

## ICT for L2 Acquisition by Adult Migrants: Results from a Comparative Study in the Netherlands and Sweden

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*The views expressed are purely those of the authors and may not in any circumstances be regarded as stating an official position of the European Commission*

### Abstract

*This paper, part of a larger comparative study jointly developed by IPTS (Seville) and DG INFSO (Brussels), deals with ICT and L2 learning as enablers of integration and the everyday engagement of adult migrants in both in the Netherlands and Sweden. More specifically, the paper provides a qualitative snapshot of the current situation in these two countries where migrant integration is regimented by opposite policy regimes with sharp differences in their ICT provision (a highly developed private market for the former versus a more scattered range of online free resources for the latter). The cases highlight some driving factors: ICT provide greater choice for learners and diversification of activities. It allows the upgrading of some basic ICT skills for lower ability learners. It permits personalisation and flexibility. It fosters the independence of the learner. Yet again, there are barriers that cause the full potential of ICT to remain untapped, especially in terms of: interactive capacity of the tools being used (ICT often used as a digital transposition of printed matter); possibility to bridge L1 and L2; variety of uses of ICT (using different medias and ICTs). The paper concludes with some considerations aimed at educators and policy makers. First, it proposes that although L2 acquisition is a crucial factor for integration, the level of language proficiency is not directly correlated with the level of integration of the migrant. Second, it reflects on how the role of ICT for L2 learning could lead to a more effective enhancement of migrants' integration's paths in the host society.*

### 1. Introduction: language policy and migrants integration in the EU

Proficiency in L2 is a key factor of migrants' integration [1] as underlined in the fourth of the Common Basic Principles on Integration agreed by all EU Member States [2].

Given the significant growth of immigration over the past decade, most EU countries have introduced language policies which typically combine three types of measures: specific requirements of L2 competence (based on CEFR levels) and 'knowledge of society' (KOS) as a formal condition to acquire specific rights; provision of official L2-KOS courses; and L2-KOS tests.

A recent survey by the Council of Europe [3] shows that in 63% of EU countries (17 over 27) immigration and integration regulations foresee linguistic requirements for granting citizenship (15/17 countries) and for permanent residency (12/17). Seven Member States from Central and Northern Europe also put L2 requirements on new migrants to enter the country. The expected L2 proficiency varies from CEFR levels A1-/A1/A1.1 for entry to the country, to A1/A2/B1 for residency and B1/B2 for citizenship, with significant variation across countries. Almost all EU countries provide official language courses, mostly for free. These are compulsory in 7 countries, whereas L2 tests are obligatory in 13 countries.



This policy evolution has created the need to deliver L2 courses and tests to large numbers of migrants: 60,000 people per year in the Netherlands [4]; 120,000 people annually in Germany; 20,000 prescribed annually L2 courses in France. This entails also high budgets: the Netherlands spent 260 M€ in 2009 on the new Civic Integration Act and Germany spent 174 M€ in 2008 on integration courses [5].

Facing this challenge, in a growing number of countries ICT are looked at to support a more efficient and effective L2 tuition of adult migrants. However, very little is known about the use and impact of technologies for L2 adult learning. JRC-IPTS thus launched an exploratory study focused on two countries, Netherlands and Sweden, to explore ICT-related initiatives for L2 learning and to identify policy measures needed to enhance their contribution. The Netherlands were chosen for the presence of several innovative ICT initiatives and its long-established (and strict) language policy. Sweden, on the other hand, does not put strong language requirements on migrants (except for accessing welfare support), but has nevertheless developed a public language training system for adult migrants where ICT are also used. This paper summarizes the main findings of this study (other publications from it are available at the URL <http://is.jrc.ec.europa.eu/pages/EAP/ICT-IEML2.html>).

## 2. Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature and used an interpretive ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis [6]; [7]. It singled out five case studies of ICT use in L2 tuition of adult migrants in formal settings (three for the Netherlands and two for Sweden) all of which have investigated the beneficial and detrimental changes associated with ICT use. The five case studies reflect the differences in ICT provision identified through preliminary desk research and experts interviews in the two countries. In the Netherlands, L2 methods typically foresee an ICT component as a consequence of the character of the compulsory national exam, whose central component is entirely administered in a digital form. These ICT components range from very specific applications to all-encompassing complete courses. The Swedish landscape is rather characterised by a less diversified supply, mainly of web-based course materials available free of charge. As illustrated later, the case studies also cover a diverse range of situations in terms of approaches and conditions of ICT use in the classroom, and of types of learners' educational background and socio-economic status.

Access to the classroom was agreed with the teachers to interview them and their students. All students were informed in advance of the visit and interviews were conducted in Dutch and Swedish, though students could switch to English if they wished. Field notes were written in a synoptic format, and then the audio recordings of the teachers and students interviews were listened to and annotated. In so doing, categories emerged from the data and shed light on the research questions. This data reduction operation aimed to identify key concepts that would highlight the drivers, advantages and barriers of ICT use in L2 learning. Further, key episodes of ICT-enabled L2 language learning were isolated from the data to explore how migrants learn on their own, and/or by interacting with the teacher and peers. These episodes were later presented to and discussed with the teachers so to gain further insights and their validation. The analysis and interpretation that followed were then presented to the research team to achieve also internal validation.

## 3. The case studies

Three case studies were conducted in the Netherlands and two in Sweden. The Dutch case studies cover three types of situations:

- 'mature' ICT applications that are used for L2 learning in many locations;
- innovative applications already used on a significant scale;

- applications that are innovative but not yet widely used.

Case 1 looked at *IJsbreker* (Ice breaker), a widely used method which includes an ICT application whose underlying principles are try – error – feedback – repetition. *IJsbreker* is meant for a group of learners under the guidance of a teacher. Half of the learning time should be dedicated to self directed learning on a PC. In the remaining time, learners should use a workbook under the guidance of a teacher. Half of this time (so 25% of the total) should be dedicated to group activities where L2 speaking is the main goal, as speaking/spoken interaction is hardly possible with the ICT component. Case 2 focused on the *Virtuele Wijk* (Virtual Neighbourhood), an application which simulates interactions in real life situations such as the post office, bank, school etc.. Learning Dutch as L2 in this application is only a secondary aim. Case 3 focused on the retrospective experience of a teacher and her students that have worked with the *NT2-Nieuwslezer* (Dutch as a Second Language News Reader). This ICT software first measures through a test a user's L2 proficiency and requests his/her preferred topics. Based on these elements it selects and downloads from online newspapers the latest news which match the user's L2 capabilities and thematic interests. *NT2-Nieuwslezer* is thus a specific tool for improving reading skills and expanding the learner's vocabulary. It is meant for individual use and has no strict learning path.

The two case studies in Sweden looked at different groups of learners (by educational background and social status) and ways of using ICT in L2 learning. The first case study observed two classes who made use of the website *Kreativ Pedagogik* (Creative pedagogy) and were attended by learners with little exposure to Swedish society, lower income and a previous limited or medium educational attainment. *Kreativ Pedagogik* is a free-of-charge, easy-to-use website providing a wealth of materials for an audience with diverse language proficiency. Its simple design allows easy navigation even to those with limited digital skills. In the case study it was used as a support to the mainstream work which was based on paper and books. The second case study involved two classes where the learners met the teacher once a week and worked independently on the computer between lessons, using a learning platform called *Fronter* and material from the website *Digitala spåret* (The digital track). These offer a great variety of activities and materials for all levels of proficiency and allow learners to work and progress at their own pace. Learners in this case have a daytime job, medium to higher education and some previous familiarity with ICT.

#### 4. Findings: ICT appropriation, benefits and drawbacks

Evidence from our cases shows that learners have much diverse attitudes towards ICT: from trying to use a computer as often as possible to trying to avoid it, women being usually more reluctant users than men. In general, the learners observed in our case studies tend to have few problems with the **access and use** of a PC and understanding the ICT applications for L2 learning. Predictably however the applications' design and complexity do make a difference, along with the education background of the users. For instance, none of the 15 interviewed users of *IJsbreker* and none of the learners using *Fronter* reported any problem in this respect. Some users of *NT2-Nieuwslezer* found it too difficult, and even the teacher could not help them solve their problems. Only one highly educated learner was fully autonomous and very happy with this tool. In the first Swedish case study, despite high usability of the *Kreativ pedagogik* website, all teachers signalled the difficulties of learners with limited educational background and digital competences and that building ICT skills might go at the expenses of language learning. Nevertheless, in one of these classes teachers explicitly aimed to develop ICT literacy. In the second Swedish case study, where digital literacy was a pre-requisite for enrolment in the course, the first two weeks were dedicated to familiarising with the platform and its functionality in order to allow all learners to work independently from home. Both interviewed teachers agreed that the main disadvantage of this application was its complexity, preventing learners with low digital skills to enrol to the course.

The learners' past educational attainments seem to affect their usage modality and outcomes, for instance a more or less intensive use at home and the capacity to fully exploit the tools according to their specific language needs. Strong users motivations (regardless of education background) were also found important in this respect (*IJsbreker* case). Besides digital skills, basic language skills and understanding of the remedy instructions given by the teacher also came up clearly as a prerequisite to make effective use of ICT (*IJsbreker* case).

The main **benefits** associated with the observed ICT applications can be summarized as follows: the possibility to engage in language learning also at home; the possibility to have more individualised learning; the possibility to be exposed in a protected way (through simulation and/or access to online content) to real life situations and the ensuing empowering and emancipation effects especially among female students.

According to teachers, the use of ICT allowed for differentiation and individualisation of classroom activities, as these can be planned and tailored according to individual skills and needs with the support of the PC, as an alternative to the work done with the teacher. ICT also provide more flexibility, as learners can work independently and from a wide range of materials and resources. The possibility for learners to have extra learning time on specific ICT-supported tasks is also highly appreciated.

Concerning the **shortcomings**, besides the already mentioned need to have basic digital and L2 capabilities, the most recurrent limit of ICT is seen in the poor development of speaking skills: talking activities are limited to pronunciation drills and do not allow real communication. This came up strongly with the *Virtuele Wijk* application, much appreciated by the learners for being exposed to real life situations, but criticized for the lack of any possibility to practice their speaking skills. For the same reason (lack of support to spoken interaction from the online platform) and because of contact time limitations, teachers from the second Swedish case study decided to devote most of the classroom activity to speaking practice. Especially for pronunciation and intonation, students relied heavily on the feedback of the teacher. As one teacher reported: "They don't want to learn it the wrong way and get stuck with it". The *NT2-Nieuwslezer* case highlighted how teachers may have wrong expectations towards ICT, believing that it could support speaking practice. As a consequence, they find it difficult to incorporate this type of tool in their lessons and lack the knowledge on how to use it for different learner levels. Teachers were also found (*IJsbreker* and *Kreativ Pedagogik*) to lack institutional support, training and investment when trying out new ICT applications.

## 5. Conclusions

Facing recent language policy trends, ICT are likely to be increasingly called upon to address the challenge of a growing demand for L2 tuition and testing of adult migrants and ever stricter public budgetary constraints. ICT can help to manage the large numbers at play (of students, courses, tests), but they can also help to manage the individualisation of learning which seems particularly important for this highly varied target population. Our case studies show that many ICT solutions are indeed already available and working. Those designed to expose the learner, albeit virtually, to real-life situations and content seem to be much appreciated. No one solution, however, seems to fit all needs. In particular, people with low literacy and limited digital competence clearly represent the greatest challenge. On the other hand, jointly developing digital literacy and L2 capabilities seems an important opportunity for this target group, with relevant empowerment implications for women. The current major shortcoming of ICT in this context concerns the development of speaking skills which are poorly supported. More efforts in technological development to better support speaking skills are therefore needed. Blended solutions seems however to be the best practice, as they provide a balance of



classroom work and autonomous and distant ICT-supported learning. Social contact with teachers and peers is highly beneficial for migrants' integration, beyond L2 learning implications

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