

LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION IN ITALY: FRAMEWORK, POLICIES AND OUTCOMES

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***Abstract.** This paper explores the role of the linguistic dimension within the process of the social integration of migrant populations in Italy. With increasing ethnic diversity as a result of recent decades of immigration in all Western European countries, the integration of ethnic minorities has become a major concern of national governments, policymakers, academics, and the individuals directly affected themselves. Indeed, the Council of Europe has been a pioneer in the field of language teaching and the project on the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LIAM) is part of its continuing work in this domain. Linguistic integration is a complex process and can occur in different forms and levels being highly contextual and connected to migrants' and host communities' expectations. Starting from an overview of the main Italian policies for linguistic integration, this study highlights the linguistic resources that migrants need in order to successfully develop a sense of belonging and engagement in the host community. This study aims to understand what shapes, affects or enables the linguistic integration of migrants in medium-sized towns and rural areas. It is vital to define what types of content should be taught on a priority basis in order to develop efficient language programmes to fulfil migrants' needs and expectations.*

Keywords: integration, minorities, linguistic integration, Italy, refugees, education

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Introduction. Language proficiency provides the necessary basis for social cohesion, intercultural dialogue and democratic citizenship. Consequently, it cannot be denied that this has a strong impact on schools and on the development of plurilingual and intercultural education. Focusing on a specific aspect of this multidimensional phenomenon, this paper concentrates on the linguistic and educational policies aimed at fostering the social and linguistic integration of foreign people and in particular of the ones who arrived with the most recent migratory flow. Through a survey conducted at an MSNA Centre in Torre Le Nocelle, Avellino (Italy), the study aims to understand what shapes, affects or enables the linguistic integration of migrants in medium-sized towns and rural areas.

Literature review. The Council of Europe: a pioneer in language teaching. The Council of Europe promotes linguistic and cultural diversity for peaceful, cohesive, and democratic societies. Since the 1960s, it has significantly

influenced language education, expanding its focus from modern foreign languages to plurilingual and intercultural education, including sign, minority, and migrant languages.

The Council of Europe has emphasized the importance of language support for migrants, providing ongoing support: the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LIAM) is a project aimed at supporting language educators, curriculum designers and language policymakers in the arrangement of the planning, evaluation and implementation of curricula adjusted to meet the specific needs of the target learners. Language skills promote social inclusion, education, and employment. Non-literate or low-literate migrants require specific educational needs, such as learning a second language, reading and writing for the first time, or developing basic literacy competences in a different alphabet or writing system. Migrants' language and society knowledge needs are often overlooked in language courses, and they are not provided with enough hours to achieve the required level. From the perspective of social inclusion and social cohesion, the integration and education of migrants are among the most urgent challenges facing Council of Europe member states – challenges which can take more than one form.

The right to Education for migrant children and adults in Italy.

Education in Italy is guaranteed to all minors, regardless their status, and to adults who hold a valid permit. Italian law states that all minors, both Italian and foreign, have the right and the obligation, until the age of 16, to take part in the national education system. This law also applies to unaccompanied children seeking asylum and children of asylum-seekers, as well as children whose parents do not have a valid permit of stay. Once children are present in the Italian territory and register with the National Educational System, they can begin schooling immediately. Schools are not required to hold preparatory classes for foreign children, but some offer them anyway.

People older than 16 with a valid residency permit have the right to go to public schools for adults, under the same conditions as Italian citizens. Such classes may happen either at public schools at night, or at centers called Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti (CPIAs), which are located throughout Italy.

At the CPIAs, adult learners can study to obtain the diploma di terza media, which is often the minimum level of education required to get a job contract in Italy. CPIAs also offer Italian language courses.

It may be difficult to enroll in this kind of school if migrants never studied in their country of origin, and if the center they live in is located in a remote area.

Asylum, reception and Italian language teaching: CPIAs, SAI and CAS. In Italy, acquiring the Italian language is considered a fundamental step to guarantee access to the territory. The teaching of the Italian language is managed through two channels. At the government level, it is provided by CPIAs (Provincial Centers for Adult Education). These courses receive additional support through the SAI system (Reception and Integration System, Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione, formerly known as SPRAR, then SIPROIMI). These courses are offered in smaller centers, conveniently located near the city center or with good transportation connections.

CPIAs stands for Provincial Centers for Adult Education and Training. CPIAs are state schools established by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research. The Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIAs) are a type of autonomous teaching institution, with a specific didactic and organizational structure, divided into territorial service networks, usually on a provincial basis. They offer training to adults and young individuals, regardless of gender or nationality, who have not completed compulsory education or have not yet obtained a final qualification at any level.

The school offers Italian and foreign citizens adult education services and activities, considered as an element to encourage the personal, cultural, social and economic growth of all citizens.

All Italian and/or foreign citizens over 16 years of age can enroll in the CPIAs but, foreign citizens must be in possession of a valid residence permit.

The Educational Offer of CPIAs is mainly focused on three areas:

- language and social integration courses for foreigners (Italian L2);
- programs aimed at acquiring a diploma at the end of the first cycle of education (middle school diploma);
- functional reading and writing courses (foreign language courses and basic information technology).

The Centres employ teachers appointed by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, with specific experience in adult education. At the end of the courses and after passing a final test, the CTP issues an Italian language competence certificate.

SAI replaced SPRAR (System For The Protection Of Asylum Seekers And Refugees), which was created under law no. 189 of 2002 and consisted in a network of local authorities and members of the third sector - associations, NGOs, and co-operatives - that set up and run reception projects for people forced to migrate. The aim was to guarantee an "integrated reception" well beyond the mere provision of board and lodging, but included orientation measures, legal and social assistance as well as the development of customized programmes for the social-economic integration of individuals. The Italian language courses within the SPRAR system were autonomously managed, responding to the needs of the migrants, by increasing the number of hours provided and ensuring continuity of learning during the summer period.

The Legislative Decree 142/2015 (from now on "Reception Decree"), re-shaped the Italian reception system for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of national/international protection. Since 2015, the regulatory text has undergone several reforms. However, the model outlined by the law, which envisions the reception system as a unified structure with various phases but centered on the SAI, has significantly fallen short of full realization due to structural issues. One significant problem has been the purely voluntary participation of municipalities in the SAI network, which has never been properly addressed.

The 2018 "Security Decree", the so-called Salvini Decree, marked a net change in the reception approach, preferring a system based on big CAS centres, Temporary Reception Centres (Centri di Accoglienza Straordinari, CAS centres),

but health care, social assistance and linguistic-cultural mediation were no longer provided. CAS are coordinated by prefectures (the local branches of the Ministry of Interior).

The Decree Law 20/2023 envisaged the same approach, but establishing that access to the SAI will only be granted to asylum seekers identified as vulnerable and to those who have legally entered Italy through complementary pathways (government-led resettlements or private sponsored humanitarian admission programs). Among the many changes contained in the measure, all marked by a strongly restrictive and penalizing approach towards asylum seekers, one of the most significant concerns is that, once again, asylum seekers have been excluded from the possibility to access the SAI system, so that the reception system will return to a situation in which applicants will only have access to collective government centres and temporary facilities, while the SAI will become a sub-system reserved exclusively to protection holders.

CPIAs and Percorsi AALI Percorsi AALI (Alfabetizzazione e Apprendimento della Lingua Italiana) are the Italian language literacy and learning courses for foreigners of the CPIAs's curricula. They were established by the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic No. 263 in October 2012 and better regulated thanks to the Ministerial Decree of 12th March 2015 (Linee guida per il passaggio al nuovo ordinamento a sostegno dell'autonomia organizzativa e didattica dei Centri provinciali per l'istruzione degli adulti). In contrast to the CTP, where Italian language courses for foreigners had been taught as an extra or additional course, thanks to the establishment of Percorsi AALI for the first time this subject has been officially included in the curriculum of the Italian public school. Indeed, together with the Italian L2 courses offered thanks to the expansion of the training offer, the AALI courses seek to respond to the linguistic needs of the growing and increasingly diversified non-Italian speaking users. Furthermore, the CPIAs are also fundamental for verifying the linguistic requirements for issuing the residence permit.

Bringing our attention exclusively to the AALI paths, it is worth highlighting how their recent institution represents a fundamental moment in the history of Italian as a second language in Italian schools: following this provision, for the first time the teaching of Italian as a second language is envisaged as part of the statutory training offer of the Italian school (Porcaro, 2019). However, there are some problematic aspects that cannot be ignored. The first concerns the level of the courses provided; in fact, the AALI courses offer only the A1 and A2 levels: for levels below A1 (mainly Alfa A1 and Pre A1) and for those in the B and C range, when activated, you must refer to the expansion of the training offer.

In 'Some reflections on a corpus of texts produced in the 'literacy and Italian language learning paths of the CPIAs', Igor Deiana, stressed the importance of some important Percorsi AALI's educational and didactic issues. Through the analysis of a corpus of texts produced by migrant learners, it has been possible to identify certain critical aspects and understand their causes. On the one hand, some text documents have showed how these courses are attended by a heterogeneous group of learners in which different literacy profiles can be identified. On the other

hand, the study has underlined the importance of teachers' training and attitudes about teaching students from immigrant backgrounds; in fact, the legislation does not give any indication on its training and selection. Added to this are the critical issues, there are other problems which undermine Percorsi AALI's efficacy: from the availability or otherwise of a location to that of the network and the tools to access it; from the regulatory structure to the organizational one of the individual courses.

Language education and labour market integration in Italy: the recognition of formal and non-formal competences. The improvement of language skills is fundamental in order to facilitate admission into the labour market considered - at governance level and from the legislative point of view - as a complementary element to language training. For this reason, like the learning of the Italian language, professional training is provided both through the Centres that are responsible not only for adult education, but also through the reception projects involving associations of the third sector. The CPIAs can, first of all, extend the range of training offered within the framework of their autonomy, in accordance with the competences envisaged for the regions and local authorities, also making use of agreements that the municipalities or regions can stipulate with other public and private entities (e.g. training structures accredited by the regions). The improvement of the training on offer consists of additional activities, which must be coherent with the aims of the CPIAs and meet the needs of the cultural, social and economic context of the local areas (e.g. initiatives to integrate and enrich the adult education pathways, encourage the connection with other types of education and training programs). For example, the agreements may include partnerships with lifelong learning pathways, vocational education and training programmes (IeFP), traineeships, higher technical education and training (IFTTS) and technical specialization pathways (ITS). These three types of school structures are organized in a network, which is linked to the "National Network of Services for Labour Policies" (art. 1.2 of Legislative Decree no. 150/2015).

Similarly, to other European countries, the Italian adult learning landscape has also been characterized by important changes in the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal adult learning during the last decade. Indeed, one of the main innovations introduced by CPIAs is the recognition of competences and the personalization of pathways for their students. This has been possible thanks to the reorganization of the curricula into learning units (*unità di apprendimento*), that connect skills, knowledge and competences to each type of courses and learning periods, and define the number of hours of classes to be attended both in person and at distance. Thanks to the adoption of learning units, CPIAs students' learning pathways can be personalized based on the recognition of their competences previously acquired through formal, informal and non-formal learning.

The introduction of the Individual Learning Pact is an innovative aspect of the new adult education system, which contributes to the promotion of national lifelong learning policies, starting from the reconstruction of the individual history to the valorization of the cultural and professional heritage of the person. It allows the recognition of the formal, informal and non-formal knowledge and skills possessed by the adult. The Pact is a contract shared and signed by the adult, the

Commission (whose main task is to define it) and the head of the CPIAs and - for those enrolled in Level II courses - also by the head of the upper secondary school. With the Individual Formative Pact, the personalized study pathway (PSP) is formalized for the educational period of the pathway requested by the adult at the time of enrolment. The Certificate of Recognition of Credits for the personalization of the pathway is attached to the Pact. Finally, to increase the transparency of learning and the expendability of certifications at both national and European levels, the inter-ministerial decree (Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Education) of 8 January 2018 established the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as a tool for describing and classifying qualifications awarded under the National Skills Certification System.

MSNA and Italian Education for unaccompanied minors.

Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) are asylum seekers below the age of 18 who are not accompanied by a parent or adult relative when they enter Italy. They come to Italy alone, or together with other children or adult 'strangers', and eventually apply for asylum. After entering Italy, unaccompanied minors are sent to a reception centre that is supposed to provide safety and housing for the children for a maximum of 30 days, according to a new law – providing mainly food and accommodation. The children are then supposed to be housed in a more permanent setting, an MSNA Centre (Reception centre for UAMs) where they will be provided longer-term support, including education and integration. The problem is that there are not enough places for these children in Italy. Minors who in some cases have been in first reception centres for over a year. This of course has serious implications in terms of their well-being, because these places are supposed to be only a temporary solution and not long-term housing. While staying in the MSNA center, minors can rely on various experts to assist them, including a legal expert, a doctor, a psychologist, and a social worker who can provide support and guidance throughout their stay. A centre's interpreter is available to communicate with others in a language that they understand. A guardian, appointed by a Judge, is responsible for them and guides them, often the guardian is the manager of the Centre.

In the Italian legal system, all children under the age of 14 can access the education system in relation to their academic achievements. An initial assessment of the unaccompanied minor's current level of education is carried out in the residential community through the preparation of the Individualised Education Plan (PEI). The choice of upper secondary school is based on an assessment of the young person's expectations and his/her academic record by the residential community's social worker. Information about previous educational path in their country is provided by the education plan, but not always can be confirmed. The upper secondary school path is established based on their wishes and aspirations.

The construction of the unaccompanied minor's identity as a young adult between the worlds of school and work opens up fundamental questions about a school system that, while apparently open to cultural diversity, seems in reality to contribute to issues of educational segregation among non-Italian children, particularly young people who have to support themselves and meet familial expectations. For unaccompanied minors who can access upper secondary

education (usually those who have already completed lower secondary school to the age of 14), the main obstacle is that the protection process ends when they reach adulthood. According to statistics from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, most of the minors in residential communities are 16-17 years old and therefore find themselves unable to complete the "integration programme". Interviews with teachers and social care professionals reveal that dropping out of school is a widespread phenomenon among unaccompanied minors, as is running away to destinations in northern Europe. Despite their period of schooling in Italy, these minors frequently end up becoming the most vulnerable immigrant workforce in the informal labour market. If the minor does not have a lower secondary education certificate, the school committee can decide to admit the child following a written and oral exam aimed at demonstrating his/her knowledge (Article 192, Paragraph 3, Legislative Decree no. 297/1994). However, the accounts provided by educators and social workers indicate the difficulty of communicating with schools, with access often being strictly dependent on the minor being in possession of a lower secondary education certificate. Consequently, most unaccompanied minors aged 16-17 are not eligible to enroll in upper secondary school and usually attend an initial basic Italian course in CPIAs (A1 and A2 Italian) as well as a course that prepares them to take the lower secondary school exam. Based on interviews, it appears that CPIAs are often their first experience of education, allowing them to escape the "ghettoising" cohabitation of their residential community. However, the location of CPIAs in neighbourhoods on the outskirts of city centres pushes unaccompanied minors into a different kind of "ghetto".

Research methodology. This study focused on a literature review of the main Italian policies for social and linguistic integration, with a focus on how language teaching, literacy and second language learning (Italian L2) teaching programmes play a pivotal role for the linguistic integration of adult and minors migrants. A qualitative research was then conducted to understand what shapes, affects or enables the linguistic integration of young migrants in medium-sized towns and rural areas. The research focused on the results provided by a survey conducted in the 'CASA HOGAR', an MSNA Centre located in Torre Le Nocelle, Avellino, Italy. Minors were asked to submit an online anonymous questionnaire through Google Forms, written in English and Italian, about their linguistic integration in Italy. Further questions were asked to better understand their needs and expectations. Staff centre mediated the conversation and helped minors submit the survey.

Main results. The results of the survey highlighted some important aspects related to the role of linguistic integration in rural areas as well as the need of a multilingual approach because of their different ethnicities, but also because of globalization, geographical and social mobility, economic and political transformations, and rapid technological evolutions. Often refugee migration path and migration plans aim to northern Europe. Moreover, they use lingua francas or their mother tongue to communicate with other non-Italians in Italy. Yet, when it comes to language teaching in multicultural and multilingual environments, the impossibility of "one-size-fits-for-all" becomes even more indisputable as multilingualism may refer to different notions

in different contexts from individual and social perspectives (Cenoz, 2013). From this perspective, "every learner matters and matters equally" (UNESCO, 2017, pp. 12-13), which leads us to see individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities to democratize and enrich learning and to "make sure that the multilinguality of every child becomes a part of the pedagogical process" (Agnihotri, 2014).

The linguistic integration at 'CASA HOGAR': a case study. 'CASA HOGAR' is an MSNA Centre located in Torre Le Nocelle (*Table 1*), Avellino, Italy. The Municipality of Torre Le Nocelle is responsible for the project, in collaboration with the consortium PERCORSI CONSORZIO COOPERATIVE SOCIALI and the Social Cooperative LESS. The staff is made up of reception operators, linguistic mediators, a coordinator, and, every 15 days, a psychologist. The legal expert constantly updates the group on the procedural process and status.

An educator is responsible for monitoring school activities and CPIAs path and for enhancing the Italian language within the facility. They also deal with registration practices and training agreements. An operator is responsible for scheduling workshops and activities (trip, sport, shopping, etc.). One operator is responsible for the center submission procedures and for all the issues related to ASL (Local Health Authority) while another operator is responsible for the healthcare path (visits, prescriptions). Additionally, a figure is responsible for managing food supply, while for cooking each operator on duty supports and supervises meal preparation and kitchen cleaning. Guests follow a diet suitable for their age approved by ASL, but adjusted to their dietary habits and preferences. An integration operator handles scouting activities in the area for educational and/or work placements, as well as assisting beneficiaries in compiling resumes or CVs and assessing their skills. The mediator carries out cultural mediation interventions among the guest youths given their different ethnicities and countries of origin.

The community life is managed with the aim of acquiring progressive and adequate autonomy, so the beneficiaries take care of managing and cleaning their own spaces and common areas, making themselves available for guidance, schedules, and tasks set by the operators. Operators provide a cleaning schedule, shared with the youths.

Upon the arrival of each new guest, the internal house rules are shared and read for good coexistence.

The active participation of minors in training and recreational courses, projects, cultural exchanges, and initiatives has allowed lively socialization among minors from different cultures. The cooperative hosts 11 people: 10 minors and 1 adult, who turned 18 during his stay in the centre. They are all male migrants between 16 and 17 years old. Their countries of origins are Egypt, Burkina Faso, Tunisia and Gambia.

Table 1. Casa Hogar profile

Type of reception system	Community for unaccompanied foreign minors.
Lead Local Authority	Municipality of Torre Le Nocelle
Implementing Bodies	LESS Social Cooperative, Percorsi Consorzio Cooperative Sociali (Social Cooperative Consortium routes)
Project Category	MSNA (Unaccompanied Foreign Minor)
Project Start Date	June 2022
Number of guests	11 (1 adult)
Number of operators	9
Number of legal experts	1
Number of coordinators of the structure	1

Source: Casa Hogar, Torre Le Nocelle (AV), Italy

Linguistic Integration and Multilingualism in rural areas. Generally, from the interviews with the immigrants, it is possible to see how the learning of the Italian language is strongly linked to migration projects and to the perspective of a real labour market integration.

When asked why they left their home country 50% answered for work, 23% to join a family member, 15% to seek asylum and 7% to study. They reported that their home country was not safe and that they are mostly satisfied with their life in Italy. About multilingualism, the native languages spoken among the group are French, Arabic, Jola and Mandinka. Only 50% of the group speaks Italian and often they use gesture and facial expressions to communicate. Only 50% of the group speaks English and for this reason the role of the educator was fundamental to carry out the survey, which was written only in Italian and English. They reckon English as *lingua franca* is important to communicate in Italy but they communicate in Italian with local people. They prefer to receive information in their native language or eventually in English. Another interesting data is the number of languages spoken: 5 out of 11 speak only one language, while the others speak at least two languages or even five. They attended school in their home country and they are all attending CPIAs. The educator reported that they have Italian morning classes from 8.00 AM to 01:00 pm (A1/A2 level and A0 level). Nine out of 11 are attending Higher Secondary School, and two students are attending Lower Secondary School. The survey focused on the importance of Italian language proficiency for their integration. They all agree that language proficiency affects their mood and on a scale of 1 to 5, 46% answered five about how much language proficiency is limiting their social life and affecting their school mark (46%).

The interviews with educators working for the MSNA Centre suggest that refugee minors there do not live in conditions of complete isolation but, being the center far from the village and located in the countryside, it might limit local integration. However, projects and initiatives with organizations and other local

entities are promoted in order to enhance social, linguistic, and occupational inclusion. An example is Progetto RETE, REfugee TEams Network, the project through which the Italian Football Federation, in collaboration with the SAI Central Service has been promoting social and intercultural inclusion paths for unaccompanied foreign minors present throughout the national territory. The youths of Casa Hogar, indeed, play in the football team of Luogosano, a village nearby, and they have recently won the regional semi-final and will therefore go to Catanzaro in October for 3 days to participate in the regional finals.

Moreover, despite the low employment rate and the lack of real opportunities for stable and regular inclusion and future employment in rural areas such as Torre Le Nocelle, some of the guests of the MSNA center have found an occupation in the nearby area thanks to ITS pathways. The educator in fact reported that 3 minors, who became adults during their stay at Casa Hogar found job after ITS paths, two as carpenter and one as a welder.

However, the "language barrier" prevents unaccompanied minors from opening up independently to their new situation, and they often count on MSNA Centre staff. On the other hand, even staff members suffer a linguistic gap. The educator reported that the most difficult moment is the first meeting and the explanation of the legislation. Apart from the mediator, none of them speaks the migrants' language and not all the operators are fluent in English. Gestures and facial expressions become thus fundamental to interact and to reassure unaccompanied minors.

Discussion and conclusions. The study highlights the need for more inclusive practices: Italian language courses as well as lessons based on specific integration needs are paramount. It must be said that as migrants are often alone in the host country, they cannot rely on the assistance of friends or family members. For this reason, specific linguistic assistance and education could provide refugees with at least an initial means to face similar situations. The multilingual aspect was analyzed proving that migrants possess various linguistic repertoires and for this reason, learning the host country's language should not be the exclusive central point of the integration needs and national policies. Multilingualism is typical of refugees due to their migration path and their migration plans; often their goal is to move to another country, Italy is only their first step, and they use lingua francas or their mother tongue to communicate with other non-Italians in Italy.

In conclusion, linguistic integration is the cornerstone of social integration and it is not a straightforward process, but it implies various actors and procedures: formal learning and informal learning play both a fundamental role as well as national policies and local implementations. Immigrants need specific linguistic training, with a focus on issues like the asylum procedure and the Italian work system. In a multilingual perspective, also other languages should be taken into account. In addition to refugee needs, specific linguistic training should be addressed to teachers, educators and other social workers who daily interact with migrants.

The importance of successful integration can also be considered in light of the significant contribution that migrants can have in rural contexts. Essential economic sectors like agriculture and food processing, and sectors hit hard by the pandemic like

tourism, are characterised by both a high prevalence of migrant workers and a high territorial concentration in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. A better understanding of migration governance and integration processes in small localities is, therefore, of utmost importance.

Linguistic integration is not the same as other types of integration, as languages are not just practical communication tools, they can also be used to build individual and group cultural identities. Similar to how religion and clothing get involved in establishing social and cultural boundaries, languages are identity markers that are assumed, established, claimed, or allowed.

The changing scenario of the recent Italian policies opens new questions to the future provisions and outcomes of linguistic integration.

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