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MOBILITY AND INCLUSION IN MULTILINGUAL EUROPE

THE MIME VADEMECUM





MIME
Mobility and Inclusion
in Multilingual Europe

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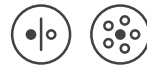
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30 Is English sufficient to reach out to newcomers before they learn the local language(s)?

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Local organisations such as municipalities and public service providers have the task to ease the arrival of new mobile EU citizens, migrants and refugees. Although there is wide agreement that immigrants should learn the local language to foster middle- and long-term integration, additional arrangements are necessary for welcoming policies. In many situations, municipalities and local organisations need to develop a new strategy to reach a linguistically diverse population that does not know the local language yet. It is particularly important in situations in which ineffective communication can threaten the individuals' life or basic human rights (health sector, justice, education). In addition, welcoming policies are needed for new arrivals.

What does research tell us?

To be effective, the agencies need to communicate with the arriving immigrants in a language they understand. Information about formal and informal aspects of daily life (regarding administrative procedures, access to the job market, housing, health and schooling, facilities and key cultural and sporting facilities) should therefore be translated into the newcomers' languages. English is often used as the default language for such purposes. However, experience shows that English is not enough to reach immigrants. Only some of them are fluent in English for a variety of reasons, such as being born and raised, or having lived in an English-speaking country, or because of their education and/or professional activities. Many, however, have no English skills at all, or they only have a limited command of English that would not be sufficient for effective communication.

A study among social workers in Brussels shows that use is made of the linguistic skills of both staff and migrants, in English and the local languages (French and Dutch), but only for simple communication. "Social interpreters" (who are certified for social work) are necessary for more complex interviews (De Rijk 2016.).

Illustration and evidence

From "Local Welcome Policies EU-migrants", in the cities of Amsterdam, Brussels, Dublin, Hamburg, Copenhagen and Gothenburg we know a bit more about mobile EU citizens and communication problems on arrival in a new city. In Amsterdam (The Netherlands) Bulgarians are seen as a "difficult" group. They often do not speak English' (*Welcome Policies 2016 Final report*, Amsterdam, p. 43). In Gothenburg (Sweden) "Romanian is the most common language to use" by organisations working with vulnerable EU migrants, prior to English and Swedish (*Welcome Policies 2016 Final report*, Gothenburg p. 39).

Policy implications

For this reason, municipalities, and other organisations in local communities that play a key role in the reception of new immigrants such as job centres, public utilities, housing associations, banks, hospitals, schools, sporting and cultural associations, should not limit their efforts to English only. They should adapt their language policies to the specific characteristics of the new arrivals and prepare translations adapted to the language skills of the larger groups. This requires awareness and knowledge of the linguistic makeup of the local context and especially the linguistic skills of immigrants.

In addition to material in different languages (languages of communication like English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and languages of larger groups), a version in the local language(s) should be made available to make sure that the information provided is accessible to local residents too, who might otherwise feel puzzled by the content of the leaflets and might feel excluded from the communication process, and possibly from specific arrangements and entitlements. It is relatively easy to give some attention to layout so as to enable the comparative reading of the same document in different linguistic versions for individuals reading them in two (for them) foreign languages. This does not only facilitate communication about content between migrants and local civil servants (or locals in their social network), but the brochures or flyers could also be used as teaching material in language courses for the acquisition of the local language(s).

For oral communication, local organisations also need to increase their awareness of their own linguistic diversity. They should encourage employees' ability to communicate in other languages than the official ones, so that these resources can be mobilised in urgent situations. A national system of distance interpreters that can be called by phone is an important resource – especially in the health sector. Municipalities and local organisations (such as hospitals) should join forces to create such a system if it does not already exist nationally. In certain sectors, especially in the health sector, the transition period in which interpretation/translation is deemed necessary to ensure effective communication and treatment, is much longer than in other cases, because a much higher level of language skills is required for newcomers to be autonomous in this domain; they need more time to achieve that level.

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1. www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/organisatie/ruimte-economie/amsterdam-europa/europees-project

References and further reading

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