

# Case Studies on Illiterate Migrants and Examples of Good Practice, Vienna/Austria

## 1. Background

Illiterate people want and need to be literate for several reasons: They want to live autonomously and independently, they want to get a (better) job, they have to pass an obligatory test that allows them to stay in Austria or to apply for the citizenship or at least because they wished for it all their life. Lots of them have a lot of competences. Many of the learners in Literacy -Courses are plurilingual: they speak two, three or four languages, although they cannot write one of them. They have a lot of experience and skills, coming from mastering a life with many difficult and demanding periods.

Reasons for the illiteracy are various. It is living in extremely poor countries or regions with no schools within reach, or living in regions of war. And often familiar or individual conditions impair the poverty: unemployment or death of one parent, or even the divorce of the parents impair the risk of having to stay illiterate for boys, but more so for girls. They have to work either in their own family, substitute the mother /father in household and to their siblings, or earn a living outside the family, sometimes at the age of 7.

For detailed literacy rates of countries and regions worldwide see the international literacy rates of UNESCO.

## 2. Case Studies

### *2.1 Mira from Serbia*

Mira could not attend school when she was a child, because in Serbia her mother died when Mira was only 7 years old. As she was the eldest daughter, she had to deal with the household and her siblings from then on. This made it possible for all her brothers and sisters to go to school, while for her it was impossible.

She came to Austria 17 years ago with two young children, her husband got work on a construction site, on and off the job for years, until he had an accident on the construction site that left him deaf. Mira herself was working for 11 years for the same employer, in the kitchen of a Viennese restaurant. Her children went to school and she managed to deal with all the necessary applications for scholarship. Her 6 children are well educated. They work now as clerk, hospital nurse, nursery schoolteacher and mechanic.

Mira dealt with her life without literacy skills all her life. She handled everything: all matters around the schools of her children, the hospital and the insurance company after the accident of her husband, got scholarships for the education of her children, dealt with psychologists for her daughter. She did this all in German, which she learned on the job.

Since all her children will stay in Austria, she and her husband want to stay as well. But for her the Austrian citizenship will be out of reach because of her low level of reading and writing. She wouldn't be able to pass the obligatory test for citizenship. But Mira also wants to continue working in Vienna, maybe even get a better job, which means a job that is less demanding to her body and health. Therefore she wants to be able to read and write.

Her oral abilities are pretty good, so she is not starting from zero: she is attending a course on the first level of literacy (of four) and on an advanced level of oral German language. She is attending course for three times 3 hours weekly, each level offered for 15 weeks in the semester.

## ***2.2 Sheyda from Turkey***

Like Mira she could not attend a school in her childhood, her mother died very young, Sheyda had to stay at home while her brothers went to school, do house chores, and take care of the little siblings. She came to Austria eleven years ago.

Sheyda is plurilingual and speaks Aramaic, Turkish and German. She is interested in politics, actual topics, and also relatively well informed because she uses TV and Radio very consciously. She and her husband own a restaurant.

She started to attend a Literacy-Class because she wanted read and write fluently - this was always her dream and her goal, since she had to stay at home while her brothers went to school. Her more down-to-earth goals: deal with public authorities, read official letters she got, take and read notes on her workplace, read notes from the teachers of her children and write an answer to them.

Other than Mira she was able to learn the Latin script on her own. When her children started school, she took the time to learn from them as much as she could. When she started to attend the literacy program in AlfaZentrum, she could read and write, albeit very unsure and slowly. She started at the third literacy level; her oral German was already very good. She is attending a course 2 times 3 hours weekly, for 15 weeks in each semester, since 3 semesters.

Although she has integrated herself very successfully in work, education of her children, speaking very good German, she meets racism and discrimination. Because education and good manners are very important to her, she is deeply wounded each time she is treated disrespectfully. She is lucky to have taken the Austrian citizenship years ago, since with the new regulations she would not be able to pass the test, although she speaks German very good and reads pretty good as well (although that would not be good enough for the test for citizenship on the level of a secondary school graduate.

## ***2.3 Yousof from Afghanistan***

35 years old he came to Austria 5 years ago, with his wife und two children, as asylum seeker. Recently his application for asylum was answered positively. Since he is therefore allowed to work in Austria, he is desperately looking for a job to make a living for him and his family. He has not been to school in Afghanistan like over 50 percent of the male adults in Afghanistan and like over 87 percent of female adults in Afghanistan (UNESCO-Institute for Statistics 2006). In Afghanistan he has worked for many years as a mechanic, learned on the job, as many of the illiterate male immigrants have worked in trades learned with a master of a trade. While in Afghanistan he was a craftsman sustaining his family, in Austria with its high literacy standards he faces many difficulties to get a job because of his low literacy skills.

As he needs to sustain his family, therefore he cannot spend years exclusively going to school. He needs to get a job soon and has to improve his language skills beneath working. So he will need courses that he can attend in the evening, only some days a week, not every day.

Also sometimes he will not be able to attend the course for some months, so a modular course system would meet his learning needs.

He began his attendance at the first level (of four levels) of courses with no knowledge of reading and writing at all, since he has not been to school in Afghanistan and cannot read Farsi, his first language. In this course he was not „only“ learning reading and writing, the course is also designed to improve his oral competences of German with a special approach, a combination of literacy program and German as a second language program.

Next he attended the second literacy level for people with basic German knowledge, 3 times 3 hours weekly, each level during 15 weeks, offered per semester. In autumn 2007 he is in his third semester.

Although he made good progress during 8 month as a participant of the literacy program for immigrants, he still is uncertain with reading and writing. His oral language skills are at a level of A 2 (CEFL). He still needs to increase his oral skills, most urgently for use the job. Concerning literacy skills he is especially interested in texts of his professional life. But since he has a family, he also wants to be able to deal with all matters concerning his and his family's life in Vienna.

What hinders him to get a job is that he faces discrimination when looking for a job. He is experiencing that his German or his literacy skills are not good enough, even if the job does not require perfect skills in either field.

#### ***2.4 Maka-Laye from Ivory Coast***

21 years old, born in Ivory Coast, he came to Austria four years ago as asylum seeker. He is plurilingual and speaks Tula (mother tongue), Arabic, Yoruba, some Fula, very good oral French and intermediate oral German. His writing abilities go back to three years of school in Ivory Coast. He wants to do the school-leaving exam, which enables him to start an apprenticeship for a job. But he does not yet qualify for a secondary school program because of his lacking reading and writing skills. A further obstacle is that in Austria there are not much offers of language and literacy programs for Asylum seekers. Even though he is young, very eager to learn and a fast learner his chances are restricted.

He participates now in a program for youths, a combination of German language and literacy training combined with some contents of secondary school curriculum. He has a daily schedule of 4 hours 5 times a week for 4 months, after attending the same program for 300 hours on a lower level before. The program is part of a ESF-project for youths at the second chance program for youths at the adult centre, it consists of three levels in preparation of illiterate youths to enrol afterwards in a secondary school leaving program: Level 1 “Literacy and German for beginners”, Level 2 “Literacy and German advanced”, Level 3 “Basic skills for youths with lacking basic skills” as preparation to a secondary school leaving program. Each level of this program for youths contains 300 to 500 hours in one term of a semester. They are designed with a circular curriculum, because only the quickest learners are able to go through all levels at once, the others attend one level twice to keep up.

The program meets his needs should due to it offers language and literacy training as well as contents of a secondary school to prepare him for the secondary school leaving exam, which is necessary for getting a job as well as for starting an apprenticeship, and because it is intensive. Programs designed for adults, 6 to 9 hours weekly, would not meet his capacities; a slowly advancing program would only frustrate him.

### **3. Good Practice: The Alfa-Zentrum for Migrants/Vienna**

#### ***3.1 The Participants***

The participants are adult Migrants from countries all over the world (Europe, Asia, Africa, India), not having attended school in their childhood, or not long enough to achieve sufficient literacy skills. So they are not literate in their mother tongue either. But many of the course participants are plurilingual; they speak two, three or four languages, although they cannot write one of them. Learners from Turkey often speak Kurdish or Aramaic besides Turkish, participants from African countries mostly speak more than one language: an Migrant from Gambia for example speaks Mandinka, English, Woloff; immigrants from Ivory Coast speak Tula, Arabic, Yoruba, French, and sometimes Fula as well.

The participants are mostly women (60 to 85%). Most of the women are mothers of about 4-6 children, in every class of 15 learners even are some single and working mothers.

Some of the participants came to Vienna recently, their German skills at the very beginning. Some of them have been living and working in Vienna for 10 years or more and speak the German language pretty well.

The participants' goals are to learn German as well as to become literate enough to participate in Viennese/Austrian social and political life, but also to get a better job, to be able to help their children with their homework, to be able to handle their official duties, etc.

- \* Some of the participants need an improvement of their reading/writing for their current job, i.e. as a worker in a hospital, driver, cleaning women, or storage worker.
- \* The younger participants want to be able to enrol in second chance programs; their goal is a school-leaving certificate.
- \* Some few participants mainly want to learn German, but without being literate they cannot participate in a regular German language course.

The learners can go through 4 levels of the Literacy Program (90 to 120 hours each semester, offered twice on two language levels), starting on the matching level and continue according to their progress. After that, they can continue their learning process in the Adult Education Centre with German /SL-courses, but also within the second chance program, aiming at the school leaving exam (30 hours weekly). That goal is achieved by youths (16-20 years) who receive good support by their families (10%). The adult learners (90 %) mostly are not able to attend the intensive second chance program because of jobs and children. Their goal is to read and write good enough for the requirements at their workplace and their social and private life.

#### ***3.2 About the Program: A combined Literacy and Language Program for Migrants***

A fluent ability of reading and writing is necessary to enrol to any education program; therefore this obviously must be the goal of any literacy program. Since this takes most of the learner's years, it is best if literacy programs for immigrants meet two needs: literacy learning and language learning. The concept of solated literacy learning before the German language courses has proven impossible: literacy learning takes most of the learners years, within these years it makes only sense to combine literacy and language learning. Immigrants who want to live and work in Austria want to learn the language as well as the script. And they also want

to participate in society, socially and politically. To achieve these goals also numeracy, computer literacy, building-learning strategies must be part of the program.

Therefore and because some literacy learners speak the German language pretty well when they enter the literacy program, others understand no German at all, it is best to offer literacy courses for both groups. So 4 levels of literacy program are offered twice, for beginners and for advanced speakers of German. (A second adult centre in Vienna provides literacy courses for people with German as their first language.)

All of the courses of the literacy program are learner orientated: themes, mode and goals of the courses are within a certain frame, but specified and developed during the course in interaction with the actual learners of the course. Participants bring in their themes and needs. No textbook is used, texts come from the participants, whether they write them or bring them from their workplace or from home. Learner-orientation means also to respond to the different languages and cultural backgrounds of the participants, to let them flow in to the course in various ways. The courses also aim at autonomous learning; learning strategies are built up.

### **Courses in LiteracyCentre for Immigrants / Vienna**

#### **Courses for adult learners:**

Content of all courses is a **combination of Literacy learning and German language learning.**

<b>For beginners in the German language</b>	<b>For intermediate / advanced speaker of the German language</b>	
Literacy level 1	Literacy level 1	120 hours in 15 weeks
Literacy level 2	Literacy level 2	120 hours in 15 weeks
Literacy level 3	Literacy level 3	90 hours in 15 weeks
	Literacy level 4	90 hours in 15 weeks
	„Basic skills“ for all learners from literacy level 3(dealing with issues, texts, and mathematical tasks that are brought from the participants)	45 hours in 15 weeks

#### **Courses for youths (20 hours weekly for 15 weeks):**

<b>For beginners in the German language</b>	<b>For intermediate / advanced speaker of the German language</b>	<b>For advanced speaker of German</b>	
Literacy level 1 and 2			300 hours in one semester
	Literacy level 3 and 4		300 hours in one semester
		“Basisbildung”: preparation for the second chance program	500 hours in one semester

All these courses are designed with a circular curriculum, so that slowly advancing learners can attend a level twice if they need it. Learners also can change from courses for beginners in German to courses for intermediate/advanced speakers of German.

### ***3.3 Counselling and evaluating rather than testing***

In individual counselling sessions (of 30 to 45/60 minutes) the learning needs and goals are evaluated and an adequate course is recommended to the learner. This information about goals and needs of the learners is also useful for planning the courses and the whole literacy program. In the last third of a literacy course again a counselling session helps to find out, how the learner can continue his or her learning process or if individual goals are achieved already.

A testing procedure instead of the individual counselling session would never give as many useful results. Testing illiterate people is difficult and gives false results, because all existing testing procedures for adults are designed for literate people. Instead of the development of such a new testing procedure, that would cost a lot of expert-time and money, that leads to very limited results, it makes more sense to further develop a model of counselling instead of testing. Individual counselling is much more valuable, because it is open to finding not only foreseen results, but also finding results that are valuable for the development of literacy programs, designed to meet the real needs of the adult learners. Besides: why test, when we can simply ask for needs and goals? Of course, one has to think about how to ask: in a sensitive, affirmative way, always acknowledging existing skills, knowledge and experiences, coming from a life rich of demanding periods, from experiences that make migration necessary to considering whether to migrate or not to the difficult time of building up a new existence in a foreign country with a foreign language. When counselling, it is important not to feel superior in every field of life, but also not to hide the advantage in literacy and formal education. If the counsellor is able to see, esteem and respect the experiences and also the desire for learning and literacy, he or she must not act false either, but plain and simple.

During the term of classes learners make use of individual learning counselling sessions, if they feel it necessary, to deal with learning problems or social problems.

## 4. Summing up the needs for literacy programs for immigrants:

Literacy programs for immigrants are more successful when they are combined literacy-language programs. Also teacher training programs on that model and the development of materials are needed, as the development of open curricula and literacy portfolios.

### 4.1 Programs for

- **literacy,**
- **language learning,**
- **numeracy**

**on different levels** are highly needed, not only in Cities, but also on the countryside.

#### Some useful parameters to the programs:

##### \* **Various intensity of programs and contents:**

- at least two **levels** for beginners and advanced learners, considering language and considering literacy.
- **Intensive programs for people under pressure of time:** i.e. for adults, who are unemployed at the time, but want to get a job again soon.
- **Intensive programs with specific goals:** school leaving certificate, vocational training. **Youths** aim for education, a formal school leaving certificate and apprenticeship, vocational training (Berufsausbildung), their need is a very intensive program aiming at a school leaving certificate.
- And **open, ongoing and more general programs** for learners who are in a demanding, difficult phase of life, when they work many hours, have little children, ... but want to improve their literacy nonetheless.
- Women find it easier to learn in groups without men.
- Older immigrants or young mothers, only recently immigrated, often wish for a **first course in their community**, before they dare to step outside their community for a literacy program in a public adult centre. If no such course exists, they often just stay at home. The younger among them might try an adult centre some years later.

##### \* **Accompanying offers that proved useful:**

- **Social counselling / social work:** Participates in literacy programs should have access to social workers. Otherwise teachers are confronted with many social or financial problems occur problems of their learners, which mostly is beyond their competences and capacities.
- **Vocational counselling** during and after attending programs for information about jobs that do not require a high competence of literacy. Also for developing (better) strategies to deal with clerks at the employment centre or employers. This would be useful especially for the fact that getting literate in a second language takes years, even for the fast learners.
- **Tutoring** after the literacy program to continue learning and dealing with written requirements of life on their own, but with help, if necessary.

##### \* **Surrounding conditions / parameters to the courses:**

- **Child care** during programs (since many of the immigrant literacy learners have 3 – 6 children),

- **low cost programs,**
- Programs at **different daytimes:** in the morning (for mothers of schoolchildren), in the afternoon (i.e. for Chinese workers at the restaurant, or in the evening for other employed people.
- **Easy access** to registration.

### ***3.2. Developments needed in the field of literacy for immigrants:***

- \* **Combined programs on literacy and language.** (Low cost programs, accompanied by childcare and social and vocational counselling.)
- \* **Teacher training programs** on that working model. Until now there exists only one literacy teacher training (AlfaZentrum in Austria since 2002), in Germany one will start in autumn. - With teacher training it is the same as with literacy programs: they can aim for learner-oriented, intercultural and autonomous learning or they can aim on older ways of learning as filling in prefixed sentences and multiple choice and preparations to tests.
- \* **Curricula:** Open learner-orientated curricula must be developed in contact with learners and successful practice, with an eye to the real needs of learners. It would be a pity if time were wasted on learning to the test, while learning writing skills for live is necessary. The time of illiterate people is precious; they have not time to waste besides hard low paid work, children and course.

The development of open curricula will ensure, that literacy and language programs are connected to the actual needs of the actual participants. The opposite would be compulsory and nationwide courses with one curriculum for all, maybe even designed to a test. This would make sure, that the learners couldn't profit from the courses, because they cannot learn what they need, but something that somebody can test.

There is a working curriculum in Vienna (RahmenCurriculum für Deutsch als Zweitsprache und Alphabetisierung für MigrantInnen, 2006), and there is further the Austrian compulsive nationwide curriculum of two pages (Alphabetisierungskurse Rahmencurriculum 2005), that gives literacy learning 75 hours (!) and is much criticised, and there is in Germany a first draft of a literacy curriculum, that adopts the concept of the combined literacy-language approach of the ViennaLiteracyCentre and refers to 630 hours of course.

- \* Instruments like the **European Language Portfolio** could and should be developed for the use as an instrument to show literal competences also for „new readers and writers“. This would allow newly „literated“ immigrants to demonstrate i.e. pretty good oral competences (in more than one language!) and maybe lower literal competences of the language of the country. Oral and literal competences can be different, but nevertheless be demonstrated.

### ***4.3 Further positive developments in language and educational policy would be:***

- \* **Plurilingual resources:** Further development of plurilingual (oral) resources and plurilingual literacy/ biliteracy would make very much sense with people that speak already three or more languages.
- \* **“First-language-literacy”:** Immigrants often learn the national script prior to the script of their mother language. On long terms it will prove to be a good investment to support immigrants to learn their mother script as well. European countries will at the latest profit from the multilingualism and multiliteracy of the second generation, if they invested to that development in the first place.