



Learning language that matters A pedagogical method to support migrant mothers without formal education experience in their social integration in Western countries



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 January 2015

Received in revised form 9 January 2016

Accepted 23 January 2016

Available online 3 February 2016

Keywords:

Migrants

Acculturation

Intercultural communication

Language

Participation

Diversity

ABSTRACT

Background: Courses for migrants in Europe are mostly aimed at literacy in western languages as a means for participation in society. These curricula are not suitable for migrants without previous basic education, which leaves groups of migrants vulnerable to alienation and without support for social integration.

Method: The IDEAL-programme (Integrating Disadvantaged Ethnicities through Adult Learning), which takes a participatory didactic approach and in which daily personal and family life is the starting point for learning, was provided and evaluated in the Netherlands and Sweden in 2011–2013. The participants ($N=16$) were migrant mothers of Berber and Arabic origin without formal educational experience. The teachers shared the same background and served as role model facilitators and social brokers.

Results: Through exploring their personal narratives, the participants showed new insights, skills, and attitudes on the topics of communication, health and parenting. All participants showed progress in language acquisition and participation in society. The Dutch group of migrant mothers reported to use less physical punishment and threats to their children, and to practise more positive parenting skills instead.

Discussion: Literacy oriented programmes for social integration are not suitable for all migrants and do not encourage acculturation. The proposed method offers a feasible alternative, so that migrants may be more adequately supported in their efforts for social integration in receiving societies. In order to advance the future development of participatory programmes for civic education, several key intervention design principles and political conditions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The integration of migrants has been an important policy issue with the Council of Europe (COE) since the late 1960's, with a focus in recent years on linguistic integration of adult migrants (LIAM-programme, Council of Europe, 2015). Language

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skills are perceived as a prerequisite for the ability to engage in relevant transactional and social exchanges. The COE Guide to policy development and implementation states that, “Language programmes offered to adult migrants should be of a sufficiently high quality to give strong support to their efforts to adapt to a new linguistic and cultural situation.” (Beacco, Little, & Hedges, 2014, p. 42). Thus, social integration is defined as a functional adjustment to a foreign society, including employment, education, social inclusion, and active citizenship (Eurostat, 2011).

However, the available programmes, including courses and assessments, which aim at full language proficiency (e.g., listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing), do not fit all populations. Such programmes need further consideration and development in order to achieve the goals of social integration (LIAM Guiding principles, 2015; Parliamentary Assembly, 2014; Plutzar & Ritter, 2008). In particular, there are concerns that standard curricula, including tests and exams, do not adequately cater to functional illiterate and unemployed migrants without basic education (Krumm & Plutzar, 2008; LIAM Guiding principles, 2015). As a consequence, the most vulnerable groups of migrants lack adequate support whilst living in a country with unfamiliar codes and habits, invoking stress and alienation for them and their families. More specifically, functional illiterate migrant mothers, who are mostly unemployed and living relatively isolated from the receiving society, are not reached by the demanding programmes for foreign language learning (Besselsen & Hart, 2015).

Several characteristics of standard programmes hinder the participation of migrant mothers without basic education. One of the problems, as Krumm and Plutzar (2008) argue, is the way legislation and course providers set the same standards for all people, as if all migrants have the same starting point and capacity for learning. For instance, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which describes levels of foreign language proficiency, is often used as an assessment tool, implying that language proficiency should encompass both oral competencies (listening and speaking) and written competencies (reading and writing). Most European countries focus on full language proficiency as a condition for migration and in the Netherlands, the A2-level of this framework serves as a legal requirement for citizenship (LIAM, 3d survey, 2014). Yet, for illiterate populations oral language proficiency is the highest achievable goal. Self-evidently, groups of learners (in the present case, migrants) are unequal in all aspects of their linguistic and cultural abilities and competences. Despite being motivated to learn and attending classes regularly, learners who have little or no literacy even in their mother tongue cannot progress beyond a certain level of second language proficiency. The phenomenon that they will never make enough progress to finish the course is known as “course blocking” (Beacco et al., 2014; p.39). A focus on standard tests and assessments, all entailing full literacy proficiency, therefore leads to exclusion and discrimination of support in efforts for social integration (Avermaet & Gysen, 2008).

Moreover, although researchers stress the need for encouragement and motivation as key issues for successful integration, the current political climate reinforces integration by negative sanctions, such as exclusion, fines and, ultimately, eviction (Besselsen & Hart, 2015; Krumm & Plutzar, 2008). Thus, paradoxically, by providing civic integration courses which are unilateral, limited and culturally singular, the tensions between majority and minorities are not adequately addressed (Arasaratnam, 2013). Differences between individual citizens within the cultures as well as differences between migrant learners are ignored (Jenks, Bhatia, & Lou, 2013), and standard courses fail to contribute to intercultural competence (Martin, 2015).

A recent declaration of the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council (2014) stated that socially relevant functional language skills, which encourage communication and integration, are more important than the testing of proficiency in the target language. Additionally, Krumm and Plutzar (2008) have argued that societal integration encompasses such a broad range of competencies, that it cannot be achieved in a course and in the target language alone. In fact, intercultural competency involves a dynamic and relational process, rather than a transfer between (fictional) stable cultural systems (Martin, 2015). Moreover, research indicates that migrants are more successful at achieving a certain degree of social integration in a new country when exchanging experiences with peers, using their native language first (Witvliet, Paulussen-Hoogbeem, Odé, 2013).

Many civic integration courses are still solely focused on in-classroom teaching in the second language in highly diverse groups of students. They focus on language acquisition and cultural knowledge only, have a fixed curriculum, and facilitators are mainly native of the host country (Inburgeringscursus, 2015), and monolingual themselves (Krumm & Plutzar, 2008). Furthermore, they apply an instructive didactic style, use a teacher-centred approach, a static lesson plan, and mono-didactic methods. Thus, traditional teaching didactics do not take the specific needs of first-time adult learners into account. Also, such courses deny the complex, dynamic and fluid characteristics of culture (Bauman, 2006) and intercultural communication competence (Martin, 2015).

In contrast, participatory didactic methods have shown good progress in learners who have not profited from formal teaching (Rood, 1997, 2010; Chambers, 1994; GRAAP, 1992; Hope & Timmel, 1999). Two key principles of such methods are: learning about things that matter and learning by exposure to different perspectives. By focusing on what matters to individuals, instead of teaching a predefined and fixed model of culture, learners are encouraged to interact with others to explore their identity and the context of their own cultural group, which already holds different perspectives (Jenks et al., 2013; Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Roose, 2012). Consequently, through encounters with locals and exposure to habits and language of the receiving country, other perspectives will challenge the learning process even more.

Well known early examples of this kind of teaching are attributed to Freire (1994), in whose method of *The pedagogy of the oppressed* teachers sought to find the crucial topics that were most relevant to the learners, and challenged them by exposing them to different perspectives and critical thinking about these topics. For inhabitants in the Brazilian rural villages Freire worked with, water wells were an important part of life, but no one took responsibility for maintenance, so villagers

were asked, “Who owns the water in the well?” By doing so, they became more aware of their role and responsibilities in society and eager to learn the language they needed to positively influence their position.

One of the results of such a pedagogical method is that learners will experience progress and be able to redefine themselves as individuals capable of learning and participation. Several meta-analyses have shown that such a thinking-skills approach is a successful teaching method (Higgins, Hall, Baumfield, & Moseley, 2005). In specifying *what* is to be taught, the students' interests and the relevance to their daily life is central (which is in concordance with COE aims, see [LIAM Guiding principles, 2015](#)). Furthermore, much attention is paid to *how* it is taught: the content of lessons and the teaching approach form an integral part of thinking skills approaches to teaching and learning, including playing and multisensory assignments as means for cognitive and psychosocial development, which is an essential condition for social integration in Western societies (Krumm & Plutzar, 2008). Learning methods like these are called participatory methods in order to distinguish them from teacher-centred and curriculum-centred programmes: the participation of the students influences the content, speed and chosen activities of the course, while its main goal (namely, integration in a host society) is agreed upon and crucial topics are identified within the group of learners.

This approach requires a safe and conducive learning environment, provided by a similar-background role model facilitator who by her own appearances and acts, shows feasible alternatives for perception and behaviour and serves as a cultural broker. Forming a group of learners with similar backgrounds is advantageous: for instance, women dare to speak about their bodies and health more freely without men present; mothers share the same kind of experiences in parenting. At the same time, even homogeneous groups show individual differences in experiences, level of social integration, and cultural values, which can be discussed in the safety of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1968). Thus, for these learners, change becomes feasible and acceptable. As a result, learners will take an active part in the course. Programmes like these are defined as “respecting the prior knowledge of the learner and seeing him/her as a co-facilitator of their learning process,” using a “constructivist approach to adult education,” providing support to learners by establishing “clear communication of expectations, and creating a joint model of accountability between participants and instructors” (Jasis & Marriott, 2010; p. 130). Thus, the differences and tensions between cultural habits and values are at the core of the chosen issues, suitable for a participatory programme, which aims to expose the learners to different perspectives. By doing so, the main goal is not the dominance of one culture over another, nor the search for similarities (Arasaratnam, 2013), but the ability to understand different approaches, consider new possibilities and dealing with tensions more adequately and fluently (Jenks et al., 2013; Moore & Barker, 2012).

Surprisingly, although similar participatory adult learning methods are well-known in developing countries (Rood, 1997, 2010; Freire, 1994; Jasis & Marriott, 2010), European and western facilitators seem to be unfamiliar with the principles of this approach, and it is lacking in the array of civic education programmes. This knowledge of a participatory approach to adult learning can be transferred from developing countries to western countries, in order to deal with the identified pedagogical challenges of serving students without formal education experience. To this end, the method Themis was developed from 2002 onwards,¹ and was executed in several small scale settings in the Netherlands (Rood, 2006). In a European context, it was the basis of a programme which was delivered in 2011–2013: IDEAL, *Integrating Disadvantaged Ethnicities through Adult Learning*.

2. Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to present a feasible alternative to current language oriented curricula for civic integration, especially for adult migrants without previous formal education experience, who are vulnerable to isolation and alienation. This study introduces a participatory didactic approach, realised with migrant Berber and Arabic mothers, which contributes to the progress of migrant learners' functional literacy and participation in western societies.

2.1. Programme—general characteristics

IDEAL is a participatory programme, aiming to support non-western migrant mothers without previous formal education in their efforts toward achieving social integration in a Western host society (see Section 2.2). The programme is based on the participatory pedagogical method Themis, which is characterised by its use of creative sense-activating didactic tools, a semi-structured curriculum, and a mother-tongue-based dual language approach.

The programme is participatory and based on the experiences of more than 100 participants in earlier years, the following crucial topics were identified as the starting point for building a curriculum: effective communication with family and others, health and caring, parenting, and taking part in Western society. Within each of these topics, the specific group of learners are encouraged to emphasise certain elements and experiences that matter most to them. Several studies confirm the relevance of these topics. For instance, it is well known that active citizenship is hindered by, for instance, various psychosomatic illnesses, a taboo on talking about physical functioning and also by language barriers in consulting a physician and communicating with native speakers of the host country (Pels, Distelbrink & Postma, 2009; Kocken, Joosten-van

¹ Themis is accredited as an effective intervention by Movisie, the Dutch Research Institute for Social Issues (2009 and 2014).

Table 1

Selection criteria for the participants in the IDEAL project.

-
1. None or only a few years of primary education (illiteracy)
 2. Very limited knowledge and understanding of the surrounding western society
 3. None or very limited command of the language of their host country
 4. Low self-esteem and self-confidence
 5. Suffering from physical, mental, or psychosomatic illness, often resulting in a predominant “illness identity” overshadowing any other possible self-perception
 6. Lack of understanding of gender equality, lack of skills as how to adjust traditional ways of child upbringing to gender balanced societies
 7. Lack of understanding of their roles, as of how to bring their resources to bear in society
 8. Very often social or financial problems in the family
 9. An experience of stagnation and failure, the conviction that a transformation of one's life is impossible
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After: Zaadstra, 2012.

Zwanenburg, & de Hoop, 2008). Also, it is well documented that the children of migrant mothers often experience differences between the parenting practices at home in comparison with the childrearing and educational goals at school and with peers, a phenomenon which is called cultural discontinuity (Lahlah, Lens, Bogaerts, & Knaap, 2013; Lynch, 2013; Priest et al., 2014; Super & Harkness, 1986). Parents themselves experience stress and poor parental self-efficacy because of tensions between their own goals and methods like conformity and monitoring, and the goals and methods of the receiving western society, in which autonomy and ‘positive parenting skills’ are widely promoted (Distelbrink, Pels, Jansma & Gaag, 2012; Rodrigo, Martín, Máiquez, & Rodriguez, 2007; Nieuwboer & Rood, 2012). For instance, in western societies, physical discipline is unlawful, whereas migrant mothers may perceive corporal punishment as a feasible option of showing parental guidance in order to increase compliance (Dekovic & Pels, 2006, chapter 3; Eldering, 2011; van Keulen, Van Beurden, & Pels, 2010; Kleijnen, van den Broek, & Keuzenkamp, 2010; Pels et al., 2009; Sameroff, Seifer, & Baldwin, 1993).

The method appeals to several senses: the cognitive, visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and communicative. The programme uses pictograms for memorisation purposes, in combination with focus group debates, role plays, guided fantasies and many other activating didactic tools. In accordance with Krumm and Plutzar (2008), out-of-the classroom activities are organised as well, like using public transport, a visit to a library, education at a health centre, or talks with teachers at a school.

The fact that IDEAL makes use of a semi-structured curriculum means that the learners determine the content of each session by putting themes, issues and challenges on the agenda that they consider important and relevant within the context of the modules. The programme is flexible and suits the participants' needs.

Furthermore, the programme takes a mother tongue based dual language approach, which entails that participants are encouraged to effectively express themselves in their native language (L1). In this way, they are understood by the facilitator and do not depend on interpreters. At the same time, they are constantly challenged to learn the new target language (L2) in a functional way, mainly listening and speaking.

Two versions of the parenting module were developed separately: a Dutch version, with a focus on a solution-focused behaviouristic approach (Nieuwboer & Rood, 2012; Nji, 2012), and a Scandinavian version, with a focus on attachment parenting (Hyllie Park Folk High School, 2012). Both versions have been translated into English.

The programme lasts an average of three hours per session, three days a week during one year, amounting to approximately 350 contact hours in total. The programme includes a facilitator's Handbook (freely accessible on the IDEAL website, www.ideal-participation.eu) and five modules with lesson plans and teaching materials. Facilitators are trained and supervised during the first implementation of the programme, in order to become well acquainted with the method and its didactic approach.

2.2. Frame 1

IDEAL, *Integrating Disadvantaged Ethnicities through Adult Learning*, has been a multilateral project under EU's *Lifelong Learning Programme* (LLP/Grundtvig). IDEAL was partly funded by the EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, European Commission) and was launched October 1st, 2011. The project has had a lifespan of two years (until September 30th, 2013). IDEAL is based on Themis, a pedagogical method for a participatory approach to adult learning, developed and realised in the Netherlands since 2002.

IDEAL has been implemented in The Hague and Malmö. Partners, involved in IDEAL, were: Hyllie Park Folk High School (Sweden), Stichting Mooi (the Netherlands) and Vantrood Educational Services (providing the Themis method). All organisations are specialised in working with disadvantaged groups and have experienced how traditional methods of facilitating and learning fall short when applied to the target group (see Table 1 for general characteristics). IDEAL consists of five modules with topics that have been identified as highly relevant for this group of learners through focus group interviews in 2002–2010 (Rood, 2009, 2014, see Table 2).

Table 2

The content and aims of the IDEAL modules.

Module	Promoting communication	Result ^a
Getting acquainted	Within the group of learners	Safe and conducive learning conditions; building trust
Family communication	With family and friends	Awareness of distressing effects of gossip; trust within the group
Health	With health care professionals	Awareness on preventive and curative health issues; enhanced body esteem
Caring for myself	With partner and family	Self-esteem and self-confidence, effective communication and dealing with conflict; improved social skills
Parenting	With children and teachers/carers	Awareness of attitudes towards childrearing; effective parenting communication skills

^a Further goals of IDEAL, integrated in the modules, are language acquisition and participation in society.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants for the IDEAL programme were recruited on a voluntarily basis. In the Netherlands the group was homogeneous with Berber speaking participants from Morocco and a female facilitator with Moroccan/Berber background. In Sweden the group was more heterogeneous with participants from different countries; however, they were all Arabic speaking, with a female Arabic speaking facilitator.

Eight participants dropped out, due to personal reasons, such as illness, pregnancy and remigration. All parting participants regretted leaving the programme. Attrition rate was 26.6% overall. In Sweden, five participants joined the programme at a later stage. Overall, 30 migrant women participated in the IDEAL programme in the Netherlands (13) and Sweden (17).

In total, 16 participants (10 in the Dutch group and six in the Swedish group) were included in both the baseline interviews and the semi-structured focus group evaluation interviews. Complete research participation included 53.3% of all programme participants ($N = 16$).

3.2. Research conditions

The group of participants initially showed a high level of suspicion and reluctance to share views and experiences with “outsiders,” not belonging to their peers. They started off with a low level of self-expression skills and low reading/language ability, which was an obstacle for interviews with the (Dutch) researchers. Furthermore, extensive written validated questionnaires and self-assessment scales like the European Language Portfolio (ELP, [Little, 2012](#)), which consists of 19 pages of descriptors, would have been unsuitable for these participants, since they require a relatively high level of literacy.

Therefore, the researchers chose an oral research approach as the core of the evaluation method: focus group interviews on the four chosen topics and individual oral assessments on language proficiency. Supplementing these instruments, the researchers had access to weekly activity reports of the sessions, written by the facilitators on the basis of experiences and life stories, shared by participants during the course of the programme (see [Section 3.3](#) for more details).

Choosing this qualitative small-scale approach matched the method of the programme and the participants' characteristics. Although the method may yield low objective validation, it is of a high quality in subjective profundity and takes ethical considerations of research with vulnerable groups into account ([James & Platzer, 1999](#)).

The central topics of the programme were included in the research to evaluate its effectiveness: communication, health and caring for oneself, parenting, language acquisition and taking part in society.

3.3. Research methods and measurements

The following methods were used to measure progress in language acquisition and level of participation in society.

- 1 Focus group interviews, using a pre-developed set of questions. The participants did not consent to videotaping sessions and were reluctant to speak their minds to an unknown researcher. The focus group interviews were performed in the native language by the facilitators, and notes were simultaneously taken by assistants. The facilitators subsequently wrote a report with findings and quotes, which were coded for the four central topics by the researchers.
- 2 Individual language proficiency assessments. The short individual language proficiency assessments (at baseline and after finishing the course) were audiotaped, and analysed by an independent researcher. IDEALS goal is that women can listen and interact with reasonable ease on familiar topics in predictable everyday situations and short conversations (oral A2-level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, [CEFR](#)). However, for participants who start off at A0-level (written illiteracy in the native language), oral A1-level in the foreign language is the desired outcome. This implies that they are able to interact in a simple way, at a slower rate of speech, by rephrasing and correction, on

Table 3
Levels of participation in society.

<i>Participation level 1:</i>	
1.	The competence to visit schools and to talk about the performance of their children without an interpreter (either a child or someone else)
2.	The competence to visit doctors without an interpreter (either a child or someone else)
3.	The competence to make use of public transport without any assistance, and/or to undertake leisure activities
4.	The competence to visit public facilities (like libraries, sports facilities, leisure facilities, cultural facilities like for instance museums, municipal authorities, insurance companies, etc.), without any assistance
5.	The competence to travel to other shopping areas than those in their own vicinity, without any assistance
<i>Participation level 2:</i>	
1.	The competence to undertake voluntary activities, like the care for sick/disabled family, neighbours, or friends
2.	Or the competence to undertake voluntary activities in the own neighbourhood, like providing support to street festivals, or taking care for collective facilities
3.	Or the competence to undertake internships or voluntary activities in school, health centres, sports clubs, libraries, shops, nursing homes, cultural centres, etc.
<i>Participation level 3:</i>	
1.	The competence to work in the business of a family member
2.	Or the competence to work for a salary in a (part-time) job
3.	Or the competence to start an business venture

After: Rood, 2006.

familiar topics. Language proficiency was measured with indicators, similar to the self-assessment “I can”-descriptors of the European Language Portfolio (ELP, Little, 2016).

Relevant CEFR-levels in this programme are A1: Breakthrough—a basic command of the language, familiar with everyday expressions and able to make very simple sentences. And A2: Waystage—familiar with frequently used expressions and able to communicate in everyday situations. Thus, the test consisted of spoken reactions on daily questions such as “What did you do today?”, “Can you tell me something about your children?” and on the words and sentences used when asked for a reaction to pictures of for instance “sun”, “train”, “fourteen”, “snow”. The reactions of the participants were analysed using the CEFR categories. The categories A1+ and A2+ were introduced by the authors to express the diversity within the indicators, in which the progress within a level implies the capacity to almost reach the next level. Ultimately, more than 90% of all ELP-descriptors at A1- and A2-level for oral literacy (listening, spoken interaction and spoken production) were assessed.

3 Weekly progress reports and a final report were written by the facilitators. Progress was reported by the facilitators, based on experiences and life stories. Participation levels were assessed by an independent researcher, assisted by the facilitators as interpreters, at baseline and after finishing the course, on the basis of pre-developed sets of questions about the levels of participation, and by using a scale which has been developed on the basis of experiences with Themis in the Netherlands (Rood, 2006; see Table 3). Participation includes, at the basic level, the competence to visit professionals (such as educators, family doctors) and public facilities (such as libraries, sport and leisure facilities, shopping malls). At a more advanced level, participation includes the competence to take care of sick or disabled family members, to take part in neighbourhood activities or voluntary activities in schools, cultural centres and so on. At the highest level, participation means the competence to maintain a paid (part-time) job or to set up a small business venture.

4. Results

4.1. *Effective communication*

At the start of the course, the women indicated that they had a lot of arguments with their families on a daily basis. They reported that they often cried or screamed and many arguments remained unsolved. They also reported on feeling tired, anxious and depressed about their home life and personal relationships. Their goals were to be able to prevent or deescalate conflict and get along with others.

4.1.1. *The Netherlands*

Previously all women shared the experience that they did not dare to decline requests from family members (especially husbands and mothers-in-law), even if they were not able to comply with the demands posed. During the course, they reported that they are not put aside anymore, for being less shy and more comfortable with themselves. They felt more able to express their needs and expectations, and to defend their personal interests. They also gained skills related to how to

communicate effectively to prevent escalation. The participants felt that they learned to verify the information provided by family members, by asking questions and not to take everything said for granted. They have come to understand the difference between a fact and an opinion, and were less upset about opinions of others that they do not share. They have become less impulsive in their reactions towards others. During the course of the programme, the participants were improving their ability to raise questions, to take active part in discussions and to discuss taboos, like sexual issues. The women took the opportunity to discuss many sensitive topics that were not included in the curriculum, such as female genital mutilation. They learned to make eye-contact and criticise each other without feeling unsafe. They were more likely to join in activities and personal celebrations, such as birthdays.

The participants reported that these abilities prevent quarrels and arguments. Also, they were more understanding of the Dutch society. The women felt taken more seriously by Dutch counterparts, for example by the family doctor or teacher, because they learned to ask for assistance and were better able to express their interests.

4.1.2. Sweden

The group members developed a bond by sharing experiences, listening and supporting each other, and accepting and respecting each other's personalities. Many of the participants started to reflect on their own lives, needs and dreams. The participants reported that they felt more important as human beings and they had more self-confidence in the classroom, at home and in society. Many of the women expressed that within the IDEAL group they have had the opportunity to share difficulties and joys of life, and as a result they felt much better mentally. The participants have become more socially active at home and with friends. They also changed their attitudes towards their own lives and their families by being more positive. The participants shared many stories of daily life situations, which showed that they gained self-confidence and were able to act more constructively than before. They attributed this to the fact that they practised authentic role plays and discussed real life situations in the IDEAL group.

Participant: *"I was in the supermarket in the line to pay and someone tried to take my place. Before the IDEAL course, I did not dare to speak out . . . being afraid that we would have a row. I was quite shy and embarrassed. But now I was able to tell a woman that she should go back in line."*

4.2. Health and caring for oneself

At the beginning of the programme, the women said that their language skills were insufficient to explain illnesses and physical pains. They therefore avoided consulting health care professionals and if they did, they needed an interpreter, mostly their husband or child. They indicated that this was sometimes embarrassing for themselves and burdensome for their relative. Their goal was to be able to consult a physician themselves and communicate about physical problems.

4.2.1. The Netherlands

- All participants now know the names of body parts and important key phrases to indicate pain or distress.
- Eight out of 10 participants now consult the family doctor for more simple issues, without an interpreter.

4.2.2. Sweden

- All participants now know the names of body parts and important key phrases to indicate pain or distress.
- Two participants visit the family doctor now without any assistance. Before only one participant managed to do this by herself.

All women shared the experience that complaints of stress, insomnia, shoulder and back pains, stomach problems, headaches, loss of energy, feelings of depression and weight related problems were reduced in the course of the programme.

4.3. Parenting

At baseline, participants indicated that they experienced a lot of complaining and nagging from their children. They used disciplinary actions, but felt these were not always effective. They also felt embarrassed about corporally punishing their children, but did not master alternative skills to achieve compliance. Finally, they worried about the differences they experienced with childrearing habits in the receiving country, to which their children were exposed.

The difference between the Dutch and the Swedish version of the parenting module is reflected in the difference in the reports.

4.3.1. The Netherlands

In the sessions on parenting and the final focus group evaluation interview, participants reported that they all became aware of the importance of a positive attitude towards their children. They reduced the use of negative reinforcement and used more positive affirmation instead. They found that it is useful to compliment the child and to listen. As a consequence, they experienced less complaining and nagging from their children.

Table 4

Baseline and final scores on language acquisition and levels of participation in relation to the IDEAL intervention.

C. ^a	No.	Language acquisition				Levels of participation			
		Baseline	Final	Score	Remarks	Baseline	Final	Score	Remarks
NL	1	A2	A2+	+0.5	Can easily make correct full sentences now	2	2	0	Applied for further formal learning ^b
NL	2	A1+	A2	+0.5	Can make correct full sentences now	1	2	+1	Applied for further formal learning
NL	3	A1	A2	+1	All words used are correct	1	2	+1	Contacts with school, doctor, facilities
NL	4	A2	A2+	+0.5	Can easily make correct full sentences now	0	2	+2	Applied for further formal learning
NL	5	A1	A2	+1	All words used are correct	0	2	+2	Contacts with school, doctor, facilities
NL	6	A1	A2+	+1.5	Can easily make correct full sentences now	1	2	+1	Applied for further formal learning
NL	7	A2	A2+	+0.5	Can easily make correct full sentences now	1	2	+1	Contacts with school, doctor, facilities
NL	8	A2	A2+	+0.5	Can easily make correct full sentences now	1	2	+1	Applied for further formal learning
NL	9	A1+	A2	+0.5	Makes sentences, with some mistakes	1	2	+1	Contacts with school, doctor, facilities
NL	10	A2	A2+	+0.5	Can easily make correct full sentences now	1	2	+1	Applied for further formal learning
SW	1	A1	A2	+1	Can make correct full sentences now	0	1	+1	Able to use public transport and library
SW	2	A0	A1+	+0.5	Correct but broken sentences and single words	0	1	+1	Able to use public transport and library
SW	3	A0	A1+	+0.5	Correct but broken sentences and single words	0	1	+1	Able to use public transport and library
SW	4	A0	A1+	+0.5	Correct but broken sentences and single words	0	1	+1	Able to use public transport and library
SW	5	A0	A1+	+0.5	Correct but broken sentences and single words	0	1	+1	Able to use public transport and library
SW	6	A1	A2	+1	Can make correct full sentences now	0	1	+1	Able to use public transport and library

^a C: Country: NL = The Netherlands, SW = Sweden.^b Further formal learning: These participants have applied for education MBO-1, the lowest level of advanced formal education in the Netherlands, enabling to acquire the least basic competences for paid labour (approaching participation level 3).

- They now perceive their children as individuals with developmental needs, taking children's feelings more seriously. Seven out of 10 participants report better communication with their children.
- By structuring their daily activities they have gained time to pay more attention to the children. They also understand the importance of paying attention, within the context of their parental responsibilities: these are not just limited to practical daily care, but include social elements and play as well. Seven out of 10 participants report a more efficient use of their time.
- They understand how important it is for their children to become involved in school affairs, and many now contribute to activities in school. They also visit the schools of their children now, and ask the teachers about the performances and progress of their children, which they did not do before.
- All participants report examples of setting and maintaining rules at home: time to be at home, bedtime, time spending watching TV or using the internet and sharing meals together.
- Participants indicate a better understanding of the development of the child, resulting in less physical punishments and articulation of threats. They also shout less and have softened their tone of voice.

Participant: *"I used to punish my children by holding their hand over a lighter flame, so that they would obey. I have better rules and demands now, and know how to instruct my children. Then, when they obey, I compliment them. We have a lot less rows and arguments now."*

4.3.2. Sweden

The participants appreciated the sessions on attachment parenting and the group evaluation interview, focusing on providing and receiving social support. They described the relief of sharing experiences and how they felt now that they are not alone with their thoughts and daily life's joys and difficulties with their children. One participant shared that she and her daughter sat down to play and how they enjoyed the moment. The participants helped each other with suggestions and support.

4.4. Language acquisition

All participants aimed to achieve a better foreign language proficiency. They were very motivated to use functional oral language in everyday life and practise by role playing.

4.4.1. The Netherlands

Baseline scores showed that five of the ten participants were already on A2-level, whereas the other five were on A1-level. In the final assessment, all participants reached A2– or A2+–level. Six participants were reported to easily formulate correct full sentences, whereas the other used correct words and created sentences with some minor mistakes (see Table 4).

4.4.2. Sweden

At the start of the programme, four of the six participants were at A0-level and two were at A1-level. In the final assessment, the four illiterate participants reached A1-level (and some A1 +), whereas the others also stepped up one level to A2.

Two participants were reported to make correct full sentences, three to break up sentences but use correct wording, and one participant used isolated, but correct words (see [Table 4](#)).

4.5. Level of participation in host society

At baseline, the participants indicated that they would avoid contacts with teachers at their children's school and with western citizens in shops or in the street. None of the women were employed, and experience with formal education was limited.

4.5.1. The Netherlands

The following results were reported (with reference to baseline outcomes):

- Nine out of 10 participants now report more effective contacts with the school of their children. Before they made use of an interpreter (husband, daughter, sister in law), except for two.
- 10 out of 10 participants report effective contacts with Dutch people. Previously contact was limited to Moroccan people only, except for one who already maintained contact with one Dutch woman.

Six out of 10 participants expressed their wish and motivation to continue their education in a more formal manner (MBO 1 level—the lowest level of advanced formal education in the Netherlands, enabling to acquire the basic competences for paid labour).

All participants in the Dutch group achieved participation at level 1, and some at level 2. Six participants now have the confidence to develop to level 3 (see [Table 4](#)).

4.5.2. Sweden

The following results were reported (with reference to baseline outcomes):

- All participants can manage to talk to the teacher, but most still need an interpreter. Before, four participants would go and talk to the teachers at their children's schools.
- All participants can make use of public transport by themselves. Before, five participants managed to make use of public transport.
- All participants go to the library now. Previously, no one went to public facilities by themselves; one participant never visited public facilities at all.

Several participants in the Swedish group achieved participation at level 1, and some were developing towards level 2 (see [Table 4](#)).

5. Discussion

The current evaluation shows positive results after completion of the IDEAL programme. All migrant women showed progress towards independent use of the target language of the receiving country and improvements in participation. Since 2002, the pedagogical method Themis, underlying the IDEAL programme, has been developed and improved, demonstrating the importance of the two principles: learning language that matters and learning by exposure to different perspectives. On the basis of previous experiences and this evaluation, several recommendations for future development can be made.

Firstly, over the years, the programme has been provided to heterogeneous groups, i.e. diverse in gender, age and culture. This practice is promoted by government policies, which implicitly state that more exposure to diversity will lead to better outcomes in acculturation. However, it appears that first-time adult learners experience a lot of stress when exposed to a group to which they do not relate with, and that they benefit more from the safety of apparent homogeneous groups. Twenty-five years of research in intercultural communication shows that culture itself is not a fixed, homogeneous and stable concept, but may instead be conceptualised as 'fluid, dynamic, contested' ([Martin, 2015; p. 7](#)). Instead of being forced to learn under the pressure of sanctions and stress, change becomes feasible and acceptable when learning from similar others and role models ([Vygotsky, 1968](#)). It is therefore recommended to reconsider the assumption that acculturation is encouraged by high exposure to diversity, and to compose classes of the same gender and similar culture.

Secondly, different versions of the parenting module were used. The Swedish version aimed for women to share their experiences and thus become more relaxed and confident in parenting. The Dutch version taught the participants parenting skills, such as structuring their household, paying positive attention to their children, and playing. Also, in the Dutch version, participants came to understand the basic psychological principles of child development. As a consequence, they used less physical punishments and threats. The use of the Dutch module, with a solution-focused practical approach, is recommended, since it has shown to have a more profound impact on the mothers in using positive parenting skills, which is promoted in Europe in order to prevent child maltreatment ([Molinuevo, 2012](#)). Children suffer because of the cultural discontinuity between home and school education, leading to alienation and problematic behaviour ([Lahlah et al., 2013](#)), and IDEAL

addresses these tensions constructively. In 2012, the Dutch module was accredited and included in the Database of Effective Youth Interventions (Nji).

Finally, the role of the facilitator in this intervention as a social broker is crucial. To be an effective IDEAL facilitator it is necessary to have well developed communication skills in both native and target language. The multi-sensory role plays, games and discussions of the IDEAL programme are useful tools for this group of participants. The facilitator should be comfortable using such tools. Themis has evaluated the characteristics of facilitators of different educational backgrounds over the years, finding that social workers are often more successful in this type of work than primary school teachers, the first being more capable to improvise according to the group's needs.

Facilitator: "To speak the same language makes it possible to communicate and understand each other. The participants can express what they want to say, without guessing, and without concern that they might have said something wrong. I have time to listen and I take their experiences and thoughts seriously. I feel that I am a role model for the women."

This study holds promising implications for the future development of civic integration programming. However, the adoption and implementation of such a method is hindered by political obstacles. Legislation on civic integration is different among European countries (LIAM, 3d survey, 2014) and is mostly unfavourable to alternative programming, since most member states have legally binding full language proficiency requirements for immigration.

Dutch legislation states that new immigrants are obliged to pass an integration exam within 3 years after their arrival (5 for illiterates) and migrants are responsible for their education. However, it is commercially not worthwhile to serve this group of learners with language courses, since migrants lacking previous basic education are perceived as 'hard to reach' and 'difficult to handle' (Jasis & Marriott, 2010; Kleijnen et al., 2010; Kocken et al., 2008; Witvliet et al., 2013).

The complications are not limited to first-time learners. Recent research into the experiences of migrant students has pointed out that the current system already requires high-level skills to be aware of all legal requirements, find a suitable course of good quality, be responsible for the course fees, know how to learn and study, and combine the course with obligations in everyday life (Besselsen & Hart, 2015). As a consequence of these policies, participation in civic integration courses in the Netherlands has dropped dramatically (CBS, 2014; *Het begint met taal*, 2014; Menckhorst, 2013). Furthermore, only 1.5% of non-western immigrants who have followed courses for civic integration in 2012–2013 successfully completed the official integration exams in the Netherlands in 2013 (Ministerie van Sociale zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2014), raising serious doubts about the effectiveness of such courses.

European countries show vast differences in legislation and practice regarding civic integration, varying from no legislation at all to detailed legal requirements; compulsory or voluntary courses; language demands for entry, residence or citizenship; and different levels of required language proficiency (LIAM, 3d survey, 2014). All in all, governments seem to take little responsibility in providing the necessary conditions to support migrants, in spite of the Guiding Principles of the Council of Europe (LIAM, 2015). Paradoxically, the focus on language acquisition in European countries may frustrate progress in social integration and fails to decrease tensions between cultural groups. It is necessary to learn from extant research of intercultural communication in order to identify more effective approaches to civic integration.

This study shows that migrants, who have no experience with formal education and who can therefore not comply with foreign language proficiency programmes, have prompted a new design of learning. Intercultural communication requires a much more flexible method than a fixed curriculum can offer. A participatory approach encourages participants to share observations, opinions, doubts, dilemmas, choices and solutions among individuals who are learning to live in a country which is not familiar to them, including topics which matter most and have a considerable impact on daily family life and future generations in the context of society.

Our study indicates that it is useful and feasible to reconsider and redesign a programme for social integration based on these insights. The evaluation also shows that such an approach is not contradictory to language acquisition and active participation, but instead enhances the learning process, even with first-time learners.

5.1. Limitations

This study demonstrates that in two European countries the intervention programme of IDEAL showed different characteristics. Flexible and subjective factors, such as a semi-structured curriculum and participatory dialogue, are crucial design elements of the IDEAL programme. Furthermore, adherence to the programme, which takes a year or more, is vulnerable to influences beyond the control of the intervention. The IDEAL programme is not an intervention which can be assessed with standard comparative or evaluation methods, since it is impossible and objectionable to standardise the precise factors of the intervention which are likely to contribute to effective social integration.

Acknowledgements

This evaluation was partly executed by Hyllie Park Folk High School Malmö, and A. Zaadstra MSc, Utrecht University. IDEAL was partly funded by a grant from the EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency), European Commission, Nr. 2011-3483/518248-LLP-1-2011-1-DK-GRUNDTVIG-GMP.

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