

INTEGRATION TRAINING PARTICIPANTS AS A COMMUNITY LANGUAGE PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES IN A MULTILINGUAL WORK AND EVERYDAY LIFE ENVIRONMENT

Formal integration courses focus on the tuition and learning of language skills in Finnish, but the informal aspects, such as time spent between classes and possible bonds created among participants, are important factors to consider in viewing integration in a more inclusive and holistic way.

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The integration training and integration process in Finland are often a community-building experience for participants through shared experiences and challenges. In this article, I ask the question: what kind of language practices and strategies do the participants of the integration training use in their first steps in working and everyday life in Finland? I argue that the integration process, even though it aims to support learning the Finnish language and customs, is also a time of strengthening multilingual skills and building a community from which people of immigrant backgrounds function later in Finland. For this reason, the time between classes, during joint internships, and during leisure time is often just as important from the point of view of the integration process as the language classes themselves. The data consists of an autoethnographic field diary collected during integration training in 2021–2022 and ethnographic interviews with participants whose first year of integration training ended but were still customers of the integration process through vocational or further language training (2023). This article focuses on concepts of integration and the (non-)empowerment of multilingual communities. The study examines the strengths of immigrant Communities of Practice (CoPs) formed based on shared experiences in Finland, rather than on the nationality or origin of individuals.

Introduction

The dichotomy between migrants and the local community, often framed as an "us vs. them" narrative (Wodak 2011), maintains a perception that migrants exist as isolated individuals in need of assimilation into the broader Finnish societal fabric. The dominant narrative highlights the notion of migrants as outsiders who need to be integrated into the established social order and places the responsibility for integration exclusively on the migrant population.

This article explores the dynamics of language acquisition and community building within Finnish integration training. I focus on the language practices, experiences, and strategies of people of immigrant background in Finland who are a part of the official integration process (*kotoutuminen*) and participants of the integration language and working life training (*kotoutumiskoulutus*) organized by The Employment and Economic Development Office (*Työ- ja elinkeinotoimisto*). While integration training is commonly thought to primarily serve as a conduit for mastering the Finnish language and cultural norms, I argue that this

training also serves as an incubator for the cultivation of multilingual skills and the establishment of resilient community bonds.

I explore the relationship between language acquisition, community formation, and the integration process. The research draws on autoethnographic field diaries collected during integration training from 2021 to 2022 and ethnographic interviews conducted during subsequent stages of the integration process in 2023. I highlight the important role of informal interactions, both inside and outside the classroom, in shaping the integration experience. Drawing on Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's (1991) concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs) meaning local communities jointly constructed based on their everyday practices, I apply it to the participants of integration training to emphasize the resilience and cohesion present in multilingual communities formed based on shared experiences, rather than on individual nationality or origin.

As defined by Tuuli Kurki in their doctoral dissertation (2019, 63), immigrantization is the process of social construction of migrant subjectivities through integration and educational practices. The process involves homogenizing individuals from diverse backgrounds into a single group, known as migrants, which omits the multiplicity of their individual identities (Kurki 2019). Building on the foundation of this concept, I advocate in this article to reconceptualize the immigrant community, with a focus on individuals participating in the Finnish integration process, as a locally relevant and connected community. Rather than defining identity solely through national and ethnic origin or otherness, I look at the local immigrant communities as communities formed around shared experiences and practices. Through this perspective, I include individuals of diverse nationalities, including Finnish nationals, who are connected through common activities and interactions in the local context. I acknowledge the agency and contributions of individuals within the immigrant community and emphasize their active participation in shaping local social dynamics and cultural landscapes. In this article, I look at a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of community formation and integration possibilities within the Finnish context.

Integration training in Finland is currently the most extensive systematic tool to facilitate the societal integration of immigrants (Opetushallitus 2022). These trainings typically focus on language acquisition, cultural orientation, and practical skills useful for everyday and working life in Finland (Opetushallitus 2022). During the training, partic-



ipants take part in language, society, and history lessons and go on trips to forests, museums, and job expos. The main language practice happens within the group and with the teachers. A big part of the integration training is low-threshold job internships. Additionally, integration training includes modules on Finnish laws, working life, and institutions. It can also include optional studies that are curated towards an individual's vocational training or needs (Opetushallitus 2022, 47).

Integration: from a broader context to Finland

The concept of integration, particularly in the context of migration and resettlement, has undergone significant scrutiny and reevaluation in recent decades. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the prevailing discourse on integration was still dominated by assimilation theory, which advocated for immigrants to conform to the values, culture, and behaviors of mainstream society (Kivisto 2021). However, this approach became increasingly contested as researchers began to recognize its limitations and inherent biases (Kivisto 2021).

Despite advancements in conceptualizing integration, the term itself remains ambiguous and subject to diverse interpretations. The involvement and inclusion of migrants in the host society are commonly taken as the definition of integration (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018). Integration is often seen as a dynamic, reciprocal process that creates mutually beneficial attitudes, cooperation, and acceptance between people (Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx 2016). Bucken-Knapp, Omanovic, and Spehar (2020) define integration as a process aimed at enabling migrants to achieve equal status with the native population in terms of functioning within society. The European Commission (2020) described integration as a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation and responsibilities, signaling a departure from assimilationist paradigms. Mikkel Rytter (2018) critically examines further how the prevailing integration discourse perpetuates a dynamic of host-guest relationships, where immigrants are often cast as temporary visitors rather than equal members of society. They also highlight the concept of negative welfare reciprocity, which suggests that immigrants are perceived as benefiting more from the welfare system than they contribute. Rytter (2018) advocates the need for a critical reevaluation of integration frameworks and a concerted effort to address intersecting inequalities and power dynamics through language. Integration as practice is strongly entangled in the

power relations related to postcolonialism and structural racism (Bhambra 2009).

Integration training in Finland is a targeted program aimed at unemployed adult immigrants with residence permits, as mandated by the Integration Act (Finlex 2010) and Curriculum Criteria for Integration Education (Opetushallitus 2022). The integration training aims to equip participants with basic language proficiency (B1.1) in Finnish or Swedish, alongside other crucial skills for employment or further education (Tarnanen & Pöyhönen 2011). Typically offered as full-time labor market training or self-study, the latter involves tailored language studies supporting employment prospects beyond conventional training methods (Strömmer et al. 2023). With an emphasis on a seamless transition to working life, the curriculum integrates modules such as vocational studies, work placements, and entrepreneurship (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2016; Opetushallitus 2017). Integration training may also accommodate part-time employment, providing dedicated support during the minimum six-week work placement period to enhance workplace language skills (Opetushallitus 2022).

Methodological Approach

In this study, I employ a qualitative mixed-methods approach based on an autoethnographic field diary and semi-structured interviews. This methodological framework allows me to look closer at the language practices, strategies, and experiences of adult immigrants who participated in integration training programs in Finland. Through a combination of autoethnographic reflections and interview data, this study aims to capture both personal narratives and broader themes relevant to the research problem. Data collection involved two methods: maintaining an autoethnographic field diary during my participation in integration training from 2021 to 2022 and conducting 16 semi-structured interviews with participants in 2023. The interviews aimed to capture participants' experiences, challenges, and strategies encountered during their integration training. During interviews, I used an open-ended dialogue form to grasp the diversity of perspectives and voices that shape the integration landscape.

In this article, I analyze the data thematically, focusing on identifying recurring patterns, themes, and experiences across both the field diary entries and interviews. The chosen methodology is rooted in the necessity to understand the integration process from the perspective of those directly involved. My focus is on adult migrants attending

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integration training, a group of particular importance for understanding integration challenges and dynamics. A critical part of my fieldwork practice constitutes the fact that I am an immigrant woman in Finland. Limitations of this approach may include potential bias inherent in autoethnographic reflections and the subjective nature of interview responses. Additionally, the sample size of 16 participants may restrict the generalizability of findings to broader immigrant populations in Finland. Nonetheless, through the chosen methods I aim to amplify marginalized voices and perspectives within the integration discourse and focus on the locally rooted experiences of the research participants.

Multilingual Communities of Integration Training in Finland

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs) is a useful tool that supports the analysis of the formation and evolution of multilingual communities during and after integration training. CoPs are social groups wherein individuals share a common interest, engage in joint activities, and collectively develop shared practices and understandings (Lave & Wenger 1991). In the context of integration training, CoPs serve as environments for developing linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, and social bonds among participants.

The fluid and dynamic nature of language use I observed among integration training participants often manifests as blending Finnish with native-level languages and often a common *lingua franca* such as English, Spanish, or Russian. Through those situations, I observed three themes: 1) the dynamics of language acquisition, 2) identity negotiation, and 3) community building within the integration context. Participants articulate ideas, convey meaning, and navigate social interactions using a variety of linguistic resources and moving between languages. The fluidity in language use is a part of the learning process and the design of the training as well, because rarely do the instructors speak participants' native-level languages.

During the interviews, participants often expressed feelings of linguistic inadequacy or ambivalence toward their language proficiency. Despite possessing capabilities in multiple languages, including their native tongue, participants may perceive themselves as lacking fluency or mastery in any single language. Through those challenges, participants were negotiating their language identity, linguistic competence, and self-perception in the multilingual environment of the integration training. For many integration training participants,

multilingualism becomes a double-edged sword, simultaneously enriching their communicative opportunities while also blurring the boundaries of linguistic identity and proficiency. The constant code-switching and linguistic blending may contribute to a sense of linguistic fragmentation or displacement, wherein individuals struggle to fully identify with any single linguistic or cultural community (Boteva-Richter, 2024). Thus, integration training can have a profound impact on cultural transition on individuals' sense of self and linguistic belonging.

Integration Training as a space of cultural exchange

The locally created CoPs during integration training reflect the needs and concerns of the participants.

“As a result, their practices reflect the members' own understanding of what is important. Obviously, outside constraints or directives can influence this understanding, but even then, members develop practices that are their own response to these external influences.” (Wenger 1998, 2).

Integration training serves as fertile ground for the formation of Communities of Practice (CoPs), where individuals with shared experiences, challenges, and aspirations meet. Integration training participants collaboratively construct and negotiate their understanding of what is important in the integration process, as well as how they develop practices that reflect their collective identity and goals. On the side of language and culture learning that are inherent to the integration training, there is a strong need for mutual understanding and space to communicate. The common experiences and practices outside of the classroom during internships and leisure time, for example in urban parks, provide a platform for mutual understanding, creating and supporting a sense of belonging that complements the formal language and culture instruction received in class. Those practises are often a form of performative enacting of the taught Finnish culture and identities, in activities such as playing m^ölkky – a traditional Finnish throwing game – thus embodying elements promoted as emblematic of Finnish society. Performing Finnishness in this way is a way for people of immigrant background to “pass” as a member of a mainstream group (Valenta 2011) and at the same time adapt the activity to the newly formed community.

Mammon (2010, 22) argues that in Finland integration is constructed on a clear division between the public and the private, in which “private is the area of realizing one's own culture whereas the public is the neutral and culture-free common area, which aims at equality of all its members”. The space of the integration training becomes a transitory space, neither private nor public, where participants learn and negotiate the tensions and synergies between their private cultural identities and the expectations of the public sphere, aiming for a harmonious synthesis that fosters social cohesion and belonging within Finnish society.

The phenomenon of mixed language communication, where individuals seamlessly integrate multiple languages into their interactions, is often perceived differently in various contexts. In many workplace environments exists a prevailing perception that communication should be conducted predominantly in the language deemed professional or appropriate for the context (Lovrits 2022). This expectation often stems from cultural norms, organizational policies, or industry standards that prioritize linguistic uniformity and clarity in communication. As a result, instances of mixed language communication may be viewed as unconventional, informal, or even unprofessional by some individuals or organizations.

Furthermore, in contexts where linguistic proficiency is equated with competence or expertise, deviations from the prescribed language norms may be interpreted as a lack of proficiency or professionalism. This perception can be particularly pronounced when it comes to workers' seniority. (Lovrits 2022). The situation forms a closed loop where the integration training participants are placed in trainee positions despite their years of professional experience where their inability to fully express themselves in Finnish limits their effectiveness and leads to a devaluation of their worth as employees. This devaluation, in turn, perpetuates their placement in trainee positions and reinforces the cycle.

Additionally, the perception of mixed language communication as unprofessional may also be influenced by broader societal attitudes towards language diversity and linguistic variation. In societies where monolingualism is valorized and linguistic diversity is marginalized, individuals who engage in mixed language communication may face stigmatization or discrimination based on linguistic prejudice or stereotypes (Rosa & Flores 2017). However, it is important to recognize that the perception of mixed language communication as unprofessional is not universal and can vary significantly depending on the cultural, orga-

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nizational, and situational context. In some multicultural or multilingual workplaces, for example, mixed language communication is embraced as a reflection of the organization's diversity and inclusivity (Lovrits 2022).

In internship settings, where individuals may still be in the process of developing proficiency in Finnish, the use of mixed languages becomes a practical necessity for effective communication. Participants often find themselves blending Finnish with other languages, commonly English, to bridge linguistic gaps and convey their ideas, instructions, or questions comprehensibly. For those who did not speak English, the challenge was greater – they incorporated words from other languages, occasionally relying on similarities with English words for comprehension, yet often experienced a persistent sense of being incompletely understood. Internship participants in Finland undergoing integration training may perceive instances of language-based discrimination if they sense an unwarranted disadvantage compared to their local counterparts, resulting in feelings of unfair treatment, unease, frustration, or distress, particularly when these incidents can be attributed directly to disparities in linguistic proficiency. As Back and Piekkari, (2024) show in their research focusing on language-based discrimination in multilingual organizations in Finland, non-Finnish-speaking employees often face discrimination and exclusion in both physical and virtual workspaces, despite the lack of Finnish language requirements for the job positions. Similarly, as Back's and Piekkari's (2024) research shows, professionals in Finnish language integration training internships are relegated to the background and are not given responsibilities equivalent to their competencies.

Moreover, the asymmetrical nature of language exchange – where one party predominantly speaks in Finnish while the other responds in another language, typically English – deepens the power dynamics inherent in intern-supervisor relationships. Interns, who may possess varying levels of proficiency in Finnish, often default to using English as a *lingua franca*, reflecting a perceived linguistic hierarchy wherein Finnish is privileged as the dominant language of the workplace. In addition to highlighting the practical limitations that interns face in communicating in the workplace, this unidirectional language exchange highlights the need for greater support and accommodation for those who have limited Finnish language abilities but also training possibilities for the staff who work with interns.

The multilingual communities of practice forged during integration training often extend

beyond the classroom, persisting and evolving in the post-training phase of the integration process. After integration training, as participants transition into working and everyday life in Finland, they continue to draw upon the linguistic and cultural resources obtained during their integration training experiences. The challenges of belonging to the broader social network locally often result in coming back to the multilingual communities formed around the integration process through participating in activities organized by non-governmental organizations working with migrants.

Conclusion

In this article, I looked into how integration training can be a community-building experience. I discussed what kind of language practices and strategies integration training participants employ and I analyzed it through the concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger 1991). Participants of integration training adaptively mix languages in order to bridge communication gaps and create a sense of belonging. I argued that the integration training provides its participants with unseen and unvalued training in multilingual communication and how it empowers multilingual communities. Those assets are not strengthened

by the training's design itself but rather are side effects of how the CoPs work. Through shared experiences and challenges, these CoPs emerge as resilient and adaptable communities that extend beyond the integration training itself.

By recognizing integration training participants as CoPs, policymakers and stakeholders can adopt a more inclusive and holistic approach to the integration process. Leveraging the strengths and resources inherent within these communities can promote diversity as a strength rather than a barrier, enhancing social cohesion and cultural exchange. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore effective strategies for supporting and maximizing the benefits of CoPs in integration processes, ultimately contributing to the creation of more cohesive and resilient societies. Further research is also needed to explore how the concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs) during the integration process can promote inclusive cultural and linguistic exchanges, enhancing multilingualism as an asset in the job market and daily life.

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