations and desires were another motivation for Rukevwe to learn Italian:

...Because I wanted a better me. I don't...I don't... I'm not judging. I wanted a better me. I know it was just through school that I can get it. Just like you, anywhere you go to, you are going to get a good job.

I hope so. Hopefully.

So, you don't expect people that just sat down with a secondary school certificate that doesn't read apart from Nigeria, and you want to get a good job. No. Even now that I am studying, it's still better off than I just went to the course. You know? So, I just wanted a better me. I just knew that the...because then it was into three we were doing. Whatever we make, whatever hair I make, if should make 100 euros a day, she's going to split it into three and give me a part of it. So, I knew that wasn't enough for me. That wasn't what I wanted. Yeah...

Rukevwe's statement reveals her epistemic and agentic self (see Schiffrin 1996). She positioned herself as an agentic subject with a driving motivation for learning Italian. She repeated the statement,

“I wanted a better me”. Using me as an example, she contextualised this statement by disclosing her belief that an educated person had better chances of a good life than someone who was uneducated. Thus, her desire to improve her chances of having a good life in Italy was why she went to school. To her, education was the way to increase her social and economic standing in Italy. Merrill (2015) points out that non-traditional students – people who are underrepresented in educational institutions and who experience structural constraints in accessing learning – believe education is a way to change one’s life. Morrice (2011) found that refugees in the UK saw higher education as a path to re-establish their professional identity. A similarity can be found in Rukevwe’s story: she viewed education as a means for creating a positive identity for herself. This might hint at a search for recognition through education and learning; her identity was shaped by her educational and career accomplishments. Rukevwe also seemed to imply that one’s level of education determines one’s chances of finding a good job. In the next section, we will see how Rukevwe constructed how proficiency in Italian contributed to her progress.

Language learning and personal progress: the connection

Rukevwe highlighted the significance of language learning to her personal progress. For instance, she traced her linguistic proficiency in Italian to her time in language classes “...because in every building, you need a foundation. CPIA was my foundation...” even though “I won’t say when I was in terza media or CPIA, I spoke the language correctly but it was a foundation for me.” She underlined the importance of language classes to her academic progress:

...These are my foundation, how I can speak because before you even go to the university, you have to have B1 or B2 of the Italian language, if you are studying in Italian language.

Her progress might have been difficult without the help of her supportive language teacher. Rukevwe expressed fond memories of Isabella, her teacher at the language school, and described her as patient and helpful. This implies that Isabella was a significant

other for Rukevwe (see West 2014). Rukevwe felt loved and valued by Isabella and she also loved Isabella, thereby underscoring the significance of a positive teacher-student relationship. On more than one occasion, Rukevwe mentioned that Isabella loved her job. She remembered how Isabella helped her design her first CV. To show how highly she held Isabella, Rukevwe told the story of how she saw Isabella one day after she graduated from the CPIA:

...My first curriculum, she was the one that did it for me.

That’s CV?

Yeah, my first CV. It’s called curriculum in Italian, sorry. So, she was the one that did it for me. I would remember...curriculum, it took...the CV took more than four or five hours to put together.

Why?

Because the language...to tell her what I wanted, it was so difficult. To tell her my experience, what I have done in Nigeria, what I know how to do, you know? It was so difficult because she spoke a lesser English, and these were the things that I have to tell her in English and she have to come up with her mind to put it together in Italian because she has to make an Italian CV for me, and Emmanuella was really nice and I remember the day, we walked, we did a march around Milano. We met. The way I screamed her name. it was as someone...as though I saw a unicorn.

Who were the ones doing the march?

Different organisations, different asylum-seeking agency. I don’t really know...I can’t really remember why we marched again but we were so many. Italians, Africans, I think the march was against Salvini or so. The one before this one that just passed. We did it around and she saw me. I jumped on her. I screamed and people were just like ‘what’s going on’ and all that. So, that is one of the good memory for me....

Rukevwe’s narration suggests that there was intersubjective recognition (see Honneth 1995) between her and Isabella. Rukevwe felt valued

that Isabella viewed her as a person worthy of her time and assistance, which made her hold Isabella in high esteem. This point is important for adult educators, including language teachers: finding ways to make learners feel valued is crucial, especially in language classes where learners have to feel confident in order to make progress (see Formenti/West 2018). Merrill (2015) mentioned how supportive teachers can inspire students to keep going with their studies. In his reflection on the implication of Honneth's theory of recognition for adult education, Huttunen (2007) states that the task of adult education is to promote a society where love, caring and reciprocal recognition exist, allowing each individual to develop a healthy self-relationship and work towards self-realisation and flourishing. Huttunen states that Honneth's theory of recognition is primarily about "people's respect, love, and caring for each other..." (Huttunen 2007, p. 432). West et al. (2013) argue that acceptance by teachers and significant others can enhance students' self-confidence, thus situating a loving and caring relationship in the sphere of love since Honneth states that recognition in the sphere of love leads to self-confidence (see Honneth 1995). Moreover, Honneth (1995) identifies encouragement or affective approval as being important in the sphere of love.

Determination and improved self-identity

In Rukevwe's narration, she constructs herself as an agentic person, "...For myself, I will tell you that I have this zeal. When I...Except I'm not energised, motivated to do something. You can't motivate me. My motivation comes from within." She explains further:

I would remember a friend of mine asking me, "Are you a man? Why are you acting like a man? Whenever you see a man doing something, you want to do it. What do you have to prove?" I'm not proving anything. I just feel that there is no limit of what you can attain in life when you are really motivated and you want to do it.

By constructing an identity of a resilient and determined learner, Rukevwe alluded to how she

was able to attain proficiency in the Italian language. Merrill (2015) points out that determination is a trait noticeable in non-traditional students. Despite the fact that she was mocked for leaving her job for language classes, Rukevwe was not discouraged. She narrated that though it was not easy for her after leaving her job because she no longer had the means to earn any income, her resolve to keep attending language classes was buoyed by her fellow asylum seekers' acknowledgement of her proficiency in Italian:

... When I knew that what I was doing was really good, apart from me, for myself, but for others – I don't really think to learn something is for myself. I think I do stuff if I know I can use it to help others also. It was when my friend was going for her last commission because they had given her negative before, and she said she doesn't know what to say, that she just said the story and she could remember less. You understand? So, I was like, "Okay, bring your story written in Italian." I read it for her and I explained to her what she had said already and what she needed to remember since it was her story but I just read it. I read it in Italian, and these were one of the people that mocked me when I was going to the school...

By asking for her help, Rukevwe's friends and acquaintances recognised her abilities and worth. According to Honneth (1995), this recognition is recognition in the sphere of social esteem. This feeling of being valued for her proficiency in Italian contributed to Rukevwe developing a healthy self-identity. She began to see herself as someone valuable within her social milieu. This recognition served as a motivation for Rukevwe to keep schooling: learning the Italian language placed her in a position where she could assist others.

Rukevwe underscored the link between language learning and self-development. Her proficiency in Italian had given her the opportunity to participate in some vocational courses, thus increasing her profile and chances of employment. The development of a self-assured identity is noticeable in her narration:

...If you go through my certificate, you will see that I have gone for secretary school. I've gone

to the course. I've gone for receptionist course, informatica course, which is computer training in their language here. I know the language and I've... I even have some kind of experience. So, sometimes when I ask for job, they want to know the level of your capacity, where they should put you. So, if they have higher position, they can give you based on what you have already put in your curriculum. You understand? Sometimes, it's not really about what you put in your curriculum. you have to live it for them to see it that this is what is really...what you are really carrying with you, so, to say...

Rukevwe spoke of a time when she really needed a job and she saw a cleaning job advert. She sent her CV to the place but was told the job was not for her:

...So, I know how many proposal that has come and they will like "No, maybe you need to look for..." When they see my curriculum, my CV, "Maybe you need to look for other jobs," because of the formation and everything that I have done, you know? Okay, like there was a time I was just looking for a job. I just wanted to work. I think I went on for a period of time because of the books I had to buy, and I saw this cleaning place and I sent my curriculum. They said, "Signora, qua non e per te." They didn't give me the job because...

Sorry, could you say that again?

Yeah, Signora, this is not yours. Like, "I think you should look for other jobs because..."

This scenario narrated by Rukevwe reveals an instance of the recognition of her worth. The prospective employer recognised her worth and advised her to look for other jobs commensurate to her level of education. This kind of experience of recognition has the potential to contribute to a healthy sense of self.

To drive home her point about the necessity of learning Italian, Rukevwe contrasted the experience of those who acquire proficiency in Italian and those who lack proficiency in the language:

...for people that don't understand the language, they can't negotiate. They are just going to be

given, what they want to be given. And some, they even work so many hours without contract. I heard of a girl the other day who told me the other day that she worked more than four, five months for a man that didn't want to pay her. He's paying her 250 a month. 250 a month. That girl wasn't staying in the house. She worked sometimes 9 hours a day, cleaning job.

How many hours?

9. Let me not exaggerate, 8 or 7 above but nothing less than 7. She was really fat when I met her but after she must have done cleaning job, she became so thin, Tonia. She was telling me, "Rukevwe, please if you know any lawyer, we should sue this man." How can you sue the man? You can't sue him. There was no written contract. The language does not help.

She doesn't speak Italian?

She doesn't know the language. She doesn't know the language.

Despite Rukevwe's position that an inability to speak Italian can make one susceptible to exploitation, research has found that migrants from the global South usually experience underemployment or precarious employment in the global North (see Andersson/Guo 2009; Gogia/Slade 2011; Morrice 2011; Morrice et al. 2017; Shan/Guo 2013; Slade 2004 a. 2008). However, this does not imply that language acquisition has no advantages. For example, employers of labour will prefer a person who can speak Italian over someone who cannot. Proficiency in the language also helps a person to read and understand the terms in the job contract which someone without linguistic proficiency may not understand.

Conclusion

Rukevwe's story reveals a search for recognition through learning and education. This is a motivation that has been found among adult learners (see Fleming/Finnegan 2014; Sandberg 2016; Sandberg/Kubiak 2013; West 1996; West et al. 2013). Her decision to learn Italian was about

finding employment and forging relationships. This signals a search for recognition in the spheres of personal relationship and social esteem (see Fleming 2016; Honneth 1995; West et al. 2013). According to her narration, learning Italian was the foundation for other things she has achieved. Already able to speak Italian, she was able to get into the university and also to negotiate employment terms with prospective employers. Morrice (2021) asserts that refugees can be motivated to take part in learning if there is a prospect to acquire higher education. She further states that the opportunity to acquire higher education is crucial for refugees to achieve self-reliance, lead a dignified life and have a sustainable future.

Rukevwe's story illustrates the role of agency in her academic progress in Italy. Once she was convinced

that language acquisition was the gateway to a better life for her in Italy, she was determined to learn Italian and acquire any form of learning available in order to boost her chances of securing good employment. Following her educational achievement, she seemed to develop a self-assured identity and improved self-esteem.

The significance of having a supportive teacher was evident in Rukevwe's narration. She attributed her progress in the language class to the interest Isabella showed in her. Entigar (2022) encourages adult educators to be reflective enough to support the growth and self-determination of learners. The need for teachers to show support, understanding and care has been emphasised by different scholars (see Fleming 2016; Murphy/Brown 2012; West 2014; West et al. 2013).

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Auswirkungen des Sprachenlernens in der Erwachsenenbildung auf das Selbstwertgefühl

„Ich wollte ein besseres Ich“ – die Erzählung einer Geflüchteten

Abstract

Wissenschaftler*innen haben erkannt, wie wichtig das Erlernen der Sprache als wesentlicher Bestandteil des Eingewöhnungsprozesses von Migrant*innen ist. In diesem Beitrag stellt der Autor die Geschichte einer Geflüchteten vor, die an Sprachkursen teilnahm und zum Zeitpunkt seiner Forschungsarbeit ein Studium an einer Universität begann. Der Beitrag geht auf eine empirische Untersuchung zurück, die der Autor mit Asylbewerber*innen und Flüchtlingen in Italien durchgeführt hat. Um zu verstehen, wie eine Asylbewerberin ein positiveres Verhältnis zu sich selbst erlangte, stützt er sich neben seinen empirischen Ergebnisse auch auf die Anerkennungstheorie von Axel Honneth. Der Beitrag zeigt auf, wie die Teilnahme der Geflüchteten am Sprachunterricht zu einer Suche nach Anerkennung wurde und letztlich ihr Selbstwertgefühl stärkte. Er legt weiters dar, wie wichtig die intersubjektive Anerkennung zwischen ihr und ihrer Sprachlehrerin für ihren Lernfortschritt war.

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