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The Invisible Learners in the Classroom: Macrolevel Politics and Microlevel Experiences of LESLLA in Italy

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Abstract

The increasing politicization of adult immigrant language learning in conjunction with insufficient financial resources and limited teacher training has resulted in inadequate language and literacy learning opportunities for many adult students. In 2009 and 2010, Italy enacted two pieces of legislation that require most immigrants to pass a preintermediate Italian language test in order to receive both temporary and permanent residency permits. This language test is mostly written. Consequently, it significantly disadvantages LESLLA test-takers. As we will show, in the anti-immigrant political context of Italy, the voices, experiences, and expectations of LESLLA students—in particular, migrant women—are largely absent from the political debate. Through the discussion of a small qualitative study conducted in Rimini, Italy, we argue for the need to document women learners' experiences in order to nuance, and perhaps even challenge, the political rhetoric that tends to privilege xenophobic and anti-immigration ideologies.

Introduction

Over the last decade, adult immigrant language learning has become increasingly politicized in Italy. This politicization was epitomized by recent legislation that requires the passing of a level A2 (in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR) Italian language test for both permanent and temporary residency permits. Rooted in often xenophobic and anti-immigrant political discourses, these new laws' central assumption is that (some) immigrants are not learning the Italian language and, therefore, are not integrating into Italian society in ways that are supposedly dangerous to "national security." On both the national and local levels, there are numerous teachers and other stakeholders fighting against these new laws through activism and advocacy; nevertheless, the laws' consequences can already be felt in adult immigrant language classrooms throughout the country, as legal immigration status is now directly tied to Italian language learning (Love, 2014). This is especially true in low-education second-language and literacy-acquisition (LESLLA) classrooms, as the language test is almost exclusively written and, therefore, requires a certain level of school-based literacy, which may be a prohibitive obstacle for some migrants who have limited education and literacy backgrounds. Compounded by large funding cuts for adult education and limited LESLLA teacher training throughout Italy, the result has often been inadequate educational opportunities for many migrant students who show the greatest need.

Given this politicization, there is a growing need for responsive and appropriate pedagogy for adult LESLLA immigrants. Yet, the symbolic and practical meaning of second-language and literacy learning from the perspective of migrants has mostly been ignored in language-in-education policy discourses and second-language acquisition (SLA) research agendas in Italy. This is particularly true for migrant women because, while little sociological research has been conducted on non-literate adult migrants in general (Gonzalves, 2012), even less is known about LESLLA migrant women in Italy. In this sense, we argue that

emerging-literate migrant women are often the invisible learners in the classroom, whose needs must be understood in order to strengthen LESLLA education for the most marginalized of students. In this chapter, we aim to juxtapose the political discourses of immigrant language learning with the voices of some emerging-literate migrant women in Italy. In order to do this, we will first briefly examine the impact of macrolevel immigration discourses and policies on adult Italian language education. Then, we will discuss the results of a small qualitative study that aimed to listen to and document the voices of some emerging-literate women in Italy in order to bring their experiences into a discussion that often neglects their unique subjectivities.

Immigration Discourses and the Politics of Adult Second-Language Learning

Italy has recently transformed from a country of mass *emigration* to one of mass *immigration*. Since the late 1970s, Italy received more immigrants than it sent emigrants abroad for the first time in the history of the Italian nation-state. Between 1870 and 1970, it is estimated that 26 million Italian emigrants left Italy and that millions upon millions more migrated internally (Totaro-Genevois, 2005). Today, foreigners residing in Italy make up about 8.2% (around 5,011,000 total) of the resident population and 8.4% of the elementary and secondary school student body (44.2% of which were born in Italy) (Caritas-Migrantes, 2012). In addition, it appears that several immigrant communities in Italy have begun to establish themselves as permanent linguistic and cultural minority groups (Chini, 2011). While Italy is a destination country for many migrants, it has also become a type of crossroads or borderland for immigrants from the global south heading toward the more prosperous countries of northern Europe. As Italy is both an immigration destination *and* a zone of transit for migrants, migration in Italy embodies the growing interconnectedness and complexity of migration today (Castle & Miller, 2003).

In this context, Italian academic research and educational discourses have increasingly focused on migration as a central theme in schooling today. Research on the acquisition and pedagogy of Italian as a second language has boomed over the last few decades. Yet, adult SLA and literacy education scholarship in Italy, as in most other national contexts, has weighed disproportionately toward students from relatively advanced and privileged schooling and literacy backgrounds, often overlooking the needs of marginalized adult LESLLA students (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; Lukes, 2011; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Minuz, 2005; Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2012). While the international dearth of research and materials has certainly made LESLLA teaching in Italy a challenge, other sociopolitical factors specific to the Italian context have further exacerbated the problem. This is because, as Burns and Roberts (2010) have noted, "second language learning policies are highly susceptible to agendas other than educational ones, and thus, to ideological changes which can lead to ad hoc, unstable, ideologically based and incremental funding structures" (p. 413). In Italy, the second-language learning of adult immigrants has been greatly impacted by anti-immigrant and xenophobic ideological and political discourses.

Exemplifying this politicization of adult immigrant language learning, the Italian legislature passed two pieces of legislation in 2009 and 2010, which, in addition to other obligations, require immigrants to pass a level A2 Italian language test in order to receive residency documents and even avoid expulsion in certain cases (Ministero dell'Interno, 2012). The 2009 law was passed as part of the *pacchetto sicurezza* (national security package), which requires all "mentally and physically" capable residents over the age of 14 applying for permanent residency status (*permesso di soggiorno di lungo periodo* or *carta di soggiorno*) to demonstrate their linguistic abilities through a standardized language test (with a few exceptions for those with Italian school diplomas or other formal Italian language certificates). In 2010, the *accordo d'integrazione* (integration agreement) mandated that immigrants (over the age of 16 who wish to live in Italy for over one year and receive a *permesso di*

soggiorno) sign an agreement aimed to "support" their integration into Italian society. This agreement obligates immigrants to complete certain activities within a two-year period or risk having their residency permits revoked or even being expelled from the country (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2013; Ministero dell'Interno, 2012; Venanzetti, 2011). Most problematically for LESLLA migrants, the Italian language test appears to be mostly, if not exclusively, written; consequently, it privileges test-takers with relatively high levels of formal literacy and schooling backgrounds. While there is no evidence that low-educated immigrants were specifically targeted by this legislation, the result has been that LESLLA test-takers are, in the best case, significantly disadvantaged and, in the worst case, unable to pass the test.

Throughout Europe, the national language testing of adult immigrants has emerged as an increasingly popular legislative tool that functions under the assumption that language learning and usage is a measurable indicator of an immigrant's willingness and ability to integrate into society (Hogan-Brun, Mar-Molinero, & Stevenson, 2009; Kostakopoulou, 2010). Yet exactly what is intended by the term *integration* is often unclear and vaguely defined, especially in terms of how adult language testing demonstrates such processes. This is especially the case in Italy, where rampant employment and housing discrimination, an infamously inefficient and arduous state immigration bureaucracy, and inadequately funded education and services make socioeconomic equality and mobility exceedingly difficult for many migrants (Calavita, 2005; Love & Varghese, 2012; Venanzetti, 2009). Yet, despite the elusiveness of the concept of integration, many policy makers, administrators, and adult Italian language teachers often cite integration as one of the most important motivations and outcomes of requiring national language learning for legal immigration status (Love, 2014). In this context, it is necessary to ask these questions: What language or register of the national language will be tested to measure integration? What level and category of proficiency will be deemed acceptable? And most importantly for migrants with limited literacy and education backgrounds, are reading and writing in the national

language considered to be essential aspects of integration? Addressing these issues is particularly important as more and more educational scholars have called into question and critiqued the capability of standardized language testing to measure the complex functions and usages of language in the everyday lives of individuals and communities (Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Warriner, 2007).

In addition to the politicization of immigrant language learning, the adult education system of Italy (known as the *centro territoriale permanente,* or CTP) has suffered from devastating cuts to school funding and an overall underdevelopment on the national scale (Boriani, 1999; Zabeo, 2009). As a result, instead of professional, public education for all adult immigrants, charity and other private/social organizations have developed language schools, which are often taught by volunteer teachers. In fact, these organizations now provide at least half of adult language and literacy education for immigrants in Italy (Venanzetti, 2011; Zabeo, 2009). For example, in Rome, a city with one of the largest immigrant populations in Italy, a significant majority of free language courses (around 60%) are conducted by volunteer organizations. Even so, there are not enough spaces available to satisfy all the requests for Italian language courses (Venanzetti, 2011). To be sure, volunteer-based schools have many important benefits for migrants and autochthonous individuals alike; these positive outcomes and advantages may include increased intercultural interaction, free or affordable courses, and education programming that is more flexible to immigrants' work and family schedules. Yet, this dependency on volunteer teachers in Italy may inadvertently devalue the necessity for well-trained professional adult language and literacy educators. Well-trained teachers may be especially important for LESLLA students, as significant evidence suggests that learners with limited literacy and education backgrounds learn a second language differently than other higher-education students (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; Lukes, 2011; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Minuz, 2005; Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2012).

Since the language-testing laws were first implemented throughout Italy, some adult SLA educators have expressed great concern to the

government regarding how the test's overwhelming reliance on writing and reading disadvantages students with limited literacy and educational backgrounds. As Love (2014) documented, the government appears to have informally responded to such concerns by giving more flexibility to each individual CTP to weigh the importance of formal literacy for passing the test. As a consequence, some evidence suggests that the uneven application of this exception for LESLLA students may be a cause of the discrepancies in test results on the national level. For example, initial reports by the Ministero dell'Interno (2012) state that, on the national level, 85% of all immigrants have passed the first round of the language test. In Veneto and Lombardy, the two regions with the largest number of test-takers, only 71.1% and 83.9% of immigrants passed the test, respectively. In Piedmont and Lazio, a respective 92.3% and 93.9% of students passed the test. One hypothesis for why such wide discrepancies between the regions have emerged may be linked to the flexibility of individual CTPs described above. More generally, highlighting difficulties on the part of the central government to communicate the new requirements, only 31.1% of all migrants with the appropriate prerequisites registered for the test, and many who registered didn't show up on the day of the test. In other words, the majority of migrants who were required to take the test by law were not present on test day. As this policy moves forward in the future and more immigrants are tested, we will be able to better interpret these statistics and understand the consequences of these laws on the legal lives of migrants.

From the Macro Context to the Microlevel Experience of LESLLA Students

In the second half of this section, we will step back from the macrolevel context of immigration and language-in-education policy in Italy in order to move toward the microlevel experiences of, expectations for, and meanings of literacy for a small group of LESLLA women in Rimini, Italy. Here, we aim to demonstrate how powerful ideologies and politics around literacy and language learning often differ substantially from the

personal ways by which migrant women see themselves as learners and possessors of linguistic and literacy knowledge. This discussion's focus on migrant women is important for many reasons. First, according to UNESCO statistics, around 21% of all women globally are non-literate, and about 64% of all non-literate people on the global scale are women (UNESCO, 2010). Second, as Gonzalves (2012) points out, despite this significant male–female discrepancy in the experience of literacy and non-literacy worldwide, there is very little research from the framework of gender that focuses specifically on female learners with no or very limited formal literacy. Gender-specific research is important since the meanings of both literacy and gender are inherently tied to ever-shifting power dynamics constructed culturally, socially, and politically. In other words, like many other socioculturally rooted activities, literacy is sometimes practiced and experienced by women and men in different ways, often with important legal, socioeconomic, and cultural implications and consequences (Rockhill, 1993). Finally, neither second-language nor literacy acquisition is a neutral, apolitical activity. Mathews-Aydinli (2008) argues that SLA is "more than *just* language learning but, rather, constitutes a social process of reconstructing a new *self* in the target language culture" (p. 203, original emphasis). Therefore, in the case of LESLLA learners, it is imperative to better understand how interwoven and intersectional identities—which encompass gender, personal life experiences, racial and ethnic membership, socioeconomic status, and culturally and historically contextualized views of literacy and language—might impact the process of learning and approaching formal literacy for the first time (Wallace, 2007; Ferdman, 1990).

We sustain that theorizing non-literate or emerging-literate adults in abstract terms outside the greater sociopolitical context and the deeply individual and personal experiences that constitute the lives of learners is not sufficient for a complex understanding of LESLLA students. In addition, we argue that the symbolic, economic, and cultural meanings, and the consequences and possibilities of literacy, can change considerably from one sociocultural, geopolitical, and personal context to another (Walter, 1999). As Warriner (2007) illustrated, "Literacy is a situated social activity

and a process—rather than something one has or does not have—and … its consequences are never predictable nor guaranteed but instead mediated by context, situation, audience, purpose, and relations to power" (p. 307). By understanding the experiences of emerging-literate migrant women in Italy, one may be able to shed light onto how the meaning of literacy is impacted by the migration process. This may be especially interesting in the case of certain migrant women coming from countries with significantly higher rates of non-literacy than those reported in Italy.

In the context of print-rich Italy, immigrant women with limited literacy might perceive themselves to be marginalized because of a sort of "double handicap" of discrimination and hardship—first, as immigrants, and second, as individuals with limited literacy (Goussot, 2011). In Italy, limited literacy in adults is commonly characterized in negative terms or, as in the case of current Italian language testing policy, ignored almost entirely. Therefore, because identity is often challenged and reinvented as a result of the migration trajectory (Cattaneo & Del Verme, 2005; Devereux, 1978), women might reevaluate their own limited literacy and, perhaps, internalize ideas of themselves as inadequate, unable, or incompetent, which is accompanied by emotions such as shame and feelings of inferiority. Such phenomena should not be underestimated, since "the feeling of marginality has been found to affect the development of student self-concept and academic performance and has been used to explain low academic performance and a high dropout rate among minority and immigrant students" (Lee & Sheared, 2002, p. 30). With these above considerations in mind, we will now discuss a study aimed at understanding the educational needs, experiences, and expectations of a small group of adult female LESLLA students in Italy.

Methodology and Analysis

This small qualitative study of semistructured interviews was conducted in Rimini, Italy, between February 2012 and April 2012. Using a convenience sample, coauthor Kotai, who taught an all-female literacy

class, contacted for interviews all of the students who frequented the class. Five of these women chose to participate. Also interviewed, in order for us to compare across schooling contexts, were an additional two women who studied the Italian language and literacy at another school and under a different instructor. The women had migrated from five African countries within the last 10 years—Morocco (Rihab and Ana), Tunisia (Lisa), Senegal (Asia), Nigeria (Beth), and the Ivory Coast (Rebecca and Clara). The names are pseudonyms to protect the interviewees' privacy. All the women had little to no schooling and had migrated from countries in which female non-literacy rates are relatively high (UNESCO, 2010).

A 30-minute-long semistructured interview session was conducted with each woman. The interview questions inquired about demographic information, childhood schooling and literacy backgrounds, the experience of being non-literate in the country of origin and in Italy, the reasons behind enrolling in literacy/Italian language courses, and the informant's future expectations for literacy.

The transcripts of 142 minutes of tape-recorded interviews were analyzed manually using quantitative content analysis of keyword frequencies, homonyms, and synonyms. The transcripts were coded and categorized to determine elements concerning the following: (1) how the experience of literacy is impacted by the migration process, (2) how one's sense of self is constructed in connection to perceptions of literacy, and (3) what symbolic and practical meanings the women attributed to becoming literate.

Results

Premigration to Post-migration Shifts in Literacy Perceptions

By comparing their experiences before and after migrating, it appears that the women experienced a small change in their perception of literacy over time. While these changes at times appear to be subtle, the data support the notion that perceptions of literacy are not fixed and

timeless, but are instead culturally situated and constantly changing. Almost all of the women reported having suffered from both practical and psychological complications arising from their limited literacy in their countries of origin. Subsequently, all of the women after migrating to Italy explained that they continued to perceive their limited literacy as problematic and a source of frustration, though not in the same ways as before they migrated. For example, Rihab described the socioeconomics around non-literacy in her native country of Morocco:

> I always found difficulties. … If you pay someone, she/he will write for you whatever you want, [for example] a letter. Because a lot of people haven't gone to school, therefore you pay someone to write whatever you tell him/her. (Rihab, Morocco, February 17, 2012)

Having to pay out-of-pocket for solutions to everyday literacy needs—such as going to the bank or the post office, writing one's name, trying to read warnings or labels, and searching for a job—was one of the ways that the women reported experiencing difficulties with their non-literacy in their countries of origin. Yet, even if limited literacy caused frustrations in their countries of origin, all the women revealed that the problems and concerns around non-literacy seemed to increase upon their arrival to Italy. This may be because Italy's employment market is heavily dependent on the services sector, which often requires a basic level of literacy. In any case, a certain level of literacy is often taken for granted. Lisa explains how her experience of non-literacy changed from her country of origin to Italy:

> When I had to go anywhere [in Tunisia], I usually could say that I don't read well. But there was always someone [who could read/write], so it was enough to say what I wanted … Now [in Italy], when I go to look for a job or to see something, I have [to be able] to read. For a job …

> when I don't understand something, I feel … bad. (Lisa, Tunisia, March 23, 2012)

To put it simply, as the socioeconomic context changes from the women's country of origin to Italy, the perception of the impact of literacy on one's life also shifts, even if subtly. Importantly, most of the women noted that their difficulties with non-literacy in Italy were coupled with other layers of discrimination that they experienced as migrant women. As we will now discuss below, these changes appear to have some significant psychological impact on the women.

Psychosocial consequences of literacy. The data provide evidence that perceptions of literacy are firmly rooted in the social context in which literacy is practiced and, consequently, in the psychosocial experiences of such contextually situated activities. Many of the women shared during the interviews that some of the emotions associated with non-literacy, which include shame, uneasiness, embarrassment, and feelings of lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, are derived from a lack of autonomy and the need to ask for help to complete daily tasks. Ana addressed this explicitly:

> I felt ashamed. When they showed me a piece of paper with an address and asked me where it was, I didn't know, because I wasn't able to read, so I had to say [that I don't read and write]. And when there was a birthday and they showed me the [birthday] card, I didn't know what was written in it and I couldn't sign it. It is such a bad feeling. (Ana, Morocco, February 17, 2012)

Quotidian situations that required literacy often provoked a sense of uneasiness or distress in the women, particularly in terms of literacy's social repercussions. In the interviews, the women commonly expressed how their self-perception and self-esteem were based on how they compared themselves to others in their social group, in this case at an

Italian language school: "At (our) school … everybody knows how to read and write[,] but I don't" (Rebecca, Ivory Coast, February 4, 2012).

When comparing themselves to others, some of the women addressed their limited education backgrounds with a sense of regret and shame. Rihab said:

> [I felt] really bad … always bad, nervous [and] asking myself, "Why? Why [didn't I go to school]?" [I was] thinking bad [thoughts] about my parents because they didn't send me to school … maybe it was just an excuse that I was always sick [when I was a child]. (Rihab, Morocco, February 17, 2012)

Rihab's sense of anger about her parents' choice demonstrates how literacy is inextricably tied to how it's practiced and experienced within the family, with peers at school, at work, and within the community.

The practical role of literacy. In addition to naming the social context, the women tended to attribute meaning and purpose to literacy as fundamentally tied to how it could facilitate the practical and personal goals they set for themselves. Literacy was seen as a tool or instrument for the realization of the life project. Finding work was a central component of all of the women's migration goals. Clara, for example, perceived her main difficulty not as her limited literacy but her inability to find employment. "The only difficulty I have now is work" (Clara, Ivory Coast, February 27, 2012).

In this context, the women often linked emerging literacy with work opportunities, which, with the high level of unemployment in Italy, can often be experienced as disheartening. Yet, despite the seemingly desperate economic situation described by the women, many of them expressed future expectations of literacy-driven positive changes in their lives, such as finding a job, acquiring greater autonomy, and being able to better understand the surrounding world. Clara emphasized how important it was for her to be able to carry out everyday life activities autonomously:

> [W]hen you can do something by yourself and don't need the help of someone else … when you go to an office and you are able to do everything on your own … now I can do some things by myself … Yes, [my life] could be very different. … I imagine that I could work, but if not working, anyway, I could do so many things by myself. (Clara, Ivory Coast, February 27, 2012)

It is important to note that acquiring literacy for its own sake was not mentioned by any of the women; instead, the interviewees focused on the practical implications and consequences of literacy.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the results of this small qualitative study, certain important themes emerge that nuance and perhaps even challenge the macrolevel political discourses at the heart of adult language-in-education policy in Italy. First, the women's narratives contest the central assumption of current language testing policy, which claims that adult language and literacy acquisition is apolitical, is neutral, and can be accessed and experienced equally by all learners based mainly on the migrant's willingness to study. Through the descriptions of the difficulties that the women faced vis-à-vis their limited Italian language and literacy skills, it becomes clear that this "one size fits all" language testing policy cannot possibly address the unique linguistic and educational needs of all individual migrants in Italy. Understanding and addressing the specific socioeconomic and personal contexts in which students develop as learners is essential to coming up with educational solutions that work for all students, especially those who are the most marginalized. In the case of LESLLA learners, this means adult language schooling that is capable of providing opportunities for learners who have experienced a lifetime of unequal access to education. By ignoring the unique subjectivities of each student and prioritizing standardized language

testing, current migrant language policy in Italy does not create the space to provide such opportunities.

The interviews detailed how the process of migration impacts perceptions of literacy and its psychosocial and practical consequences in the daily lives of emerging-literate women. For all the women interviewed, the hardships associated with non-literacy, while present in their countries of origin, were accentuated in Italy. One reason for this may be that the women perceived their literacy within the context of their unstable social position as migrants in the often-hostile environment of anti-immigration politics in Italy. Much like Goussot's (2011) concept of the "double handicap," the women believed that the various levels of psychological difficulty and socioeconomic hardship that they faced in Italy was based partially on their status as female migrants and partially on their limited literacy. An understanding of the adversity and discrimination that many migrant women experience in Italy weakens the assumption that Italian language learning, especially as demonstrated through standardized language testing, will greatly aid integration into Italian society. Instead, without major structural changes to the unemployment situation, housing market, and adult education system, which are supported by a fair and effective legal immigration system, integration is not likely, despite the push toward Italian language learning. Instead, the language-testing policy appears to create yet another barrier and obstacle in the already arduous immigration bureaucracy.

Concerning LESLLA classrooms, our findings confirmed Lee and Sheared's (2002) notion that feelings of marginality and low self-confidence can greatly impact the educational experiences of migrant students. As discussed before, the emerging-literate women in this study often expressed the idea that the sense of shame and discomfort associated with their limited literacy intensified in Italy, whether in school, the workplace, or the community. We argue that contemporary Italian language-in-education policy that mandates written language testing without consideration of non-literate and low-literate learners will not help to alleviate these complex psychosocial experiences and

dynamics. Instead, notwithstanding the neutral language of the law that supposedly aims to promote language learning, Italian policy may serve to further isolate and marginalize emerging-literate learners.

Finally, the common, macrolevel conceptualization that binds together the politics of language learning and the ill-defined notion of integration often ignores the unique backgrounds, motivations, and needs of adult migrant students. In turn, this context often renders invisible the emerging-literate LESLLA students in the classroom. Several of the women interviewed in this study made the link clear: Italian language and literacy learning serves a fundamentally practical purpose in their lives. In the political and policy-making arena, on the other hand, Italian language and literacy learning is spoken about in mostly symbolic terms, which conflates adult migrant language learning with rhetoric that defines migrants as dangers to national security and identity. This significant difference between the women's concentration on the practical functions of language and literacy and the government's focus on its symbolic importance may be one of the sources of the government's failure to provide adequate learning opportunities for many adult migrants.

In conclusion, a nuanced understanding of female migrant learners' experiences with limited literacy is becoming more and more important because migrant language learning has become increasingly politicized in Italy. The voices of LESLLA learners are needed in order to provide counter-discourses to the dominant narrative in contemporary Italian politics, which tends to equate the perceived ability of a migrant to learn the Italian language (as demonstrated through standardized language testing) with a migrant's integration into Italian society. In fact, the results of this small qualitative study point toward the need for adult schooling that is rooted in practical socioeconomic opportunities for adult migrants as a means to bolster Italian language and literacy acquisition.

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