



Policy Brief

First things first: Language and literacy skills for immigrant adults in Europe

Learning to read and write is a vital element in enabling the individual, especially immigrant adults, to become an active citizen in society, and it is of crucial importance for employability and for bringing up the next generation.¹ Especially for immigrant adults, who never had the opportunity to read or write. For them literacy is viewed as essential to the reduction of poverty, to economic development and to democracy, a fundamental human right and a prerequisite to the development of society. Literacy is at the heart of learning, the core of Education for all.²

Question 1: Are there figures of number of immigrant analphabets?³. How can we involve these immigrant adults, who are not able to participate in nowadays society?

What needs to be done?

In order to overcome the problems concerning the lack of initial literacy and language skills among immigrant adults in Europe innovative strategies need to be developed. Still specified knowledge and professionalization in order to train immigrants facing problems concerning initial literacy is lacking. Therefore the members of the European Basic Skills Network recommend policy makers throughout Europe to prioritize and develop an innovative strategy in order to decrease the threat of initial literacy and language problems among immigrants in nowadays European society.

Research shows the sense of urgency

- The international PIAAC³ study shows that:
Question 2: Are there specified figures of number of immigrant analphabets per country in the EU?
- Several European countries face problems of being multilingual, according to the situation of Luxemburg over 45% of the citizens are non-nationals with very heterogeneous language backgrounds and literacy needs.⁴
- Research shows that learners with no prior print literacy differ from literate learners concerning how information is processed and how they perform concerning “school-based” skills.⁵
- The EBSN survey on initial literacy⁴ shows that still not in all countries illiterate immigrants are identified by providers of literacy trainings and that in most of the cases the mother tongue will not be used, which makes the learning process even more complicated.
- According to the ALFIE network little is known concerning the problems and needs of the alphabetized (immigrant) learners and raising awareness for these groups is necessary.¹
- According to the professionalization of teachers specific teacher training for staff working on initial literacy training for immigrants is not provided in most of the countries.⁴

Practice shows the surplus value of specialised programs

- **Question 3: Are there more good practices of education concerning immigrant analphabets in the different countries of the EU?**
- In cooperation with the Nordic Adult Literacy Network (NVL)⁷ a clear description of the competencies required by a professional teachers of initial and functional literacy is provided for teachers in **Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Faroe Islands.**
- In the **Netherlands** a lifelong learning centre offers specialised literacy programs for refugees in The Hague based on their background aiming increase of social inclusion and language skills.
- In **Spain** the Spanish Ministry of Education and the regional educational administrations recognise the importance of literacy training and immigrants have the possibility to join different literacy and numeracy courses.

Results concerning the impact of education and training

- **Question 4: These research results are concentrated on literacy, but are there more research results concerning the impact of education for immigrant analphabets in the different countries of the EU?**
- **The Netherlands and USA:** Adult participants of language, numeracy and basic skills courses experience a personal growth and increase of their self-confidence and 40% - 60% experience a better social inclusion (De Greef, 2012a⁸; De Greef 2012b⁹; Purcell-Gates et al., 2000¹⁰).
- **Scotland and New Zealand:** Most adult participants have better employee skills besides confidence and satisfaction in their job and 60% gets a better perspective on the labour market (Tett et al. 2006¹¹; Department of Labour, New Zealand, 2010¹²).
- **Australia and USA:** Participation in language courses results in a decrease of depressions among participants and besides that illiterate people have an increased risk on depressions and hospitalization (Berkman et al., 2004¹³; Hartley and Horne, 2006¹⁴).
- **The Netherlands:** Adults with higher literacy skills participate more often in education and in some regions 40% of the participants of language, numeracy and basic skills courses joined other courses after joining a first course (Houtkoop et al., 2012;¹⁵ De Greef, 2012c¹⁶).
- **United Kingdom and USA:** Attention for reading in early years overcomes reading problems in later life. Besides this after involvement in language courses 85% of the parents expected better communication skills among their children and 80% was more aware of the need of talking about interests with their own children (Fletcher and Lyon, 1998;¹⁷ Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998¹⁸; National Literacy Trust, 2012¹⁹).

Reflection

First of all research shows us that there is still a significant number of immigrants who lack initial literacy and language skills. According to the PIAAC research results several European countries are confronted with enormous groups of foreign citizens facing the lowest level of literacy skills. Although these groups are a significant share of the European population a lot of countries don't have specified policy or strategies in order to trace these potential learners.

Second not every European country has the possibility to train teachers in order to facilitate the needed training for immigrant adults lacking initial literacy and language skills. Just a few of the European member states provide training for teachers concerning specified education to face the challenges of learning among the aforementioned group of learners.

Third research shows that investment in language courses for among others immigrants, who lack initial literacy and language skills has a positive impact on their social inclusion, position on the labour market and their well-being. Besides this it reduces problems in care and improves contact between parents and children.

Recommendations

To be literate means (also for immigrants) that one has the ability to identify, understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.³

- Policy makers should develop and adopt a strategy in order to increase the awareness raising of immigrants facing initial literacy and language problems in the different European countries.
- Research on initial literacy for immigrants should be promoted and conducted among universities and used in order to develop a needed strategy facing problems of initial literacy among immigrants.
- A systematic system of facilitating and supporting courses of initial literacy has to be provided in order to increase social inclusion, chances on the labour market and language skills among immigrants facing initial literacy problems.
- Specified models for teacher education of immigrant adults lacking initial literacy and language skills should be developed based on good practices like the competence model of for example the NVL.
- In cooperation with universities and train the trainer organisations specialised programs of professionalization for teachers on initial literacy for immigrant adults need to be developed and organised.
- **Question 5: Are there more recommendations to be made concerning immigrant analphabets in the different countries of the EU?**

References

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How to use this brief: To promote initial literacy development of immigrants in their countries, EBSN members may wish to translate or adapt this brief to their own contexts and culture. The EBSN asks you to inform us of any impact you achieve at secretariat@basicskills.eu.

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