



The Migration Experience and the Informal Language Learning of Refugees

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Abstract

Due to the increasing migration flows in the recent decades, language learning has become an important issue related to the integration of newcomers in Europe. In fact, the migration crisis has resulted with the creation of new integration policies that have as a main preoccupation the acquisition of the language of the country of arrival by the newly settled immigrants. Lesser attention has been shown by the policy makers about the linguistic background of the immigrants, which often includes a plurilingual repertoire. Literature about language learning is hence now getting specialized in migration contexts, putting its attentions on the language of the new country of residence learning by the immigrants. However, few attention has been dedicated to the specific case of refugee learners and their linguistic background. The aim of this research is to study the plurilingual competences of the refugees and the relation of the refugees' linguistic repertoire with the migration experience. In order to achieve the objective of this research, we have used an ethnographic approach which has allowed us to enter in a direct contact with the subjects of the research in a natural way. Specifically, the instrument used in this study is the in-depth interview, focused on the linguistic biography of the informants. This instrument allowed us to know in deep both the refugee migration experience and its relation with the languages of the migration process. The data collected by this research show that the peculiar migration experience of the refugees, which often includes a long migration process, reflects in the language learning process. In fact, refugees' linguistic repertoires are shaped by the migration experience. On another hand, the possibility to learn the languages met during the migration is related to the experience lived in the countries of the migration.

Keywords: Refugees, migration, language learning, L2, plurilingualism;

1. Introduction

The international mobility that represents our era is shaping an always more multicultural and multilingual world. The need for improving the person's own economic condition and the emergency situations of some areas of the globe are the main causes of the migration flows. In the last decades, the surge became so important that the literature often refers to as the "migration crisis", because of the vast number of humans that reaches Europe after fleeing their own country. Conflicts and instability are often responsible of the surge, which looks like becoming the greatest after the Second World War [1]. The countries of origin of the migrants are often countries affected by wars, dictatorships and, more recently, by the tyranny and terror of ISIS. In our day, the countries that mostly have generated refugees and asylum seekers are countries like Syria, Congo, Iraq, South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Mali, Gambia and Pakistan, between others [2].

The pressure exerted by the increase of the non-nationals in Europe has triggered anti-foreigners feelings which often associate the newcomers to 'invaders', promoting the fear for a 'foreign invasion' [3]. On another hand, the growth of the migrant's presence has gradually induced in almost all European countries the implementation of migration policies. Such policies include laws that aim at controlling the migration flows and the stay within the European borders of the extra-European nationals. At the centre of one of these policies there is the knowledge of the residency country language. The language mastery is required, accordingly to each European country policy, either for the admission into the country, for the permanence and/or for the citizenship application. Both the requirement reason and the language competence level varies according to the policy of each state [4]. One of the European nations that has implemented its integration policies based on the language knowledge is Italy, whose rules contemplate the mastery of Italian language at a A2 level of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) in order to obtain the long term permit of stay. Cuttitta describes this policy as the policy of the 'mandatory integration', which becomes part of the border control policies "blurring the traditional distinction between the two domains", the integration and the border control policies [5].



Definitely, the implementation of such policy can have at least two potential effects. First, this policy implicates an education challenge which can result with a more prohibitive procedure to obtain the legal status of the immigrants [6]. A way of limiting, in other words, the residency of the immigrant in the European country of stay [7]. On the other hand, if the attention focuses exclusively on the country of residency language learning, it can intensify the monolingual attitude of countries like Italy, in which the linguistic diversity and the presence of immigrant languages is treated as a threat to the national unity [8] [9].

Consequently to the monolingual attitude, there is in the literature a lack of studies on the immigrant languages and plurilingualism to which is added a generalised lack of research studies on refugees' linguistic repertoires and attitudes.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that if from a side the international mobility is valued as a precious way to acquire language skills that enrich a university student curriculum and can lead to better job opportunities [10] [11], from another point of view, the refugees' migration experience, which also lead to plurilingual abilities, is definitely not valued in the same way and also suffers from the monolingual integration policies, hence discriminatory.

2. Method

The methodology used for this study is the Ethnography. Twenty-eight in-depth interviews to adult refugees living in Italy have been carried out during a period of seven months, in order to study the relation of the migration experience with the refugees' linguistic repertoire. The origin of the informants is varied and describes the migration crisis that is affecting Italy and Europe. Their nationalities are represented as follows: Nigeria (5), Pakistan (5), Gambia (4), Senegal (3), Bangladesh (3), Syria (2), Cote d'Ivoire (1), Guinea (1), Egypt (1), Mali (1), Niger (1), Ghana (1). In order to proceed with the analysis of the collected data, the interviews have been labelled and subsequently analysed following an interpretative approach.

3. Results

The peculiar migration experience of refugees and asylum seekers as forced migrants consists of a generally long migration period that can last up to several years. The length of the migration is typical of this kind of migrants, which totally differs from other kinds of migration. For example, from that of economic migrants which is characterized by a voluntary process generally accompanied by a safe and comfortable short trip. During this period, forced migrants often cross various countries, staying in one or more of them for a longer period than in others, entering in contact with the local population and learning their language. This experience, often hard and even traumatic, can result with the enlargement of their linguistic repertoire, as this fragment of interview shows:

"When I reached Greece, it was so hard, it was impossible to speak with them! Always when I say 'do you speak English?' they answer 'όχι όχι όχι'. They only speak Greek. [...] I've started to understand something, people were knowing me and started to look for me to give me jobs..." (A.T., asylum seeker from Pakistan).

The mastery of the local language covers in this case an instrumental need and, although at a basic level, helps the migrant to work in the new country.

As previously said, the migration process of a forced migrant can last up to several years, and can consist of numerous countries crossing which can result in their correspondent languages learning, as expressed by this informant:

"I left my country around two years ago, almost [...] I have been in Libya for many months, many months. I had a job but I had to hide, so I didn't talk a lot with them. But I can understand some words, but it is really hard language for me. Now here I've learnt *italiano* and I can speak with people in the street, at *mercato* [...] I want to learn Dutch because I want to go to Holland, I have friends there and I can have a job" (M.C., asylum seeker from Nigeria).

The competence of the language acquired during the migration can be basic and partial, as shown for Arabic in this interview. Nevertheless, all the migration experience is accompanied by the permanent learning of new languages. In this case, which is common to many others, the language learning does not stop in the host country but is going to continue because the migrant plans to carry on his migration experience, ending up with the learning of at least three languages: Arabic, Italian and (probably) Dutch.

Furthermore, the two fragments of interviews here proposed demonstrate that the type of contact, hence the kind of experience, had during the migration can determine higher or lower competences in the second language. In fact, the permanence of some refugees/asylum seekers in a country can be

characterized by less contact with the local population, sometimes for suffering from detention or because of living with compatriots.

4. Conclusion

The migration experience of forced migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, is often an extremely long trip that last up to several years and comprise a stay in various countries. During the way, forced migrants enter in contact with various languages and cultures, ending up with at least partial and basic competences of them. The more the migration experience is long and comprise many countries, the more the migrant can extend his language repertoire to other languages. The refugee knowledge is in fact shaped by the migration experience which, despite the hard realities he has passed, can result with a linguistic and cultural enrichment. The linguistic knowledge acquired during the migration experience definitely improves the linguistic competences of the refugee, who usually holds a rich plurilingual repertoire. These competences should be taken into account in the outline of integration policies that promote plurilingualism.

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