

Hartmut Esser
Migration, Language and Integration
AKI Research Review 4
Berlin, February 2006

Migration, Language and Integration: the AKI Research Review in brief

Language as the key to integration

The focus of this AKI research review is the significance of language for the integration of immigrants into host societies. The background is the emergence and consolidation of ethnic strata in virtually all immigration countries and the suspicion that certain deficits in terms of the command of the relevant national language play a particularly significant role – albeit not exclusively or independently of other possible influences. Because it fulfils a number of functions, language has a particularly significant role to play in the process of individual and societal integration. It constitutes both the medium of everyday communication and a resource, in particular in the context of education and the labour market. Furthermore, languages and accents can act as symbols of belonging or foreignness and give rise to differentiation and discrimination. Inequalities in terms of access to education, income, central institutions, societal recognition and social contact are significantly, although not exclusively, determined by linguistic competence in the relevant national language. This alone gives rise to a strong interest among immigrants in the acquisition of the national language, and when the corresponding preconditions are fulfilled, this goal is frequently achieved – at least over the course of generations. Like cultural diversity in general, linguistic diversity can lead to innovative stimulation and inter-cultural exchange, on the one hand, but can also give rise to problems of understanding and coordination, on the other, for example in the context of work situations or social contact. Thus, linguistic pluralism always triggers the need for a general communication medium which can usually be fulfilled through the teaching and acquisition of the relevant national language (or a generally valid lingua franca, which English has now become). This may also give rise to processes of linguistic adjustment which may, however, be hindered or entirely blocked by certain circumstances.

General agreement on the mechanisms and social conditions of language acquisition

The main concern of this research report is to identify the mechanisms, social conditions and consequences of the acquisition of the host society's language and the retention or loss of the language of origin. Given that the various academic disciplines that deal with language acquisition work on basic assumptions which are similar in substance, their perspectives may be incorporated into a single general theoretical model. Language acquisition and language retention are understood here as the outcome of the interaction of immigrants' activities or learning, on the one hand, and certain social conditions, on the other. The learning of the new language depends on basic motivation (e.g. the prospect of increased income), access (e.g. opportunities for contact or availability of courses), skills (e.g. general intelligence or particular ability to learn languages)

and the costs associated with learning (e.g. time involved, pressure to assimilate). The empirical basis of this research review is mainly provided by the results of multivariate statistical analyses of representative data sets from scientific and official surveys carried out in different immigration countries, i.e. in particular the USA, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Israel, and Germany. Despite the different migration and integration policy traditions that prevail in these countries, the findings for them are largely uniform.

Conditions of national language acquisition

The acquisition of the national language as the immigrants' second language is influenced by a range of factors. These include conditions in the country of origin and host country, the existence and structure of an ethnic community and – in particular – individual and family living conditions and the specific circumstances of migration. Age at migration and the duration of stay in the country of migration are particularly significant factors; the parents' age at migration and language skills also play an important role in the case of immigrant children. The attainment of a higher level of education by immigrants or their parents constitutes a clear advantage when it comes to second language acquisition. As opposed to this, significant linguistic distance between the first language and the language to be acquired, a high level of global usability of the first language (in particular English) and a presumably strong socio-cultural distance (xenophobia) between the immigrant group and the majority society can inhibit the second language acquisition by immigrants. The acquisition of the language of the host country is hindered in particular by a high level of ethnic concentration in the neighbourhood, intra-ethnic contact and opportunities for communication in the language of origin in the neighbourhood and the availability of media in the language of origin. Children find it easier to learn the language of the host country and a clear threshold can be empirically identified in terms of second language acquisition at between 10 and 12 years of age. This is not to say that competent language acquisition is impossible after puberty (even from a neurophysiological perspective), but considerable effort and motivation are required to achieve a high level of language competence and accent-free speech in adulthood. No suitable empirical studies have been carried out on the effects of (state-decreed) language courses, thus it is not possible to make any reliable statements in this regard.

Competent bilingualism remains exceptional

A clear trend for monolingual assimilation can be observed across generations of immigrants throughout the world. Competent bilingualism, i.e. the command of both the language of origin and the national language at a high (oral and written) level remain exceptional. The reason for this is that the conditions that promote second language acquisition are usually detrimental to the retention and competent command of the native language and vice versa. Thus, the more advanced the age at which immigrants enter a country and the greater their integration into the ethnic context, the more likely it is that they will retain their mother tongue and the less likely it is that they will successfully acquire the national language.

A good knowledge of the national language is central to educational success

School achievement is both directly and indirectly associated with linguistic competence and this means that competencies in the national language and language of instruction are decisive. This applies irrespective of the effects of other factors on the educational opportunities of immigrant children, such as enrolment in pre-school education, the choice of school, family circumstances and direct or indirect discrimination within the educational system. The conditions that have a positive influence on school performance in language-based subjects are generally the same as those that promote second language acquisition, i.e. a low age at migration and a higher level of education of the parents. At the same time, the school achievement of children and young people is particularly badly affected if learning takes place in schools and classes with a high proportion of students who do not speak the national language. Additional competence in the language of origin has no discernable influence on school achievement, and empirical research has yet to confirm that bilingual education has a particular effect on national language acquisition and school achievement.

Unfavourable conditions are mutually reinforcing

Unfavourable conditions, such as ethnic concentration in the neighbourhood and in (primary) schools, advanced age at migration or low level of parents' educational attainment, are mutually reinforcing in their negative effects. Unfavourable conditions in the wider environment are particularly disadvantageous to immigrant children with problematic family situations. However, immigrant children who are at such a multiple disadvantage benefit in particular from the improvement of individual circumstances, for example in terms of learning conditions in (primary) school. Therefore there are ways of terminating this spiral of mutually reinforcing negative conditions. Yet, such improvements in the situation of immigrant children can result in the loss of some of the (relative) advantages enjoyed by privileged native children which arise from the fact that they usually attend (primary) schools with low levels of immigrant children. Thus, problems of acceptance could arise among the native population if a more extensive ethnic mixing of schools and classes were to be proposed with a view to avoiding the particularly high ethnic concentration and isolation of immigrant children in (primary) schools which is responsible for a significant number of the problems faced by immigrant children, in particular those from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

Knowledge of the national language has a decisive influence on professional opportunity

In addition to the central factors of educational level and professional experience, comprehensive competence in the national language is extremely important for the labour market integration of immigrants. A lack of language skills reduces their chances of actually finding work and, at a higher level, is associated with significant reductions in income. The greater the extent to which an occupation involves communication and coordination and, in particular, if the immigrants' mother tongue has a low usability value on the global labour market, this is all the more applicable. Anyone who does not have a comprehensive command of the national language will be unable to make full use of their valuable professional experience and knowledge. On the other hand, the conditions necessary for labour market integration – for example, high level of

education and competence in the national language – influence each other. (“Statistical”) discrimination by employers who fear increased transaction costs due to accents or underestimate the professional skills of applicants and refrain from employing immigrants “as a precautionary measure” can all contribute to the deterioration of the professional situation of immigrants. They may then refrain from applying for positions within the host society’s labour market, especially if alternatives are available in ethnic niche economies. As a result of their (“exclusive”) integration into intra-ethnic networks and lack of language skills they may even be excluded from information and relations which could provide access to employment opportunities.

Bilingual skills do not (generally) pay off

Beyond the effect of mastering the language of the host country, the bilingual skills of immigrants, i.e. the command of a mother tongue in addition to the language of the host country, are largely irrelevant in terms of school achievement and labour market success. The only exception here concerns the linguistic skills in demand in specific market segments and the knowledge of English in general. Canada’s multilingualism policy has shown that the upgrading of a language (in this case of French) can have perceptibly positive effects on the labour market. However, this only applies to the established population in the Francophone provinces. Immigrants with “non-official” languages basically face the same problems in Canada as they do elsewhere and these deficits can only be reduced through adaptation to the relevant regional language. However, even if they speak one or both of the official languages (i.e. English and French), they still face significant disadvantages.

Ethnic resources largely insignificant when it comes to educational and labour market success

In general, and even in the context of a stronger transnational character of migration, the observable empirical relationships confirm the outstanding importance for (intergenerational) integration of the given institutional and cultural conditions of the relevant host country in all three areas of language, education and labour market. As opposed to this, there are few indications that ethnic resources, such as retention of the language of origin, bilingualism or access to ethnic networks, play a significant role in the structural integration of immigrants. Stronger ethnic ties and exclusive intra-ethnic relationships tend to hinder integration and can at best attenuate existing disadvantages in situations in which the relevant groups, ethnic enclaves and markets are sufficiently large. However, ethnic resources do not constitute an effective counterweight to ethnic stratification arising from linguistic and other deficits.

Some differences between immigrants of different origin have not yet been clarified

It has not yet been possible to fully explain some of the differences between the educational and labour market opportunities of certain groups on the basis of the aforementioned factors. In the German context, this applies to the position of Turkish immigrants, which is still relatively weak. In the USA it concerns in particular the disadvantages experienced by Mexican (and most other Latin American) immigrants, and the educational and labour market success of Asian immigrants. It is possible that a coincidence of specific conditions is involved here, such as the maintenance

of transnational contacts, high linguistic, social and cultural distances, large ethnic networks and the varying estimation of education. This subject requires further clarification.

Intergenerational integration, linguistic pluralism and ethnic differentiation

Despite the various differences, however, it is possible to observe a clear trend for linguistic assimilation among all ethnic groups over the course of generations – and, as a result of this, increased educational and labour market success. At the same time, ongoing migration processes can give rise to the constant or even increasing presence of immigrants who do not speak the national language. Thus a situation may evolve which is characterized by the permanent coexistence of linguistic and other forms of integration into the host society (down through the generations), on the one hand, and linguistic pluralism due to the presence of appreciable numbers of people with deficits in the national language, on the other. This is the norm in immigration countries as they are experiencing increasing international migration. The openness of the host societies – which varies in scope in accordance with the above-described conditions – and of ethnic communities to the process of (linguistic and other) inter-generational integration is of crucial importance for the long-term social integration of immigrants, the nature of the ethnic differentiation and inequality in the relevant host societies.

The full (German-language) report can be downloaded in PDF format from:
www.aki.wz-berlin.de.

Printed copies of the report can be ordered from:

Arbeitsstelle Interkulturelle Konflikte und gesellschaftliche Integration (AKI)

Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB)

Reichpietschufer 50

D-10785 Berlin

E-Mail: aki@wz-berlin.de

Tel: +49 (0)30 25491352

Fax: +49 (0)30 25491308