

Article

# The Linguistic Integration of Refugees in Italy

Rosella Bianco <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Mónica Ortiz Cobo <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Institute for Migration Research, University of Granada, 18151 Granada, Spain<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, Institute for Migration Research, University of Granada, 18151 Granada, Spain; monicaoc@ugr.es

\* Correspondence: rosellabianco@correo.ugr.es

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**Abstract:** The creation of laws regarding the linguistic integration of migrants has contributed to the change in Italian language teaching, which has had to adapt its materials and methodology to migrants. However, the specific case of refugees has not been specifically assessed, with the exception of experimentation with the Council of Europe toolkit for refugees. This paper aimed to study the linguistic integration of adult refugees in Italy by conducting an ethnography through participant observation and semi-structured interviews between Italian language teachers and refugees. The results of this work show both the teachers' perceptions of the refugees' linguistic integration and the refugees' perceptions of linguistic integration practice. The conclusions highlight the need for more hours of Italian language courses as well as lessons based on specific integration needs. Moreover, this study emphasizes that the integration practice itself implies language learning. A final consideration is made concerning the current integration situation of refugees in Italy.

**Keywords:** refugees; integration; Italy; Italian; education; language

## 1. Introduction

When defining integration, the European Commission states that this phenomenon “should be understood as a two-way process based on mutual rights and corresponding obligations of legally resident third country nationals and the host society” (Commission of the European Communities 2003, p. 17). Nevertheless, the practice of integration is often a unidirectional and assimilative process by which the migrant has to adapt to the host society by becoming part of it. One of the fundamental aspects of this process is linguistic integration into the host country. In reference to this, Europe has witnessed a shift along the years. In the 1990s, the Council of Europe recommended both the learning of the host country language and the promotion of the immigrants' language in order to maintain their identity. However, the current integration policies have put the focus mainly on the acquisition of the host country's language, which has become a tool with which to make decisions regarding immigrants' legal status (Pulinx et al. 2014; Council of Europe 1985). In this sense, language has acquired a role in migration control (Krumm 2012). Within the Italian territory, starting from the approval of the Italian Law Art. 4-Bis T.U. sull'immigrazione n. 286/98, the integration policies require a certified basic knowledge of the language for immigrants who want to apply for a long-term residence permit (Sergio 2011). Furthermore, according to the recent Italian decree DL n. 113/2018 (converted into Law n. 132/2018), Italian language certification is also required for citizenship applications. Compulsory knowledge of the Italian language draws attention to the assimilatory character of the integration process, which is not a prerogative of Italy as a country, but is rather a common aspect within integration policies all over Europe (Catarci 2014; Pulinx et al. 2014; Locchi 2012). Since the attention toward linguistic integration is mainly linked to the legal status of the immigrant, to date, less importance has

been given to the linguistic learning needs of specific types of immigrant students such as refugees (Pinson and Arnot 2007). As a consequence, the language courses provided by EU member states are often not linked to the real needs of the students (immigrants or refugees), hence, there is an emerging necessity to provide courses that cover issues of practical interest such as labor insertion and other aspects of daily life (Fernández Vítóres 2013; Extramiana and Van Avermaet 2011).

The purpose of this article was to contribute to the literature on refugee integration through language learning by investigating the integration practices of refugees and the real needs within the Italian context. On the one hand, researchers have analyzed the perception of teachers regarding the relationship between the integration of refugees and the Italian language courses. On the other hand, they studied the integration of the refugees and its relationship with language knowledge by analyzing the practice experience of the refugees. The analysis of the participant voices is essential to show the real needs and the actual integration practice lived by the refugees themselves, which seems to contrast with the integration policies of the host country. The main results of this paper show the need for language courses tailored to the integration needs of refugees as the existing courses are said to be insufficient for their integration, especially due to the inadequate number of hours provided. On the other hand, from the experience lived by the refugees interviewed, it was demonstrated that language competence is not only a means of assisting with integration, but also the result of the integration itself, since it is possible to improve the linguistic knowledge of the host country's language by socially integrating into the new community.

## 2. Italian Language Learning by Refugees in Italy

In recent decades, the growth in migration and the necessity to certify the language competence of migrants have increased the attention toward Italian language teaching in migration contexts (Locchi 2012; Sergio 2011). Consequently, new needs have appeared, such as rethinking the Italian didactics, providing alphabetization to adults, and adapting the Italian language certification to migrant users (Minuz et al. 2016; Minuz and Borri 2016; Borri et al. 2014; Balboni 2008; Rocca 2008). However, these changes have focused on the comprehensive category of 'immigrants', while the specificity of refugees has not been taken into account. In this regard, it is essential to specify that immigrants and refugees are two different kinds of migrants. The main difference lies in the reason that motivates the migration, which influences the migration dynamic. Immigrants decide to move mainly due to economic or familiar causes. For this reason, they are able to plan the migration and choose their final destination. On the contrary, refugees are usually forced to migrate, often due to impelling reasons (e.g., war, natural disaster, etc.). As a consequence, they have no possibility to plan their migration path and do not really choose a final destination. Furthermore, the legal situation regarding the migration status of refugees is different than that of immigrants. Often reaching Italy in illegal ways, refugees' first period in the host country is spent clarifying their legal situation in the country (which it can take up to several months and years). For this reason, they are usually dependent on the host agency, which is responsible of their first social and linguistic integration. In addition, the reasons that cause the migration of the refugees can have an effect on their learning. In this regard, it must be highlighted that refugees' learning abilities can be affected by the presence of mental health issues derived from life events particular to them (wars, persecutions, violence, etc.) (Delaney-Black et al. 2002; Saigh et al. 1997). Conditions of stress that potentially affect their life routine can also be derived from their particular living situation in the host country due to the restrictions that these imply (Campesi 2011; Kirmayer et al. 2011).

The particular needs of refugee students have only recently started to be addressed by Italian didactics. This is occurring especially due to the first phase of experimentation on the toolkit of the Council of Europe for the Education of Adult Refugees (Council of Europe 2014). This instrument aims to provide recommendations on the linguistic education of refugees through tools and resources designed to assist associations and volunteers who work with refugees. More specifically, it is organized into different sections and contains activities, guidelines and reference lists. The experimentation of

this toolkit is taking place inside some selected provincial centers for adult education and training (CPIA), with the aim of specializing in refugees' linguistic education.

CPIA are one of the main entities providing Italian language courses to refugees in Italy. Other institutions include the Protection System for Asylum seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) and the Extraordinary Reception Centers (CAS). CPIA are public schools that offer alphabetization and Italian language courses for non-Italian nationals as well as the preparation of Italians and foreign nationals to obtain their diploma of the first cycle of the education. CPIA alphabetization and Italian language courses are taught to adult migrants and are structured to achieve, within a 200 h course, a basic language competence of Italian, that is to say, the A2 level of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is the required level for a long-term residence permit (Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca 2015). Such a level reflects an initial knowledge of the language, for which a speaker is able to use elementary vocabulary in order to communicate in daily situations (Council of Europe 2001). On the other hand, the courses provided by the SPRAR system to their hosted refugees count with a minimum of 10 h of Italian language taught weekly (SPRAR 2017).

To date, SPRAR have taught Italian language to asylum seekers, unaccompanied foreign minors, and international and humanitarian protection holders. However, it is relevant to say that the provision of Italian language lessons within SPRAR and CAS is undergoing a change. This is due to the recent Italian decree in matters of security, the DL n. 113/2018, or Decreto Salvini. According to this law, the new protection system would only offer its services to international protection holders and unaccompanied foreign minors, keeping out the asylum seekers and the humanitarian protection holders, categories that have benefited from this system until the Salvini decree. This is because, between the important changes of this law, the so-called Decreto sicurezza abolished humanitarian protection, a widely diffused kind of protection that up until now had granted a permit of stay to more than 20% of asylum seekers (data extracted from Rapporto sulla protezione internazionale in Italia 2017). As a result of these changes, humanitarian protection holders will be excluded from the hosting system, hence from any integration plan. On the other hand, asylum seekers will be hosted exclusively in CAS and First Reception Centers (CPA), rather than in addition by SPRAR (Algotino 2018). For this reason, they might no longer be entitled to receive integration support (e.g., work orientation services, legal and psychological support). In fact, according to the new law, CAS and CPA centers are not required to provide integration services (Galera et al. 2018). Consequently, such changes will affect the linguistic integration. Furthermore, there has not been much information as yet as to whether or not asylum seekers will be provided with Italian language courses. Furthermore, this new law guarantees linguistic education solely to international protection holders and unaccompanied minors, who are the only ones to whom the protection inside the "new SPRAR" system will be granted.

After all, the linguistic education provided to refugees in Italy is limited and generally designed to let refugees reach only a basic level of language knowledge (namely, the A2 level of the CEFR). Moreover, within the host agencies, the Italian language didactics are sometimes managed by volunteers without specific training. On the other hand, although professional language teaching is always provided in other contexts—the CPIA—such centers do not seem to be ready yet to provide specific teaching methods, although they are currently trying to adapt their methods to the teaching of refugees. The material used in these centers is usually designed for immigrants or foreign language learners, and not for the specific needs of the refugees. As a consequence, more appropriate material and methods are needed. Textbooks and lessons should be built on refugees' needs and daily life in order to provide immediate and useful help to their daily needs. For example, Italian language lessons should provide basic lexical knowledge, covering issues such as the asylum procedure, Italian documents, medical needs, job seeking, etc. In addition, special attention needs to be paid to alphabetization, since many refugees come from countries with very low education level and are not alphabetized either in their mother tongue. The current system does not really differentiate between the need for alphabetization and Italian language learning. That is, CPIA provides a 200 h course to achieve A2 level. Of the 200,

20 h are reserved to support activities for the students who do not possess enough competences to begin the A1/A2 course ([Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca 2015](#)). In other words, only 20 h are dedicated to alphabetize the students. Such a period of time is obviously too short for an adult to learn how to write and read. Definitely, alphabetization requires independent and specific courses and surely an appropriate dedicated time length.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The methodology used for this study was ethnography, which was carried out by conducting participant observation and interviews. This type of methodology facilitated the approach to the context and subjects of the research in a natural way because according to ethnographic methodology, the researcher has a participatory role in the daily life of people. In fact, for an extended period of time, the researcher carefully observes the subjects of the research, collecting any available and valuable data for the research ([Hammersley and Atkinson 2007](#)). For this reason, a long period of field work allows for integration in the context of study, hence, it facilitates a deep knowledge and interpretation of the reality ([Álvarez Álvarez 2008](#); [Goetz and LeCompte 1998](#)).

#### 3.1. The Context

The research was conducted in Salento (Italy) in the Puglia region. More specifically, it was carried out within the province of Lecce, which comprises 97 municipalities. The majority of these municipalities are not highly populated, if we consider that 62 out of the 97 have a population between 2000 and 9999 people. Only Lecce, the capital, has more than 60,000 inhabitants. Moreover, due its socio-economic situation, a general depopulation of the area is taking place ([Epifani and Forte 2018](#)) because this area is located in the south of Italy, which is a less economically developed part of Italy and the most affected by unemployment. Specifically, if we compare the unemployment trend for the whole country with that of Puglia and Salento, a great proportion of unemployment can be observed in these last two areas. In fact, while Italy counted a loss of 332,000 employed workers during the period 2008–2016, the Puglia region counted 84,000 less employees and the area of Salento, 18,000 ([Forges Davanzati and Giangrande 2018](#)).

From another point of view, regarding the refugee hosting system, according to the last available data, this region is among the first five Italian regions for the number of active SPRAR projects. That is, compared to other Italian regions, Puglia is an area with a larger refugee presence. Specifically, this region is the third highest Italian region for the number of refugees that have been hosted in the SPRAR system ([SPRAR 2018](#)). In total, according to the data of 2017, the refugees hosted in Puglia numbered 14,452. Of these, 8042 were hosted in the CAS system, 3461 were hosted at First Reception Centers, and 2949 were hosted inside the 123 SPRAR centers for the region ([Anci et al. 2017](#)).

Regarding our research, the study context was Italian language classes organized by centers attended by adult refugee students in the Lecce Province (in order to protect the privacy of the informants, the name and the specific location of the centers are not be specified in this article).

Conducting the research in this context is of considerable interest. The first regards the language education context because language represents not only the expression of thoughts but also a cultural practice implying belonging to a group and its rules ([Duranti 1997](#)). For this reason, analyzing the informants' relations with the languages and the learning of the host country language is a way to study their relationship to social groups, hence their identity formation. Secondly, regarding the geographic context, we considered of great significance the analysis of the refugees' linguistic integration and language attitudes in an area with a high unemployment rate and a tendency toward depopulation.

#### 3.2. The Observation

A participant observation period of seven months was carried out in five Italian language classes at three different centers attended by adult refugee students. The observation period facilitated the approach to the context and the informants of this research, who were the refugee students, and their

Italian language teachers. However, particularly in the case of the refugees—informants can be more reluctant to open up to researchers—a deeper approach was needed, and we chose to also enter into contact with them in more informal situations outside of the Italian language class context. That is to say, the first author, who carried out the collection of the data, participated in Italian language courses in the role of teaching assistant and mediator to observe the subject of study within the formal context of language teaching. By covering the role of the teacher and mediator, the researcher was able to observe the subject of study from the inside and directly participate in the class activities.

The second step of the data collection was carried out through the use of the social media website Facebook, through which we chain contacted the contacts related to one of the informants attending the Italian language class. In this sense, Facebook allowed us to reach additional students and make contact with them within an informal situation. Creating a friendlier relationship and meetings within contexts that did not concern the school or the host agency helped us to earn the trust of the refugees in order to have stress-free conversations. In this regard, it must be highlighted that “interviewing, like observing, is a skill, and requires the interviewer to pay attention to a range of factors, from the interview venue to the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (Copland and Creese 2015, p. 37). In fact, it is necessary to point out that due to the condition of being asylum seekers, the main relationships that they establish in Italy are with lawyers, police officers, and mediators. As a consequence, this situation can drive them to feel stressed and anxious when being ‘asked questions’, hence their answers could be affected by what is thought to be ‘better to say’. While on the one hand, a deeper approach has helped in earning their trust to obtain more sincere answers, on the other hand, it has raised the ethical issue of “exit from the research site after being befriended by refugees” (Jacobsen and Landau 2003, p. 192).

Furthermore, it must be highlighted that a research approach that implies strict contact of the researcher with the participants inevitably raises the issue of the reflexivity of the researcher on the subjects and data. However, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 16) pointed out, “the fact that as researchers we are likely to have an effect on the people we study does not mean that the validity of our findings is restricted to the data elicitation situations on which we relied. We can minimize reactivity and/or monitor it. But we can also exploit it: how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they reach to other situations”.

### 3.3. *The Interviews*

Collecting data from both the refugees and the teachers allowed us to obtain not only a deep understanding of the teaching practice within the studied context, but also a better knowledge of the real needs of the refugee students regarding Italian language learning.

A total of 51 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted for this study, 28 of which were conducted between the refugee students and 23 with Italian language teachers.

The main concepts that were addressed during the interviews with the refugees were their motivation and expectations for learning Italian, the student’s relationship with Italian learning, the use of their spoken languages, the migratory experience and integration process, and, finally, their relationship with the Italian country and its society.

In contrast, the interviews conducted with the teachers mainly discussed their teaching practice experience and their perception of the benefits that such courses can have on the practical life of the refugees. Furthermore, prior to deep discussion on these subjects, the teachers were asked for their opinions about the refugees’ specific learning needs or difficulties, and the training of teachers who work with them.

### 3.4. *Data Analysis*

In order to proceed with the analysis, each group of interviews was transcribed in a Microsoft Word file and coded according to the interview data (Copland and Creese 2015). Regarding the interviews carried out with the teachers, we extracted the discourse inherent in the teachers’ opinion

about the outcome of the course according to the integration needs of the refugees. In particular, we analyzed the content regarding the opinion of the teachers about

- The influence of the course design (e.g., used material and dedicated time),
- The influence of the type of student,
- The external influence (due to regulations and organization of Italian language courses for refugees).

On the other hand, regarding the interviews carried out with the students, we considered the discourse on the relation between language and integration. In detail, the interviews' content was categorized according to the following subjects:

- Relation of the Italian language with work,
- Relation of the Italian language with daily needs,
- Relation of the other languages with integration and relocation in EU.

Following such categories, the extracts of the interviews related to each code were regrouped and analyzed according to a qualitative approach.

### 3.5. *The Participants*

Regarding the selection of the informants, random and non-random techniques were used. Interviews were conducted randomly with the teachers and some students of the language lessons observed. In order to reach more informants, the snowball technique was also used, which allowed us to make contact with other informants (Valles 2003).

There were a total of 51 informants in this study. 28 were adult refugee students who were asylum seekers or protection holders. The other 23 were Italian language teachers for migrants working inside the CPIA, CAS and/or SPRAR.

The origin of the refugees and their spoken language(s) varied. Their countries of origin (and nationalities) were as follows: Nigeria (5), Pakistan (5), Gambia (4), Senegal (3), Bangladesh (3), Syrian (2), Ivory Coast (1), Guinea (1), Egypt (1), Niger (1), Mali (1), and Ghana (1).

### 3.6. *The Researcher and Informant Role in This Study*

Due to the various origins of the refugees, in order to conduct our research, it was necessary to use more than one language. To achieve this purpose, the linguistic knowledge of the first author (the researcher conducting the interviews) was both an advantage and a disadvantage.

The first author is plurilingual and able to speak Italian, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and some Arabic. Thanks to the knowledge of common *linguas francas* of the refugees (English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic), it was possible to reach more students than it would have been if the interviews were only conducted in one language. However, although in some rare cases, the Arabic and Portuguese languages were additional helpful languages in clarifying what was not understood by speaking the other *linguas francas*, the main languages used by the researcher to communicate with the refugees were English, Italian, and French.

However, due to the various origins of the refugees, the knowledge of these languages was not sufficient to allow fluent communication with all of the participants, especially in the case of some of the refugees who did not speak a *lingua franca*. In these cases, as we did not have an interpreter for their languages, these refugees were automatically excluded from the selection; however, this was the case for only very few students. For example, some Bangladeshi students were only able to speak their mother tongue; however, in the case of the other three Bangladeshi refugees, the interviews were made possible by the presence of a Pakistani student that was able to act as an interpreter when communicating with them.

Another remark on the influence of the researcher in the study needs to be made regarding the researcher's knowledge of the area. The first author knows the geographic area of the research well,

because it is the same place where she lives. Similarly, due to her previous education and working experience in the field, she has good knowledge of the refugee hosting system and the provision of language courses in the area. Undoubtedly, this facilitated the development of this research as well as providing a better comprehension about the living conditions of refugees.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Perceptions of the Teachers Regarding the Effectiveness of the Italian Language Courses on Refugee Integration

The language courses organized by the CPIAs, SPRARs, and CASs aim to prepare students to attain the A2 level of the CEFR, that is, a basic knowledge of the language. However, according to the teachers interviewed in this study, in many cases, these courses are not enough to reach this level.

According to the words of Barbara (the names are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity), this was also the case at her school. Despite her school offering 80 h more than the 200 usually offered by this type of institution, the students failed at reaching the required level. She said: "In the CPIA, the course is 200 standard hours, 280 h for those who are illiterate. The final goal is the level A2, as it is required by the prefecture. I would also say that few students manage to reach the A2 level in just one school year, I mean, following the provided 200 h." As she said, many students need to repeat the course, thus follow a 560 h course in order to reach that level. This is an admitted practice by the CPIAs, which allow students to repeat the course one more time.

Generally, the need to repeat the course is due to being illiterate or having had a previous very low level of education. Such situations are commonly found in the students of all of these kinds of courses. For example, Michela, a teacher at a SPRAR, told us of her experience with an even shorter course and said that "The available hours are not sufficient to satisfy the linguistic needs, especially for illiterate students, whose path is more delicate. [ . . . ] On average, for each refugee, 40 h are provided, and, after an entry test, only the lowest level ones enter the courses, up to A2. [ . . . ] Very often, the course ends exactly when the illiterate student has begun to become familiar with the letters of the alphabet and the sounds".

From the experience of the interviewed teachers, it seems that the total number of hours is not sufficient to face the difficulties in educating an illiterate adult student. In fact, the school's efforts are very often not enough, even though both CPIA and SPRAR centers offer parallel courses to the students in order to potentiate their learning. Hence, refugees very often follow both courses at the same time. These dynamics were explained by Giovanna, a teacher at a SPRAR: "I follow the French mother tongue students, I mean those who use French as a vehicular language. In total, about 150 h per year. Let's say that the goal is to educate the illiterates and support the path followed at the CPIA for all those who already attend the official CPIA courses. This support and remedial activity works very well, as an after-school."

Nevertheless, despite it being very common to follow two courses in parallel, such preparation is not enough to meet the needs of daily life, as explained by Marta, a teacher at a CPIA: "Unfortunately, for most of the students, the 200 h are not enough to reach a level that allows them to look for work and to be able to really fit into the social fabric."

A similar comment was made by Giulio, another CPIA teacher, who lamented the generally low level of education of the refugees at the end of the 200 h when entering the course to obtain a diploma for the first cycle of education. He said: "The situation is not easy at all, how can they study mathematics if they can barely speak Italian? Many of them still have big issues with writing and reading. This makes them so slow."

As CPIAs also offer adults the possibility of obtaining a certificate of the first cycle of education, some refugees enter this course after completing the 200 h Italian language course path as successful completion of the 200 h course is a prerequisite for entry into the first cycle of education, as the student needs an A2 level of Italian in order to access that course.

According to the data collected by this study, teachers believe that the hours provided by the Italian language courses are insufficient to allow the refugee to enter the education system or integrate into society by entering the work field. Longer courses are required as well as a different teaching approach that is more focused on the integration of the refugee into society, hence using a more practical approach rather than “grammatically-oriented” classes. Regarding this subject, Carla, a CAS teacher, commented: “The ideal would be to reduce the hours of the formal lessons, alternating them with more practical meetings—also on the basis of the cognitive styles of the learners—perhaps by providing *ad hoc* courses set up on contextualized scenarios of the host community.”

Nevertheless, another common concern of the teachers at SPRAR and CAS centers is related to the changes introduced by decree n. 113/2018, hence the diffused fear of cutting the Italian language courses for some types of refugees (Galera et al. 2018). This was expressed by Anna, a CAS teacher: “With the Decreto Sicurezza everything is unsure now, for them and for us. Unfortunately, we fear that there might not be any more courses for the asylum seekers. It is like all students I have now, after some months, will not follow the course anymore. I will have much, much, less students, and I might also not have a job.” The fear expressed by Anna is a common preoccupation of the teachers that work for agencies that host refugees in that there is uncertainty about the provision of language courses for asylum seekers, which could also imply that the teachers themselves could lose their jobs.

#### 4.2. Refugee Language Competence and Work

Asylum seekers face multiple integration challenges simultaneously. They adapt to the language and customs of the new society, face difficulties in the bureaucratic procedures to be granted protection, and work within a new societal environment. Such challenges interfere with each other, which is the case of integration and language knowledge. When language competency is high enough, this can positively influence integration. In contrast, integration can be hindered when the competence is too low. For this reason, within the integration policies of almost all European countries, language is a compulsory requirement (Pulinx et al. 2014). On the other hand, language competency seems to be potentially affected by the integration process, as shown in this section.

For refugees who work, formal language learning is difficult to access, because they have no possibility of going to school. That is, once refugees find a job, they might withdraw from the language course. In various cases, the refugees in this study demonstrated that at a certain point, they had to quit formal language learning in order to go to work. Ahmed, a Pakistani refugee who reached Italy at the end of 2017, followed the language course offered by the CAS where he was hosted, until the moment he found a job. He explained: “I did not go to lessons from last two months [ . . . ] Because from one month and half I am working, but not regular. Class is three days in a week, Monday to Wednesday, sometimes school also off. [ . . . ] I hope if I will do work with Italian people more and more I will learn much better than school because according to me the major thing is that if someone has no hesitation, he or she can speak, even learn, much better.”

In these cases, formal language learning is affected by the practice of work. That is to say, the student does not receive formal learning because they are busy at work. Furthermore, it must be highlighted that this does not necessarily coincide with the interruption of language learning. On the contrary, language learning is a result of working. Hence, rather than representing only the first requirement to integrate within the new society and get a job, language is linked to work in a mutual process: language sustains the work activity and vice versa.

Although language knowledge is specifically required by laws that regulate the integration of migrants (art. 4-Bis T.U. sull’immigrazione n. 286/98; DL n. 113/2018), the practice of work integration shows that language competence is not always needed. In fact, as Ahmed says, language is learnt in the workplace. Despite having little familiarity with the language, step by step, the difficulties are overcome by the work practice. In this sense, the workplace becomes the place where the language is learnt and practiced. This is also what William, a young Nigerian man, told us when we asked him if he faced language problems at work: “Yeah, I had little bit problems. Mostly I understand what they

are saying. Because I have no problem, as I want, I speak Italian, it does not matter I am speaking good or not, but most important for me I can convey my messages to them easily. At beginning it was little bit harder but time by time I recovered all. Now, sometimes I feel little bit problem but I can understand what they are saying to me and what they want from me. So in any case I am working according to their choice [ . . . ] Actually, it is our daily routine working, I can guess what they are saying in case I could not listen well or understand them. But now I am working properly, I have no problem for any matter. [ . . . ] It is mainly a handwork."

The need for a higher or lower level of language depends on the kind of work that is undertaken. In the case of William, who worked as a dishwasher—a very common job held by the refugees interviewed—this type of work does not really require specific linguistic knowledge as it is repetitive work, so he can usually understand what he is being asked to do.

Nevertheless, in the case of work that requires contact with people, the language knowledge is a plus and can represent a way to improve their working conditions. This is the case of Sajjad, a Pakistani refugee who also worked as a dishwasher. Sajjad, when telling us about his experience in the job search, affirmed: "Today I have asked from four places and I have found two jobs. [ . . . ] I found a job as a waiter. I said: 'I am so sorry I cannot because I cannot speak properly'. [ . . . ] I think this year I work as a dishwasher. Next year I will speak Italian so well, I can work as a waiter". In cases like this, linguistic knowledge of the host country's language is a means by which to find work or to get a better position.

From another point of view, it must be highlighted that being a refugee often means being alone in the host country and not being able to count on the mediation help of other people such as family members or friends when facing their first integration challenges. For this reason, language can represent an obstacle when dealing with work-related needs. This is the case, for example, when needing to understand a work contract, which is not an easy task due to the kind of language used in it. As Mamadou, a young Nigerian refugee, told us, this can be incredibly frustrating and even lead to misunderstandings: "Yesterday I asked everybody for help, I went here and there. All the day looking for someone who can help understand the contract. You know, I tried to translate it but it is written in very hard words. I searched a lot but I did not find anybody to help me. At the end I signed the contract and gave it to my employer. Today, I showed the contract to the lawyer and he told me 'why did you sign it?' I do not know why they wrote six hours, we agreed on eight hours".

#### 4.3. *Language Competence for Other Needs Integration-Oriented*

Although the work context constitutes the main place where refugees practice their host country's language, other social situations (such as going to the doctor, handling issues regarding the asylum procedure, going to supermarket, etc.) also require its knowledge. In this regard, linguistic impediments similar to the example of the work contract are faced by refugees, that is, it can be difficult in other situations because of the bureaucratic issues related to their asylum application. A common problem between the refugees interviewed was the difficulty in having a deep comprehension of the administrative procedures. For example, when we asked Mohammad, a Bangladeshi refugee, how he felt about his upcoming commission interview, he related: "They did not prepare me. It is not good really. I cannot speak Italian, also, well. There is huge discrimination here. Anyway one day I will go to the office and tell them you do not treat equally." It is clear that the linguistic obstacle in this case was an additional difficulty that contributed to the stress felt by the asylum seeker.

Hence, in direct and indirect ways, language is needed for integration within the new community, and is a means through which work can be obtained. This is also the case when getting a driving license. In this regard, Hamad, a Pakistani refugee, said: "The problem here is that if you do not have a car you are disabled. I need a motorcycle to go to work. In winter, you cannot walk or cycle in the rain. Next year, I will go for my driving license. I need to speak Italian well to do it."

For certain, knowing the language of the host country can represent a way to overcome the obstacles that lead to integration. Moreover, situations like that of commission interviews or driving license courses are between the first linguistic contacts that refugees have with locals out of the language

course context. In these cases, language is improved, refined, and practiced in real situations. Hence, social contacts constitute a way to learn the language in an informal way, and for this reason, are as equally important as formal language learning.

However, contact with local people did not seem to be frequent, and was mainly limited to work and a few other situations. For this reason, the workplace seems to be the main informal language learning context.

Regarding contact with the locals, it was very common for the refugees in this study to make assertions like the one by Mahmoud, a Senegalese man, who affirmed: "I don't know anybody here. I don't speak with anybody. In the house, I talk sometimes with the guys, but few. Everybody has his problems. I only speak with my family at phone."

Integration seems, in this sense, to be very limited and hard to reach, since refugees seem basically relegated to their circumscribed community. Although other informants described the locals as welcoming people and referred to daily greetings with them, the linguistic exchange did not seem to extend beyond greetings. As John, a Nigerian man, said: "I think people here are good ... Here everybody knows me, if you go to supermarket and you tell them my name, they know me. They can tell you where I live. It is a small town. [...] I have no friends here, I talk only with others in the camp, but I don't talk about my life."

Therefore, although the size of the town allows people to get to know and recognize each other easily, the establishment of relationships with the locals is not guaranteed, hence, once again, language practice is hard to realize.

Another factor that influences language practice and integration into the social fabric is surely the difficulty of finding work. This is a difficult task in Italy nowadays, even more so in the Salento area, since the unemployment rate is rising and the small towns are consequently depopulating (Epifani and Forte 2018; Forges Davanzati and Giangrande 2018). Refugees can hardly find work in villages and small towns, as John told us: "I searched for jobs around here but there are no jobs. Restaurants tell you to come back in summer. In winter there is no work".

As John says, work availability depends on the season, because during the touristic period, there are more chances to find jobs. This reason contributes to the isolation of the refugees, which hinders integration, both social and linguistic, into the host country. As already mentioned, work is one of the main places where refugees can practice their language skills as well as a way through which they can integrate into the host country. Consequently, for refugees who work but do not have other social contacts, informal language learning within the workplace can play an important role in the development of linguistic knowledge. This is because, as already mentioned, other social contacts that foster language learning are very limited.

#### 4.4. Other Language Competency and Practice

Immigrants and refugees are asked to integrate into the new society by learning its language, thus following an assimilatory approach. Such an approach considers linguistic integration in a unidirectional and monolingual way. That is to say, the relationship of the individual with other languages such as their linguistic repertoire or the need to learn other languages is neglected and not valued (Bianco and Cobo 2019). However, refugees usually own a rich multilingual repertoire, also due to their migration path (Bianco and Cobo 2018).

The practice reality shown by this research demonstrates that the Italian language is not the only language spoken in Italy by refugees. In social contexts such as the workplace, other languages are also spoken. Benjamin, a refugee from Nigeria, told us that in his workplace, there were other refugees with different nationalities. This is how he explains his method of communicating with his co-workers: "I speak Italian when we don't understand each other. There are people from other countries. I usually speak English with them. Until a month ago there was someone from Nigeria, I used to talk my language with him, because he speaks my same language."

Evidence like this is common between the participants of this study and shows that refugees usually have a rich linguistic repertoire and can choose which language to speak according to the context and the person they are sharing a conversation with. They use Italian, but also *lingua francas* or their mother tongue.

From another perspective, it can be seen that the migration path of some refugees does not conclude in Italy. On the contrary, some refugees aim to continue their migration. For this reason, they are interested in learning other languages. For example, we quote the words of Alaa, a Syrian refugee: "My goal was to go to Sweden, but they didn't let me stay (there) because I entered Italy first. Actually I have many friends who moved to Sweden. So, my plan is to reach them as soon as I can. Life is good there. I will live there and make my family there. [ . . . ] I will start again all, I will learn their language, make papers, etc."

As demonstrated by Alaa, learning the host country's language was sometimes not included in the goals of the refugees, as their real migration path had not finished and they did not really plan to integrate and live permanently in Italy.

A final language remark has to be made regarding dialect learning. When not attending the Italian language course as they often have to withdraw due to work reasons, refugees learn the local spoken language between people. This is mainly the case for those who spend their time begging for money or sell items on the street. The absence of a formal linguistic education and the frequent relationship with low educated Italians (e.g., within the market sellers sector) allows them to learn and exclusively speak the local Italian dialect. However, these refugees do not distinguish between the language they speak and the formal Italian language. This has raised the attention of the need for a formal education for refugees who want to continue their life in Italy because if they should choose to move to another Italian region, they might face linguistic differences that might impede their comprehension.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of this study show two perspectives on the linguistic integration of refugees in Italy. The first was provided by Italian language teachers, while the other was given by the refugees themselves. According to the results of this study, teachers thought that the courses provided were not enough to allow the refugee to be able to integrate. On the other hand, the practice of refugee integration demonstrated the opposite. An example of this is given by the fact that refugees managed to integrate in the workplace even with very little knowledge of the national language.

As stated by the teachers, the Italian courses provided were not enough to reach the A2 required level, even when the course was repeated and taken in parallel with other Italian courses. This means following a 200 h CPIA course twice as well as a SPRAR/CAS course in parallel, which generally consists of at least 10 hours per week (SPRAR 2017; Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca 2015). The causes of the inefficiency of the courses were mainly illiteracy and a low education level among the students, difficulties that are difficult to overcome with the course hours provided. Therefore, teachers think that the level reached by the refugees at the end of the course is not enough for them to integrate within the social fabric, including looking for work or entering into the first cycle of education.

According to teachers, there is a need for longer courses as well as a teaching approach based on the real integration needs of the refugees such as practical learning methods (that is, methods more based on daily conversation needs rather than on grammatical aspects). This calls for attention to the need for more informal teaching practices, which could be given inside the workplace by organizing language courses within the work context that are tailored to the area of work.

Nevertheless, despite the level reached by the students, various refugees did manage to find work. Hence, it was shown that their workplace also promoted improvement in their language skills. In this regard, we remark on how informal language learning has the same importance as formal learning. However, the social contacts made by refugees seemed to be limited due to their isolation, the lack of opportunities to build social networks with the locals, and the diffused unemployment in the towns in

this study. In contrast, for working refugees, work represented the main learning context. Moreover, language and work seemed to be linked in a mutual process: language supports the work activity and vice versa.

Furthermore, although Italian language is specifically required by laws regulating the integration of migrants, it can be that in not all cases is language a compulsory requirement of work, as some kinds of jobs do not require much communication. Still, in other cases, language is a requirement to find work or obtain a better job.

Moreover, it must be highlighted that specific language competencies are needed in situations linked with integration and work. Some of these, like understanding a work contract or having a better comprehension of their own asylum procedure are specifics related to refugees. It must be said that as they are often alone in the host country, they cannot count on the assistance of friends or family members. For this reason, specific linguistic assistance and education is needed in order to provide refugees with at least an initial means to face similar situations.

From another point of view, we highlight the relationship of the refugees with other languages, both their spoken languages and those they would like to learn. Multilingual needs are typical of refugees due to their migration path and their migration plans. This is the case of the individual whose goal is to relocate to another country and that of refugees who use lingua francas or their mother tongue to communicate with other non-Italians in Italy. In this regard, there has been no attention paid to the various linguistic repertoires possessed by the refugees. However, learning the host country's language is the exclusive central point of the integration needs required by the national policies.

Concluding, we can remark that, according to the real needs of the refugees, other languages should also be taken into account, especially regarding the learning of languages for refugees who intend to relocate.

On the other hand, the ideal language education for refugees should comprise linguistic integration courses providing specific knowledge about issues like the asylum procedure and the Italian work system as well as other useful subjects like how to obtain a driving license. In addition, courses should provide more teaching hours. Furthermore, lessons for higher levels should also be provided, in order to fully accompany the refugees in their integration. Such courses should take into consideration that adult students have difficulties studying and working at the same time. In addition, working refugees need specific linguistic training related to their work. Hence, the organization of language courses within the work context should be considered.

These ideal practices seem to clash with the preoccupations expressed by the teachers regarding the future provision of Italian language courses for refugees, as law n. 132/2018 does not guarantee any more integration assistance to asylum seekers and humanitarian protection holders, which means that they could also be kept out of linguistic education (Galera et al. 2018). For this reason, it would be interesting, in the near future, to explore how the recent policy changes will influence the provision of language courses and linguistic integration, particularly to asylum seekers and humanitarian protection holders.

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