



ADULT REFUGEES LEARNING GREEK AS L2 FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: THE CASE OF VOLOS IMMIGRANT CENTER

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Abstract:

In this article, I examine the views of asylum seekers with limited schooling experience who attend classes in Greek as a second language, and their teachers, who volunteer in a non-profit organization, using semi-structured interviews. I discuss the role of language in the social inclusion of refugees in a non-formal educational setting and how it affects their motivation to learn the Greek language. Attending classes in a non-formal setting seems to lead to greater social inclusion, broadening the students' relationships with other immigrants/refugees and their instructors. Social skills in communication and interaction between themselves and also other people are enhanced.

Keywords: second language learning, immigrants/refugees, social inclusion

1. Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon that has always existed; however, the world has seen the number of people fleeing their homes due to conflict, violence, human rights violations and persecution increase dramatically, reaching the 100 million figure in 2022 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Many of them come to Europe, passing through Greece, which is considered for most a transit country, but they often decide to stay.

Immigrants and refugees inevitably come into contact with members of their adopted country, who have a language and a cultural system quite frequently very different from their own. Their social inclusion in their host country is of crucial importance, as they can often become marginalized. One very important factor which can facilitate the process of adaptation and successful integration into the immigrant's/refugee's new society is the acquisition of the language of the host country. Research has shown a strong relationship between second language learning and social

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inclusion, as this takes place through communication (Beacco et al., 2017; Kim, 2017; Magos & Margaroni, 2018; Ortega, 2009). Acquisition of a second language (L2) is essential for new arrivals, as it facilitates migrant/refugee integration in the job market but is also essential for their general well-being. At the same time, literacy in the host country's language promotes integration and counteracts social and economic marginalization (Ives et al., 2022; Morrice et al., 2021). The reason why labor market participation is of the utmost importance is mainly because of the pressure many immigrants/refugees are under to send money home (Plasterer, 2011). Second language learning is paramount not only in order for the immigrants/refugees to integrate into the job market but also the host society, as it strengthens communication and relationship building with its members in the long term (Tip et al., 2019).

Limited or no language proficiency in the language of the country they moved in poses various barriers in migrant/refugee inclusion, impeding the newcomers from developing social networks and political power, succeeding in educational goals and participating in the wider community of the host country (Morrice et al., 2021). Taking classes in the L2 can greatly enhance the process of language learning; however, there are many barriers and challenges regarding the participation of migrants and refugees in language and literacy programs and many times there is no provision from the government at all. This group is highly heterogeneous and their learning needs are very complex and diverse, especially regarding those who have no or low levels of education (Hanemann, 2018). This paper seeks to understand the particular challenges adult refugees face while living in Greece in their efforts to become members of Greek society and the role of Greek as a second language in this process.

2. Theoretical framework

A lot of research confirms the importance of learning the host country's language for both migrants and refugees (Bernaus et al., 2004; Doucerain, 2019; Ehrman et al., 2003; Mattheoudakis, 2005). Successful second language acquisition is not solely a result of motivation and the desire of a person to learn a language, it is influenced by many factors such as the distance between the migrant's/refugee's first language and the target language, the person's educational background, his/her age and his/her level of literacy (Doughty & Long, 2003). Some groups are more vulnerable and face more challenges in general but also when trying to learn the language of the host country, such as minors, refugees and low-literate learners (Rocca et al., 2020). The term low-literate learners (LESLLA learners) refers to individuals who either had no schooling or too little schooling to result in literacy and they are the least equipped of all migrants to be able to communicate with members of their communities in their host country (Young-Stolen, 2013).

Language learning is an important step towards social inclusion in the new society. In order to define social inclusion, it is useful to define social exclusion first. It refers to the process that prevents individuals, groups or communities from accessing the

rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of the society in which they live in and which are vital for social integration. Even if normally associated with poverty and lack of financial resources, social exclusion is also determined by many factors: gender, disability, status, sexual orientation and religion (Călăfăteanu & García-López, 2017). According to Kovacheva (2014), social inclusion refers to *“the process of [an] individual’s self-realization within a society, acceptance and recognition of one’s potential by social institutions, integration (through study, employment, volunteer work or other forms of participation) in the web of social relations in a community”* (Kovacheva, 2014, p. 2). It is a term used widely in social and educational policymaking to express the idea that every person who lives in a given society (should) have access and participation rights on equal terms. This means that institutions, structures and measures should be designed positively to accommodate the diversity of circumstances, identities and ways of life. On the other hand, social inclusion means that *“opportunities and resources should be distributed so as to minimize disadvantage and marginalization. In the sphere of European youth work and non-formal education, inclusion is considered an all-embracing strategy and practice of ensuring that people with fewer opportunities have access to the structures and programmes offered”* (Călăfăteanu & García-López, 2017, p. 21).

Social inclusion is particularly important for people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and live in precarious conditions (e.g. immigrants and refugees). For them, it involves breaking various barriers before they can acquire their social rights and become full members of society. There are many stages in the process (from total isolation to active inclusion) and migrants might enter it at different points and move toward both poles (marginalization or achievement of autonomy and well-being). Furthermore, the process is multi-dimensional and affects many domains of a person’s life: economic, political, cultural, social, which overlap (Kovacheva, 2014). Immigrants and refugees face additional challenges regarding social inclusion. There are many parameters that have to do with the host society and its institutions and with the particular characteristics of the immigrants/refugees both as individuals and groups, the way they move through borders and countries (legally or not) and the duration of their move (permanent or temporary) (Kasimati, 2006). Their socialization has been accomplished in their country of origin and they come to the host society already having completed their socialization process, something which automatically differentiates them from local people, who have not experienced this desocialization and resocialization process (Papadopoulou, 2006). The immigrants/refugees enter their new culture with the cultural identity and the cultural communicative competence they had acquired in their country of origin and which they took for granted until they came into contact with people of a different cultural system (Kasimati, 2006; Kim, 2017). As a consequence, they are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and marginalization.

It is not only immigrant and refugee newcomers that have to make changes to promote social inclusion and smooth integration. Policies, institutions, and social environments pose social and structural barriers to their integration (Ives et al, 2022). Hanemann’s research on educational services for refugees and migrants (2018) indicates

that provision for youth and adults, especially those with low education levels is not a priority in most countries hosting those populations. Their education is either completely absent or limited to small-scale interventions which do not really address their needs. Many refugees are illiterate in their own native language, something which significantly affects their ability to acquire a new language (Mogli & Papadopoulou, 2018). Consequently, traditional approaches to teaching a second language to adults do not really work for them, so there is a need for programs specifically suited to their needs (Fanta-Vagenshtein, 2011; Huntley, 1992; Marrapodi, 2013). Additionally, there is a shortage of teachers specifically trained to teach this group and teaching material to support their language learning (Windisch, 2015).

Because of the lack of access to formal education, many adult immigrants and refugees resort to attending language classes in non-formal educational settings. Non-formal education refers to any organized educational activity outside the formal education system. It is organized (even if it is loosely organized) and can be (but not necessarily) defined by a curriculum, which is always very flexible (Non Formal Pathways, 2017). According to Coombs and Ahmed (1974), it is any systematic educational activity outside the formal education system, which provides specialized types of knowledge to particular subgroups of the population, both adults and children. Although it does not lead to formal qualifications, it significantly enriches the participants' knowledge, based on their skills and abilities and they acquire attitudes, values and skills (Coombs, Prosser & Ahmed, 1973). However, there is no clear distinction between formal and non-formal education and many times they are combined to form "hybrid" programs, based on elements from both (Radcliffe & Colletta, 1989; Norqvist & Leffler, 2017).

According to a lot of research, there are numerous advantages to employing non-formal educational practices in the case of immigrants/refugees (Krupar, Horvatek & Soo-yong, 2017; Non Formal Pathways, 2017; Morrice, 2016; Wiktorin, 2017). It can cover the real, everyday needs of the particular group of learners and can become an ideal solution for migrant communities that need immediate results. Additionally, it increases motivation to learn the second language and promotes the social inclusion of cultural groups that are in danger of exclusion. It also creates a feeling of belonging to a wider community and of participating in the host society. Finally, it can promote interaction both in but also outside the classroom and an opening to the host society.

3. Aims, sample and methodology of the research

The present study focuses on the relationship between learning Greek as a second language and social inclusion, especially regarding young people of immigrant/refugee background, in a non-formal educational setting. Second language acquisition and its connection to social inclusion is particularly relevant in today's globalized world, since international migration has reached record levels. In addition, there is limited research

on second language acquisition and social inclusion, especially regarding non-formal educational contexts, so there is a need for delving into the topic deeper.

The primary research questions of the study are the following:

- Do Greek language classes in the context of a non-formal educational setting contribute to the social inclusion of young immigrants/refugees?
- What processes facilitate the inclusion of young immigrants/refugees to Greek society?
- What educational practices are adopted by the instructors in such a setting?

The study was carried out from April to June 2018 with a non-random group of participants, two Greek instructors who taught Greek to immigrants/refugees on a voluntary basis and three young immigrants/refugees (two from Iran and one from Afghanistan) who attended the classes. The interviews were conducted in Greek for all the participants, both the instructors and the refugees (since they did not speak English) and were translated for the purpose of this article from Greek into English by the researcher. However, as the refugees' language skills in Greek were limited, their answers tended to be short, since they could not express themselves fully in the second language. At the time the research was conducted, the participants were attending Greek classes at the Immigrant Centre of Volos, a non-profit organization that supports immigrants and refugees, is organized on principles of solidarity and is against racist, nationalist and sexist practices. All teachers who teach there are volunteers and students do not have to pay to attend. The city of Volos, where the study was carried out, has a large number of migrants, mainly from European countries but also from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Ukraine, China and there is a camp with Syrian refugees in the outskirts of the city.

The immigrants interviewed were all asylum seekers and considered themselves refugees. All of them were originally planning on going to other EU countries before coming to Greece but had decided to stay. The immigrants/refugees are aged from nineteen (19) to twenty-six (26) years. They were two (2) Iranians (a young couple), whose mother tongue was Farsi, who had stayed in Greece for two (2) years at the time the study was conducted and spoke very little Greek, and a nineteen (19)- year-old young man from Afghanistan who spoke Dari and had stayed in Greece for three (3) years, who spoke Greek quite well. The young Afghan had arrived in the country as an underage minor, as he was under eighteen at the time, he had fled Afghanistan. They had all arrived in Athens first, and then moved to Volos, while their first experience learning Greek as L2 was at the Immigrant Centre. The Iranians had some experience of formal education in Iran, but the young man from Afghanistan had no schooling in his native country and when asked about his educational background he only mentioned spending a year at the local mosque, where they were basically taught to recite the Koran and they were not taught how to read or write. As a result, he had limited literacy skills in his native language, which meant that he was able to read Dari as he had taught himself to read in his native language, but could not write in it very well. His classes at the Immigrant Centre were basically his first classes which involved literacy and consequently, they

were in Greek, which was his second language. The Iranians did not speak English or other languages which would enable communication with the local population, while the young Afghan spoke some English (only oral skills were acquired) which he had learned while living in Greece. The Iranians had started Greek lessons at the Immigrant Center four (4) months before the interview took place and the Afghan young man a year before. It was considered interesting to study young refugees and their relationship to the Greek language and at the same time examine their views on social inclusion and the role language played in their integration into their host society.

The instructors who gave the Greek classes to the participants were two women, both personal acquaintances of the researcher. The first one was twenty (20) years old with very little teaching experience and still, a university student studying for a degree in primary school education in the Department of Primary Education in Volos. The second instructor was a teacher of ancient and modern Greek. She was thirty-five (35) years old, had a degree in Greek Philology, had a lot of teaching experience and was working towards a PhD. Both of them were teaching Greek as volunteers at the Immigrant Center of Volos. They did not have any specific training in teaching Greek as a second language and no training regarding LESLLA students. Consequently, they both felt the need to have further training regarding teaching Greek as a second language. The reasons why they volunteered were their desire to help immigrants and refugees better integrate into Greek society and because they considered language learning a vehicle for social change.

Qualitative research methods were considered more suitable for the study. A qualitative approach can shed more light on the complex and symbolic character of modern reality, and specifically the experience of immigration and second language learning and teaching (Androulakis, Mastorodimou & van Boeschoten, 2016; Tsiolis, 2014). Data was obtained through semi-structured, individual interviews with each participant and were analyzed using thematic analysis, which was undertaken to gather the information from the data and organize it into distinct themes and codes. The interviews took place in the setting where the classes were conducted, they were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using manual inspection.

The findings gave insight into the relationship between second language learning and social inclusion and what can facilitate it. The purpose of the study was two-fold, to examine the issue through the lens of both the immigrants/refugees and also their instructors, as a combined view of the issue would give more complex and richer results to illuminate the intricate process of social inclusion through second language learning. It was investigated whether the non-formal educational setting was better suited to the needs of the immigrants/refugees and whether second language teaching and learning facilitated the inclusion of young migrants into Greek society.

4. Results and Discussion

The volunteer instructors' views on language and integration were quite similar. They did not see second language teaching and learning in isolation, but connected it to the general societal context the immigrants/refugees found themselves in. They mentioned in their interviews that their main aims were twofold: to teach the second language, but also to facilitate the immigrants'/refugees' social inclusion. That meant teaching them the second language but also actively trying to inform the students about the socio-cultural environment in their new country, which the teachers understood was quite different from the one the migrants/refugees grew up in, with the aim of helping them develop social relationships with members of the host society but also other immigrants and refugees:

"This happens with the co-existence of the students with other members of the Center, whether they are migrants or locals, and with the interaction and their involvement with the Greek community that exists in the Center, through discussions, activities, events" (I1) [see note at the end of the article for an explanation of coding system to protect the anonymity of the interviewees].

Another aim the instructors had was to empower the students, both in the context of the class and also outside the classroom. As one of the instructors mentioned, the lesson aims are intertwined and do not stand in isolation:

"The aims are social, humanitarian, political, all these aims interact and one depends on the other, one influences the other" (I1).

The language was seen as closely interconnected with society, on a micro-level (that of the classroom) and on a macro-level (the wider society):

"...the classroom is a mirror of society and society a mirror of the language" (I1).

The instructors considered language as a principal tool of migrant/refugee socialization and smooth integration into the host society:

"Language is a basic tool of communication and interaction and somehow integration into Greek society" (I1).

Giving the students information about their socio-economic and cultural environment was considered of paramount importance. This included their realizing the socio-economic and cultural environment of the host country, becoming more aware of modern Greek reality and issues related to the immigrant/refugee experience, including racism. The students' empowerment and greater confidence in the host country's

environment was considered the principal reason for their attendance and their desire for integration and inclusion in the host society was thought to be facilitated through the knowledge of the second language. The instructors believed that the students want to remain in the host country and to be integrated into its society:

“Their motivation is the integration into Greek society, their aim is to get residency here”
(I1).

Becoming more confident and being able to function in the host country is considered very important:

“I would say [my aim is] firstly for these people to gain a bit more confidence and to feel comfortable to speak in situations outside the classroom, everyday situations, from a ticket to a sheet of paper, a payment, something, not to feel that they are lost, desperate, on their own, for them to know some basic things for their everyday life and to be able to develop a very simple conversation. These are the aims, not to learn the grammar and the syntax so much like we teach it in school to young children, but we focus more on speaking, for them to say something, repeat it, to hear it, so that it becomes familiar. Also, for them to learn in class things about the Greek culture so that they learn about the culture of their host country, some things beyond grammar and vocabulary. And, without this being an aim of the class, for me to learn from them” (I2).

The instructors, therefore, place more focus on the acquisition of speaking skills and cultural competence. They see the lesson as an exchange between the students and themselves, not as a one-way process where they showcase elements of the host culture, their aim is for active intercultural exchanges to take place in the classroom and they are eager to learn about the migrants'/refugees culture as well.

The non-formal environment where the classes take place is considered to play a vital role in facilitating language learning and creating a relaxed and friendly climate in the classroom, where the atmosphere is stress-free, both for the instructor and also for the migrant/refugee students:

“It frees the student from the stress of formal instruction, so generally it is a context which is more free, and the instructor is more free, so the students too think that in this way they are in a more free situation” (I1).

The fact that attendance is not obligatory:

“...might release them from the stress and rigidity that might exist in a different context”
(I1).

Even though the learning context is non-formal, the Immigrant Center:

“Also has something important to offer, despite the existence of similar formal programs, it has a flexible timetable, a different teaching approach, different instructors, the political and social element that it promotes from the start” (I1). “I think that the Centre’s character is different, it doesn’t matter if there is anything else, it’s good that it exists, too, because it doesn’t only teach Greek and that’s it, it doesn’t stop there, the fact that we try to exchange cultures always with respect to other people’s culture, for them to come closer, to become active citizens, not only to be immigrants whom other people take advantage of. If this was organized by the state I don’t know what character it might have, it might be I teach you [language] and that’s it, or the other way around, to teach things without so much respect for the migrants. But also, something else, the timetable might not be convenient, so it’s good to have an alternative, the Centre is adaptable, we can find the time, it’s not always fixed, so in this respect the Centre might be more convenient for them” (I2).

The existence of formal educational options is not seen as a reason for places like the Immigrant Centre not to offer second language classes to migrants/refugees, as its character is different, it is seen as a more inclusive space, where cultural difference is respected:

“We approach them with respect, acceptance, trying to understand this different culture”; “if I knew more things about their culture that would help more and I do take into account the characteristics of each culture also in a non-verbal level, that is, the way you dress, the way you move, always with respect to the other person’s culture” (I2).

It was also stressed that the lessons are suited to the needs of the participants:

“The needs of the students are important; this place basically comes to cover their needs” (I1).

In addition to the Center’s non-formal character, the fact that the instructors’ volunteer changes the decision-making approach and the students become more involved in what they want to learn:

“Because this place functions in a volunteering context, a lot of things are co-decided always with discussion and communication with the students”; “there is no fixed syllabus to start with, nor a specific material to be covered, the group shapes the syllabus during the classes, depending on their needs” (I2).

Although the students’ needs are taken into account, this tends to be something that is investigated during the course of the lessons and:

“In the specific context, there can be no needs analysis before the beginning of the classes. There could have been, of course, but in my case, I was the only person responsible for the classes, so I couldn’t investigate their needs in some other way, that is with a methodical and organized research, so I first saw the students and we formed the aims of the class together” (I1).

Regarding the students’ literacy skills, the instructors did not inquire the migrants about their literacy levels in their native language but they did not consider it necessary to do so in order to define their lessons’ aims and objectives.

“I don’t know and I can’t check either if they are illiterate in their own language. There are students with learning difficulties, but I don’t know if this is connected to illiteracy in their native language” (I1).

When asked if they thought it would be better to have separate classes depending on the students’ literacy level, the instructors firmly opposed this suggestion and considered it discriminatory:

“No way, because in these cases they can help each other, the cooperative method of teaching which is often followed is very effective in dealing with these educational differences, no, I don’t think this discrimination should be made, generally I don’t think discrimination is something that should happen, so no” (I1).

They compensated for the lack of literacy skills by using cooperative learning, which is thought to maximize their own and each other’s’ learning and help weaker students to acquire more knowledge and become more independent. It also strengthens interaction between the students, helps develop stronger ties between them and promotes the development of social relationships. If the students’ literacy in their native language is limited the instructors support that:

“The class should focus more on speaking, although ideally it would be nice for them to learn their own language as well somehow, even here [in Greece] and to be able to come into contact with their country’s cinema, for example, since they are functionally illiterate, at least they can learn how to read, to be taught a bit through cinema which is easy, sound, picture, that is in a way that’s easier and more pleasant” (I2).

So, focusing on speaking and the acquisition of basic literacy skills through different means and teaching techniques is the instructors’ preferred way of teaching LESLLA learners.

The main aim of the classes is to teach the second language, but the instructors also make an active effort to encourage the development of social relationships. Social contacts with their fellow classmates contribute to their greater socialization inside the

classroom but also outside of it. Inside the educational setting, the young people interact with other immigrant/refugee students who are their fellow classmates, not only young people, like them, but also older people that attend the classes:

“No, they are not the same age, the only common thing that they should somehow have is their level of Greek. But I think it’s positive to have different sexes, nationalities, ages, I think it’s fine”. “In the context of the class, they become more friendly to each other, they come closer, they know a bit about each other’s everyday life, they say ‘we come by bus, you come by bike, oh, how was the weather in Dimini [the suburb the Iranians live in], what’s with your garden’, etc., so they know a bit about each other’s everyday routine, they are a little closer, they will talk about certain things. Especially regarding the Iranians, they need the contact, they are in the disadvantaged position of not speaking English which everyone speaks, they speak a language people don’t know here, so they have to learn the language, and neither of them knows English” (I2).

At the time of the research, there were three refugees attending but there are many people who attend the classes at different points during the school year, who might stop attending for different reasons, relocating when they find work, for example. As there are other migrants who attend classes but also come to the Center just to associate with the locals and migrants frequenting there, the immigrant/refugee students develop social relationships with other immigrants and refugees. According to the second tutor:

“They have an additional reason, that is because there is a relationship beyond going to learn a language, it’s a small society, let’s say, to which they belong and try to integrate, to function” (I2).

Except for their classmates, the students develop relationships with their instructors, who are members of the host society. When asked if their relationship extends outside class, the first instructor answered positively:

“Yes, I have [relations with the students], we go out for drinks, we get together, we phone each other, some might trust me with some personal issues or ask my help as a native speaker of Greek in order to deal with issues they have difficulty in due to the language” (I1).

So, their socialization but also integration takes place in an environment where they feel comfortable, respected and they can associate with both migrants (other students or not) and also locals (their instructors and other Greeks who come to the Immigrant Center). That would hopefully lead to more socialization and integration opportunities out of the Center, where, equipped with a better knowledge of the Greek language, the migrants/refugees would be able to participate more fully in the host society.

The means to facilitate the creation of social bonds between everyone involved included the creation of a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, treating the students with respect, adopting group work teaching methods and principles of adult learning, encouraging interaction between the students, facilitated by the multicultural environment of the class.

“It’s not always the language, beyond the basic thing which is to learn the language, it also motivates them to come to a place that is familiar to them, they can depend somehow, that in the Centre they are relaxed and they have never experienced racism here, they feel accepted. It’s also motivating that they don’t get homework and if you don’t do it we can’t function and that’s it, it motivates them that here we are more relaxed, that they have developed a friendship, that we are people they can depend on. And between them, they contact each other now, they speak on the phone” (I2).

This depends:

“On many things, a tool. A technique with which you can achieve some aims is the teaching method you will choose, if it’s traditional, if it’s task-based. The second parameter is whether you will inspire your students to actively participate, using the principles of adult education, inspiring your students to participate as well, inserting their own stamp and personality” (I1).

Adult learners require a different approach and both instructors have this in mind when designing and delivering the lessons:

“I have realized that a person who is in a foreign country has a lot of difficulty to be integrated because of the language. The main thing is that the people who come here to attend classes very often feel grateful for what is offered to them, because the instructors volunteer. It’s very moving to see adults who offer valuable time from their adult life which is very demanding, it’s very moving, and it’s very special for a person who is in an advanced age to sit again on a desk, to make an effort to learn things, to be consistent, so it is respectable to work with these students” (I1).

The needs of the students are also considered crucial:

“They need to learn things which are interesting and suitable for their age, which fit their needs and their everyday life. There needs to be material that addresses them, specifically” (I2).

Teaching adults in this context caused instructors to reconsider their beliefs on immigration, second language teaching and learning and teaching adults. Especially for

one of the instructors who was still at university studying to be a primary school teacher and did not have much teaching experience, it was an eye-opener:

“I think I have gained more than the students [laughs], yes, I say every time, I say what wonderful things I have learnt and I now see them in a different way, with the classes at university they help me see some things like that. I certainly know more now what an adult, a foreign migrant woman needs to be taught, I have an idea, it’s a different context, different from primary school where I will be teaching in the future. It’s a very powerful experience, any way you look at it, I don’t know what to mention first, that I focus on different things than I would focus on [if I taught] a different audience, young children, when teaching young children, I might correct spelling, put a stress, now I say, what is the point of correcting stress, it doesn’t matter. This is a very powerful experience and I think that later if I want to teach in a bilingual school and have as a reference point that I have done this in my life, it will be very helpful” (I1).

So, the teachers who volunteered gained a valuable perspective both on immigration but were also equipped to deal with teaching in multilingual and multicultural environments in their future teaching careers.

The students themselves put a lot of emphasis on the acquisition of speaking skills and considered speaking the main criterion in order to evaluate both their progress but also their future goals regarding learning Greek as L2. The Iranians said it took them one to two months after they started the classes in order to start speaking Greek. The young woman spoke better than her husband but they had different approaches as to why that had happened. The young man said that he did not learn as much because he had a lot of things on his mind connected to the problems he had back in Iran, but his partner commented that he did not learn as much as she did because *“he is not trying to learn”*. The young man from Afghanistan said it took him one year to learn to speak Greek. They all said they speak Greek to friends and neighbours, the young man from Afghanistan also mentioned speaking Greek at work and if he cannot understand, his colleagues speak to him in English. When asked about the skills they had acquired in Greek they all said they can speak, but they cannot write very well. They were all very happy that they can communicate and they all connected it to speaking the language, they did not mention literacy skills. They expressed feelings of happiness when they achieved communication with the locals:

“When I speak, I understand I have become better than before and I am happy that I can communicate with people” (S1).

The interviewees stressed the initial difficulties when learning Greek but the reward of speaking the language was considered great and it also boosted their self-confidence:

"...the first year when I came to learn Greek it was very difficult, the numbers, one, two, three, were very difficult, but when I learnt, I was very happy, that is I didn't think I could be able to speak Greek one day" (S3).

Even understanding people when they were speaking in the language of the host community was considered very helpful for the participants:

"What we have learnt helped us a lot with people and so far, when they speak, I understand, but I can't speak much" (S2).

So, it can be seen that taking lessons in a second language greatly facilitated the process of learning the basics in order to be able to communicate and had a positive effect on the refugees' self-image and confidence in their ability to acquire another language. The student from Afghanistan mentioned specific communicative situations, where he could not function in the host society because he did not have the necessary language skills:

"In the past, I didn't know how to buy a ticket, a book, where to find the library, I couldn't speak to people, say what I want, now it's ok, I have learned a lot of things".

He mentioned that he first learned what the Greek language was in the classes, *"how to learn, all that"*. It can be seen by this comment that second language learners, but especially LESLLA learners, have difficulty in acquiring literacy skills and they even need help to learn how to approach the learning process in general, something literate students have learned to do from an early age.

The students' main motivation to attend classes was to learn the language of the host country and to settle in Greece. All of the refugees expressed their desire to stay in the host country:

"I want to learn Greek because I want to stay in Greece" (S1),

Even if staying there is seen as something temporary:

"We don't know what will happen later, now we are trying to learn, now we are here we have to know this language" (S2).

The goal is to acquire native-like proficiency when speaking (*"I want to learn very good Greek, like a Greek"*) (S3), writing skills were not mentioned by the participants when they were asked what they wanted to achieve in the second language. Desire for socialization in the host country was also very emphatically stressed:

"I wanted to learn Greek because it was a big problem [not knowing the language], I couldn't speak with the people, I didn't have friends, that's the reason I wanted to learn Greek" (S1).

The friendly atmosphere in the educational setting was also considered important and they heard this from other migrants who had attended classes there before:

"They told us it's a good place and they [will] help us learn the language" (S3).

Attending classes brought more opportunities for socialization with other immigrants:

"Because I go to class, I go to school, there are people from many countries there and there I could find a friend, I can speak with everyone, English, Greek, whatever they want" (S3).

They did not prefer to have classes with people of the same nationality as theirs, learning Greek was considered the reason they attended and a variety of nationalities would offer more opportunities for practicing the L2:

"...it's not that important for me who goes to class, I only want to learn, and if they are from another country, it's better, we then have to speak Greek to each other" (S2).

It can be seen, therefore, that the students' motivation for attending the classes is social/integrative and interpersonal. Socialization and the possibility to meet people from other countries and form friendships with other students are considered very important, together with communication with the locals and the use of a second language for socialization with locals and other immigrants. The friendly atmosphere in the classroom and the opportunities the place offers for socialization with other migrants (not only their classmates) and locals who frequent there were also considered crucial:

"Yes, yes, I found some friends there, these people are very friendly, they talk to me and when I go to school it's ok" (S1).

The desire for friendliness is considered an important characteristic of the teacher as well. Regarding the role of the teacher, they stressed that they need to understand them and their needs and they desired a teacher who is friendly and close to the students:

"A good teacher is the one who understands the students, how I have to learn, they have to be friends, close to each other" (S2),

"A good teacher is one who understands what I want, how to learn the language, how he/she can help me" (S3).

The relationship with the teacher was directly connected to the effectiveness of the student's learning abilities and motivation:

"When I don't like the teacher, I can't learn, that's why I want to have a good teacher" (S3).

It is evident that the warm and friendly climate of the classes and the non-formal environment where students' needs are respected and the teacher is not constrained by strict adherence to a set curriculum and syllabus seem to make the migrant/refugee students feel relaxed and are conducive to better second language learning. The focus on speaking and not so much on homework which teachers follow also seems to suit the needs of the migrants quite well.

Except for the above, the migrants mentioned other reasons for learning Greek as well, not directly related to the classes, the teaching approach or the friendly atmosphere of the Immigrant Centre which offers opportunities for socialization. The Iranians both stressed the fact that they liked Greece, the weather and its people and they found the culture similar to their host country. The fact that local people are friendly to immigrants and refugees was stressed by everyone:

"In Iran we have a beautiful place and good people, so I understood that the people who live in Greece and the people who live in Iran have a lot of things which are the same, they are good people, they help others" (S2);

"I like Greece very much, Greek people are very friendly and all that is very good for me, I can go to school, to university, find a job, everything is good." (S1)

Although many refugees and migrants who arrive in Greece see it as a transit country to other European destinations, the migrants who participated in the research all said they wanted to remain, which explains their desire to learn the host language and why they decided to take classes in Greek. Additionally, finding a job is very important for all migrants and refugees so that they can survive in the host country and support their families. It is also a step towards better integration into the host society. Especially in Greek society, it is very difficult to find work if you do not speak Greek. The participants' attitudes regarding the relationship between knowledge of the second language and obstacles in finding work and becoming integrated varied. One of them does not attribute them to language (*"I think for other reasons, because now I can speak with the people, I don't think it's language"*), another thinks language is not the only reason (*"the first reason is that we don't know the language, but there are also other reasons"*) (S2) like the financial crisis and not having the relevant papers to get citizenship in Greece, whereas the third participant attributed them exclusively to language (*"it's only the language"*) (S3). So, their attitudes towards the relationship between language learning and the barriers

they face regarding social inclusion are not in accordance, as they all have different attitudes on this.

5. Discussion

The study results showcase the important role language plays in the integration and social inclusion of vulnerable groups, in the specific case, immigrants and refugees. Second language learning and immigrant/refugee integration/inclusion are interconnected. The findings support the importance of second language learning and confirm, therefore, similar research findings (Esser, 2006; Hammer, 2017; Kim, 2017). In addition, they bring to the forefront the importance of the knowledge of the host language to facilitate social inclusion in the host society. The speaking practice that the instructors in the study encouraged the students to engage in is very close to natural and authentic talk, as students talk about topics from everyday life (Wedin & Norlund Shaswar, 2019). The opportunity to talk to other students and their instructors about topics that are important and useful to them drives interaction and results in more learning opportunities, something which is crucial for migrant and refugee students, as the opportunities to use the host language outside the classroom can be limited. The results of this study tie well with previous studies wherein proficiency in the majority language is positively associated with more contact with members of the host society and increased well-being of minority members (Tip et al., 2019).

The study highlights the role of non-formal education in second language learning and migrant/refugee socialization and integration, which is better-suited to their needs than formal education, which is often not convenient for many migrants. Language classes are not always accessible for all refugees, especially women and older adults, with employment being a serious factor that limits attendance at language classes together with the cost of classes, travel costs, lack of childcare and lack of information about classes (Ives et al., 2021; Morrice et al., 2022). Consequently, non-formal education is often the only choice they have but at the same time, it can serve their needs in a more suitable manner.

From the study results it is clear that non-formal learning can have a positive contribution to L2 acquisition, as previous research has shown (Krupar et al., 2017; Morrice, 2016, Norqvist & Leffler, 2017; Wiktorin, 2017). Attending classes in a non-formal educational setting seems to lead to greater social inclusion in Greek society, broadening the students' relationships with other immigrants/refugees, with their instructors and with members of the local population. Through the language class, social skills in communication and interaction between the immigrants/refugees themselves and also other people are enhanced. The improvement in their language skills leads to more relationships with people from the host society (e.g. neighbors). Language is closely linked to social inclusion for their teachers, as well, as it constitutes one of the aims, they set regarding their teaching.

Unlike other immigrants, refugees have often experienced interruptions to their education or lack of access to education but even classes in the host country fail to meet their diverse needs and there is a lack of understanding of their capacities and needs (Morrice et al, 2021). The results of this study are consistent with this research and also that of Ives and associates (2022), who support that the needs of learners with lower literacy skills can also be addressed through less formal ways of learning. This surfaced in this study as well, as the curriculum and syllabus in the non-formal educational environment which was investigated are not fixed, there is more emphasis on speaking and cooperative learning opportunities and the students feel more relaxed in the friendly atmosphere of the classroom so as to explore learning together with their peers. Non-formal learning can cover the needs of these learners and can help migrant populations which require immediate results in language learning become able to function in their host country. Additionally, it increases motivation to learn the language of the host country and can promote the migrants'/refugees' social inclusion by creating a feeling of belonging to the small community of the class but also the wider community of the host society. The difficulty in acquiring literacy skills many migrants and refugees face, something especially true for LESLLA learners, requires trained instructors, who will be aware of the students' needs and are able to teach them how to approach learning in general, and a second language in particular. The teachers in the sample also lacked training and could not identify whether their students were LESLLA students but they compensated by using cooperative learning and creating a friendly and relaxed climate in the classroom. Therefore, there is a great need for training opportunities for teachers and specialized teaching material to support low-literacy migrant/refugee student language learning (Windisch, 2015).

Limitations of the current study need to be discussed. The sample of the study was small so the results are mainly pertinent to the specific group. Further research on the role of second language learning and social inclusion is recommended, in order to draw more reliable conclusions.

Note

Comments of the Greek participants were in Greek and they were translated by the author of the article. Comments of the immigrants/refugees were in Greek and they were translated by the author in English. To protect the study participants, no names were mentioned, only abbreviations were used, e.g. I1 (Instructor 1) or S1 (Student 1).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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