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Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants in France

Policy and Practice Following the Introduction of the Reception and Integration Contract (CAI)

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“Our nation is of mixed blood. Immigration constitutes a source of permanent enrichment of our national identity.”

(Eric Besson, Minister of Immigration of France, quoting President Nicolas Sarkozy at the beginning of a nationwide debate on French national identity, November 2009)

“It’s time we reacted because we are going to be eaten alive. There are ten million of them. Ten million who are getting paid to do nothing!”

(Andre Valentin, mayor of a small village in northern France telling a local gathering that France has too many immigrants who represent a burden on the country, November, 2009)

Abstract

The independence movements of the latter half of the twentieth century combined with the creation and ongoing expansion of the singular economic block in Europe (EU) have resulted in significant migration flows in Western European nations. The integration of migrants has been at the centre of political debate in European countries, with national and local authorities designing policies and programs aimed at facilitating this process and enhancing social cohesion. Most of the stakeholders acknowledge that learning the language of the host country is an essential component of integration. This recognition is evidenced by the fact that as of 2008, 21 member-states of the

EU, including France, have made language proficiency a condition for obtaining official permission for long-term residency in the country or for acquisition of citizenship. (Extramiana, 2008) What makes the French model especially noteworthy is that it represents an attempt to facilitate integration using policy tools which point to the return to the traditional philosophy of migrant assimilation, i.e. adherence to the accepted socio-cultural norms and values. The present paper will examine the set of socio-political factors which served as a catalyst for the implementation of the new language policy in France vis-à-vis the adult migrants, look at the specific instruments put in place, and explore the challenges still affecting the system. This study is based largely on the interviews conducted by the author in November 2009 with the French government officials, academic experts, and the Council of Europe authorities responsible for language policy.

1.0 Political Background

In the 1960's and 1970's, France largely pursued a policy of assimilation towards newly arrived migrants. Immigrants were expected to integrate into French society, accept the cultural and social norms of the host communities, and lose attachment to their native values if those were in contradiction with the principles prevalent in France. This policy was gradually abandoned when it became obvious that most first-, or even second-generation immigrants refused to make the required transition to the French values, thus resulting in a segregation of immigrant communities.

From the mid-1980's the French government embarked on a policy of integration, i.e. encouraging migrants to accept local customs and values and abide by the law, yet respecting their distinctive cultural characteristics. This policy was in effect until around 2000 when right-wing politicians tapped into the public perception that immigrants were responsible for the increased crime rate, particularly in large urban areas, and heightened unemployment. In the 2002 presidential elections the extreme right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen campaigned on the anti-immigrant platform and made it to the last round of the elections with 17% of the popular vote. This political "earthquake" — a

radical departure from the traditional centre-left and centre-right balance — placed immigration and the integration of migrants in the centre of the French domestic agenda.

The elections of 2007 saw two presidential candidates lock horns on the issue of immigration once again. Nicolas Sarkozy, the former Interior Minister and a candidate of the centre-right l'Union pour le Mouvement Populaire, campaigning on a law-and-order platform eventually prevailed, defeating his rival Ségolène Royal, the candidate of the centre-left Parti Socialiste. During his tenure as the Minister of Interior, Sarkozy was instrumental in the passage of several important legislations aimed at tightening the immigration flows; preventing illegal migrations; and giving police authorities broader powers to remove unauthorized migrants. At the same time Sarkozy was a proponent of the dialogue with the Muslim communities and favored measures to facilitate economic integration of immigrants. One of the pillars of his campaign was to promote integration by requiring immigrants to study French. To this effect the Reception and Integration Contract (see 3.0 below for a full explanation) was made compulsory for all new arrivals on January 1, 2007.

2.0 Current State of Immigration in France

According to the census data (*données statistiques relatives à l'immigration, à l'intégration, et à l'acquisition de la nationalité*, 2006), by the end of 2004 slightly over 8% of the total population of France, or 5 million people, were foreign-born. This figure places France close to the middle among its European neighbors. For comparative purposes foreign-born populations in Germany, the UK and Spain were 17%, 8% and 4% respectively, in the same period. During the first five years of the 21st century France has experienced a significant increase in the numbers of permanent migrants arriving from outside the European Economic Area. The largest component of this group can be attributed to family migration or family reunification. More than 70 percent of migrants within this category were from Northern and Western

Africa, primarily from the Maghreb area (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). Approximately half of all family migration came from these three countries. It is important to note that a disproportionate flow of immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries, with a relatively high ratio of illiterate or functionally illiterate arrivals presented French authorities with new challenges in their efforts to promote integration. (For the purposes of this paper 'illiterate' or 'functionally illiterate' designations are defined according to UNESCO terminology, i.e. persons either unable to read or write in any language whatsoever, or possessing only a minimal command of written expression.)

3.0 Reception and Integration Contract/Contrat d'accueil et d'intégration (CAI)

As mentioned above, knowledge of French was considered an essential element to facilitate integration of migrants into the society, and the French government chose CAI as a vehicle to deliver the desired results.

3.1 Overview of CAI

As of January 1, 2007 all new adult arrivals making their first application for a long-term residence permit in France must agree to sign a contract which is valid initially for one year but may be extended for up to two years depending on the individual case. The contract essentially creates a formalized framework of interaction between the prospective migrant and the French state, and encapsulates the following principal elements:

- A prospective migrant agrees to a personal interview with the social auditor. The interview, which lasts 1-2 hours, is diagnostic in nature, and seeks to determine the potential socio-economic needs of the interviewee, including language training.
- A very condensed civics training course aimed at familiarizing the new arrival with the fundamental principles of the Republic (democratic values, separation of church and state, and the notion of gender equality). Typically

this is accomplished in the course of one day with the help of a video and some documentation available in multilingual versions.

- If the migrant's proficiency in French is deemed to be inferior to A1.1 level (a level below A1 as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) he/she must agree to undergo language training provided by the State.
- The State agrees to offer various other forms of assistance as required.

It should be noted in this context that CAI became a requirement for foreigners from non-EU countries. EU member-state citizens desiring to reside in France do not benefit from the language training and other social services outlined above. It is also important to point out that foreigners who have legally resided in France for several years are not required to undergo language training. While language programs have been put in place, participation is on a voluntary basis and the objective of these programs is to enable learners to reach level A1 of the CEFR. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the language component of the CAI, and more particularly, on its application to the newly arrived adult migrants.

3.2 Language Training

Predictably, after CAI became compulsory, over 95% of incoming migrants chose to sign the contract in 2007 and 2008. Approximately 26,000 people, representing 26% of signatories in each year were directed towards language training. The language courses are free of charge, and where possible, available near the home or the workplace of the learners though this may be logistically difficult in rural areas, and last up to 400 hours. The objective of the training is to bring the participants' French proficiency up to the level of the Initial French Language Diploma (DILF), considered equivalent to the A1.1 level of CERF. (As of 2010 migrants will be offered an additional 200 hours of French language instruction intended to improve their level of proficiency beyond the A1.1 level.)

4.0 DILF and A1.1 level of CERF

While A1.1 is not an established level within the CERF taxonomy, this benchmark was designed by the language specialists under the direction of the French government, to assess and certify a very basic level of oral and written French. It was created specifically for adults who can demonstrate no familiarity with the language and, moreover, who have had little or no schooling (Cochy, 2008). The official reason for setting the bar relatively low is to make the successful completion of the program accessible to all learners, regardless of their educational background, and to encourage them to continue the study of French. In many other European countries where language instruction has been made mandatory for residence seekers, the required exit level is considerably higher: A2 in Denmark and Austria; B1 in Germany; A1 in Belgium and the Netherlands.

The government requires all new arrivals who undergo language training to pass a DILF certification test at the end of their period of instruction. This exit mechanism is free to the test-taker, lasts one hour and places emphasis on oral/aural components. The data for 2007 show that over 90% of the test-takers were successful.

In addition to migrants seeking long-term residence in France, level A1.1 also represents a benchmark for immigrants applying for French nationality. Acquisition of French citizenship is contingent in part on the applicant's ability to demonstrate 'sufficient' knowledge of French. The level of knowledge required is quite vague though broadly pegged at A1.1. Only oral components are tested in the application process. During an individual interview the applicant's ability to communicate is judged by the government official on a four-point scale: from 1 — communication impossible to 4 — communication possible. Only those ranked at level 4 can pursue their application. This interview technique has been criticized for its lack of transparency (Extramiana, 2007; 2008). Interviewers are not trained testers and their evaluations can be arbitrary. In some cases language 'assessment' is limited to the candidate

being asked to review the entries he or she has made on the application form while on other occasions an interviewee is subjected to a lengthier questioning. A high degree of inconsistency in a process as important as citizenship acquisition presents an unnecessary psychological burden to applicants and has been identified as an issue of concern by many observers including activist groups and the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe (Little, 2008).

4.1 Language Instruction Implementation

Language courses are put in place under a general public contract. Providers are generally given substantial latitude in designing and delivering instruction as necessary contingent on the migrants' needs and logistical limitations. As a result, the delivery modes vary greatly in terms of intensity. Programs run from 6 to 30 hours per week; and are offered in the daytime or in the evening/weekends to accommodate learners with work commitments. Several service providers are experimenting with on-line instruction for immigrants in remote areas who are deemed to be computer literate, though this initiative is still in its infancy and is not likely to become mainstream considering the educational and economic constraints of migrants.

Pedagogical approaches also vary depending on the available resources, the preferences of the instructors, and classroom composition. By and large, classes are limited to 15 students — a reasonable size for a second-language learning unit. While instructors are aware of the DILF requirements, there is no comprehensive syllabus and very little targeted teacher training, which results not only in inconsistent didactic application but, more importantly, in quality control issues. Admittedly, teachers face a very challenging environment: linguistically heterogeneous groups of students with as many as one-quarter lacking formal schooling. In most cases, teachers are not qualified to offer any meaningful bilingual support and are not equipped to address the specific language needs of the immigrant population.

Recruitment of instructors is left to the discretion of the service provid-

ers. Government contract guidelines set very broad parameters requiring the teaching personnel to have Master's degree in French as a foreign language **or equivalent** (Cochy, 2008). To date Paris 3 is the only university in France to offer a specialized training program in teaching French to migrants, and a majority of in-service instructors have not benefited from this type of educational training. Off the record, French government officials responsible for the implementation of the language policy vis-à-vis incoming migrants admit that teacher quality control is a problematic issue. No inspection has been undertaken due to lack of resources, and providers are not contractually obliged to monitor instructors' classroom performance. DILF examiners, however, do have to undergo a mandatory accreditation course, though its content and validity have not been thoroughly documented.

5.0 Challenges Facing the Current Language Policy in France

To date no empirical studies have been conducted to assess the value of the new language policy. While CAI requirement has been in existence for three years, there is no longitudinal data to evaluate the effectiveness of the language courses, and, more importantly, whether this formalized language training does indeed facilitate integration for adult migrants. Part of the problem is that the concept of 'integration' is notoriously difficult to define. While France has been spared the repeat of the violence that made headlines in 2005, immigrants still face substantial obstacles, mainly in their effort to achieve economic parity with the native French community. Unemployment (or underemployment) among foreign-born residents is still roughly double that of native-French nationals. Immigrants continue to face discrimination at many levels in their daily lives, and the strength of right-wing elements, as well as periodic acts of violence directed at Islamic religious symbols, underscore the depth of anti-immigrant sentiment still prevalent in certain segments of French society.

5.1 Challenges of Perception

Perhaps the biggest obstacles to an equitable and effective language policy are beliefs firmly held by the native population about the linguistic behavior of the adult migrants. These can be summarized as follows:

- The mother tongue of adult migrants inhibits the learning of a foreign language, specifically that of the host country.

While there is evidence in research literature about L1 interference in second language acquisition (see Galasso, 2002 for an overview), applied linguists generally agree that L1 to L2 transfer is complex, and can be both negative and positive (Krashen 1985; Elis, 2000). The above perception has no real basis in fact, however it remains deeply rooted in the average psyche and as a result, plays a role in the formulation of language policies.

In Canada, the United States, Australia and other multiethnic societies the governments have promoted a policy of maintaining heritage languages through systematic teaching programs (see for example Brown and Brown ed. 2007). However, this has not been a priority for French policy-makers. The government of France does not provide funding to nurture the mother tongues of incoming migrants and bilingual language support in the French language courses is non-existent. This choice may be the result of political expediency and the legitimate need to direct limited resources elsewhere, however a more prominent support of the main heritage languages of France would be a positive step in combating entrenched perceptions, raising the effectiveness of language instruction and ultimately enhancing interaction between migrants and native communities.

- Using the language of the country of origin in the host society is perceived as a sign of non-integration.

This is particularly true in rural communities as well as at worksites where employers habitually group together migrants with a common language in a belief that a monolingual, homogeneous work unit would be more efficient. Plurilingualism has been one of the cornerstone principles in contemporary Europe, reaffirmed regularly by Council of Europe, yet its

implementation remains elusive. To ensure a greater level of integration of migrants into French society as opposed to ghetto settlements and marginalized existence, there has to be a profound change in attitude towards migrants' mother tongues; a recognition of their value, and acceptance of their use within the French milieu. Additionally, the transmission of the language of origin to children should be commended and encouraged as language is part of the migrants' cultural capital and proficiency in languages is an asset to the whole society.

- If migrants do not speak with the same dialect, register, or generally do not demonstrate the socio-linguistic competence of native speakers they are perceived to be less professionally qualified; less knowledgeable, and “somehow less trustworthy”.

Attitudes change with difficulty, and the above belief is perhaps the hardest to adjust. Only when migrants in sufficient numbers are incorporated into the workforce and given responsible assignments will there be to a more rational understanding of the migrants' true status in the society.

5.2 Challenges of Functionality

5.2.1 Diverse backgrounds

A migrant population is very diverse, including a range of educational backgrounds, professional needs and language learning aptitudes. This adds another complexity to the already difficult task of providing language training to new arrivals. Classroom instructors face a very challenging environment — they have to teach students who, while being assessed at the same level, require very different pedagogical approaches. Learners with no formal schooling and very limited familiarity with Roman script will likely progress more slowly than their more educated peers and can benefit from instruction tailored to their specific needs.. While it may be impossible to separate learners by their level of literacy, more research into the needs of illiterate and functionally illiterate migrants is necessary to optimize their chances of success.

In this connection we may question the design of the A1.1 level which emphasizes oral components of the language. The underlying rationale is that migrants need oral/aural skills more urgently to cope with ongoing personal and professional demands. Even if this is true at the very first stages of one's settling in the host society, writing should play an important role in the program of learning. The written form of a language helps learners enhance their oral proficiency by making the structure of the language more visible and concrete (Little, 2008). In the case of functionally illiterate learners this dimension of the language acquires new importance for obvious reasons.

Perhaps even more importantly, like most societies based on bureaucratic procedures, France demands from its residents at least basic functional literacy, i.e. the ability to fill out forms; understand written instructions, write short notes, etc. For migrants from social groups where oral tradition is the basis for most of interpersonal and commercial transactions, dealing with the complexities of French officialdom is daunting. Inability to follow a plethora of directions or simply understand official papers leads to a *choc des papiers* (document shock). As a result, a migrant is likely to become disillusioned and lose his/her motivation to take advantage of educational or professional opportunities that may be available (Noiriel, 2006; Adami, 2008).

5.2.2 Diverse Needs

The CERF was not designed with the needs of adult migrants in mind. While the Framework with its 'horizontal' and 'vertical' dimensions still represents a valid instrument to use as a basis for language training and assessment, it mainly reflects the realities of European educational systems. This is particularly true at the lower levels (including A1 and A1.1) which have been designed to reflect the tasks most short-term visitors to a country may have to undertake. Adult migrants, obviously, engage in a very different repertoire of linguistic activities. Migrants need to be able to describe effectively their background, professional competencies, and perform tasks that are normally not necessary for learners who are not immigrants themselves.

Thus, CERF needs to be used judiciously, and language policy makers have to be conscious of its limitations at both the design and implementation stages.

Needs-based Instruction

Immediate and long-term language needs of migrants vary widely depending on a host of economic and professional factors. Homemakers will not require the same vocabulary as someone seeking a job. Migrants looking to work in the construction industry will likely need to perform language tasks very different from their counterparts targeting employment in more language-intensive fields. Yet, language training provided for newcomers in France does not take into account the diversity of learners' situations and needs. Obviously creating tailor-made courses to accommodate the various professional needs of migrants may be a logistical impossibility especially in rural areas. However, to ensure that the public funds used to finance language training do represent a good investment, some degree of technical analyses of language needs is necessary.

One way to achieve this objective would be to utilize CEFR and define course content in terms of specific and realistic communicative situations learners are likely to encounter. Similarly, instead of setting the benchmark of A1.1 uniformly for all skills, it may be preferable to define training objectives in terms of more specific profiles, e.g. A1.1 for oral production and A1 for written communication if the learners are literate and are preparing to enter the labor market. Instruction can then be fine-tuned for each specific profile and learners assigned accordingly.

Another practical alternative to make instruction more learner needs-specific is to establish a connection between the syllabus design and other components of CAI, namely 'a summary of skills' (*le bilan de competences*). All signatories of the Contract benefit from an interview session meant to produce a reliable overview of the migrant's educational and professional skills and qualifications. The primary purpose of the resultant document is to facili-

tate employment search, however it can also be used to identify priority areas for the learners in terms of their language needs and this information can be made available to specialists responsible for implementing training.

5.3 Challenge of Life-long Learning

For a vast majority of migrants in France reaching the A1.1 level will not be sufficient to realize their full potential in the society, achieve economic parity with their native-born counterparts, or to make a real contribution to the community. Provision of basic French instruction is a commendable policy initiative but successful integration will be to a large extent contingent on the ability of migrants to pursue a study of the language, in a formal or informal setting. Continued improvement will require an investment of time and money — something not all migrants will be prepared to do in the light of economic and other priorities.

The French government has already established a legislative basis to assist with continued language learning in the workplace — the law of May 4, 2004 recognizes the study of French as a workers' right within the framework of the national labor code (Article L.900-6) and allows employees to benefit from the training paid fully or in part by the employer. It is the responsibility of the workers to seek out training opportunities and request to be reimbursed. As usual, the problem lies in the actual implementation of this legal right. While some company language programs have been organized (see report by the Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2006), by and large, foreign-born workers are either not aware of this law or, if they are, may fear for the security of their employment should they make a request to the management.

According to the study conducted in 2007 by the Chamber of Commerce of Paris, which surveyed the scale of French language training for foreign-born employees at 6,000 small and medium sized companies, less than 5% of the respondents had organized any systematic courses (report by the Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2007). The results are particularly

noteworthy considering that the survey targeted service and health industries which traditionally have had a disproportionately high ratio of non-francophone employees.

To make this legal provision effective the French government should initiate a campaign to appraise migrant employees of their right to pursue remunerated language training. The government should also monitor the degree of interest among employees and encourage the corporate sector to create language learning opportunities. The learning process in the workplace needs to be on-going with all stakeholders understanding its common benefit and willing to commit the necessary resources to make it meaningful.

5.4 Challenges of Accountability

At present there is no quality control mechanism to ensure that the language instruction provided complies with the government guidelines. All matters related to the instruction (personnel and material selection, and delivery method) are left to the discretion of the providers. While a degree of flexibility is necessary and resources may be limited, some form of systematic monitoring of courses is warranted to ensure consistency. Training will ultimately benefit from a closer collaboration between the government authorities responsible for articulating language policy and service providers entrusted with the task of implementing it. This collaboration, in partnership with academic institutions, should be extended to the areas of needs assessment; syllabi design, literacy education and teacher training.

The government should also impress upon the providers that monitoring the attendance of language courses is an important task. CAI makes language training compulsory; however migrants face a myriad of other priorities, not the least of which is to sustain themselves and their families economically. At present there is no system of penalties for absenteeism and while providers are encouraged to follow up on no-shows, there is no reliable data on the percentage of CAI signatories who neglect their training responsibilities. One of the objectives of the language training is to promote interaction in French

and to make all segments of the migrant population conscious of the importance of acquiring at least rudimentary language skills. In this regard, the process of learning is as vital as the result ultimately achieved.

6.0 Conclusion

The present form of the French language policy vis-à-vis adult migrants is a reincarnation of the decades-old assimilative tradition presented to the electorate in a more structured, politically-palatable fashion. While the present paper outlines several important limitations of, and challenges to, this policy, it is imperative to remember that as a social instrument it has also produced the following positive results.

1. The contractual obligation to enroll in formal French language training provides a powerful external incentive to engage in at least a modicum of interaction with the native French population. This is especially valuable to the segments of the immigrant community who would otherwise feel constrained by their traditional role not to venture outside their prescribed environment, e.g. uneducated Muslim homemakers, etc.
2. Successful completion of the language training course, modest as the goal may be, still gives migrant learners confidence in their ability to function in the society and the motivation to continue language study. Even a very marginal improvement at the lower stages of language proficiency can very significantly increase one's capacity to perform a plethora of daily functions. Ability to comprehend at least some information and to produce an adequate response result in an important psychological shift from being a complete outsider to someone who can interface, albeit at a very rudimentary level, with the host community.
3. There has never been a coordinated attempt to establish a systematic language policy for the incoming immigrants. The present situation, despite its design shortcomings, is a major step forward for the bureaucracy to engage various government agencies in a constructive discussion on how this issue should be addressed, not in an ad hoc manner, but as a matter of

national policy.

The CAI-based model is still relatively young. Very limited quantitative data is available to judge whether it is destined to be a long-term success; rather it should be viewed as a work in progress. The government priorities will likely change and resource allocation will reflect that, however it is fairly certain that for the foreseeable future France will continue to face a reality of increasing diversification, and there will be an ongoing need to deal with the language education of migrants. The essential question for the government in Paris will be which route the nation will choose as it adjusts to the new multiethnic reality.

One possibility is to emulate to some degree the models pioneered by the traditionally multicultural societies, such as Canada, the US and Australia. Proceeding along this path will certainly pose significant challenges to a nation not used to accommodating diversity in its midst. What will be the role of heritage or minority languages? Should the government play a more active role in supporting them and would the taxpayers agree to such an expenditure? This will be a path of plurilingualism espoused by Council of Europe, though it remains to be seen whether French society will embrace it.

Alternately, the government may maintain the ideological tenet of assimilation and design a policy accordingly, in the hope that after a certain period of residence in France first- and certainly second-generation immigrants will become linguistically and socially French. Past history shows that this approach can be successful yet it can also become a dangerously divisive force in the country.

At the basis of this dilemma is the very controversy of what it means to be French. The debate on national identity ordered by President Nicolas Sarkozy and organized by the immigration minister, Eric Besson, at the end of 2009 underscores the government's anxiety about the changing face of France. The presence of a large number of permanent residents who are culturally, religiously and ethnically different is a relatively new phenomenon for the nation, and is perceived as a threat to social cohesion by many. The evo-

lution of the language policy will be in many ways determined by how France, the government and the people, will reconcile with the fact that the society has become multicultural and will continue to be so.

This process of change in the national consciousness appears to be under way — according to a recent national poll (Le Parisien, 2009), 72 percent of respondents cited ‘the custom of welcoming immigrants’ as an important symbol of France’s identity. Interestingly, in the same survey 98 percent of those polled consider the French language as a very important representation of the national fabric. How this apparent contradiction will affect the linguistic landscape of France certainly warrants further analysis. The French experience will present a useful study model for other homogeneous societies facing immigration flows and, more broadly, will be of interest to the language policy-makers and immigration authorities.

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<http://www.anaem.social.fr>

L'Agence nationale pour la cohésion sociale et l'égalité des chances (Acse)

<http://www.lacse.fr>

Ministère de l'immigration, de l'intégration, de l'identité nationale et du développement solidaire

<http://www.immigration.gouv.fr>

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