Linguistic Barriers in Obtaining A Driver's License For Foreign Citizens.

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Abstract

This study aims to reflect on the role of language proficiency in acquiring a driver's license in Italy and the linguistic difficulties faced by non-native speakers. The secondary objective is to design freely available digital resources that can contribute to the acquisition of specific language skills necessary for obtaining a license. Obtaining a driver's license is a crucial step for the integration of foreign citizens into social and work life. Several studies demonstrate that limited access to mobility correlates with reduced ability to access various resources such as education, social services, and healthcare, impacting the health and quality of life of individuals, families, and communities [4]. It is important, therefore, to ensure equal opportunities for every citizen to obtain a driver's license. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider the role of language skills in achieving this objective. Despite the stable presence of non-native Italian speakers in Italy, a significant percentage of them express difficulty in attaining adequate Italian language proficiency for daily life needs. This is especially true for adult foreigners, who are precisely the ones who need to obtain a driving license. Real integration involves supporting new citizens and residents on multiple fronts, including linguistic support, recognizing that linguistic needs are diverse and manifold and integration relies on effective assistance in various language domains in which the learner interacts [10; 12]. The first part of the research focuses on identifying the linguistic difficulties that foreign individuals encounter in obtaining a driver's license. The aim is to identify potential linguistic obstacles present in textbooks, linguistic challenges during the theoretical exam, and practical tests. It is necessary to analyze the specific language required for obtaining a driver's license, including the associated vocabulary, in order to provide appropriate linguistic support. The linguistic analysis also serves the second objective of this study, which is the design and creation of freely accessible teaching resources that enhance the autonomy of foreign candidates in acquiring the specific language skills identified in the initial phase of the research. The underlying intention of this study is to develop content that can inform policies and practices aimed at improving accessibility and equity in the driver's license acquisition process.

Keywords: *Language proficiency; driver's license; foreign citizens; digital resources*

1. Introduction

We can understand the integration process as "the process of settlement, interaction with the host society, and social change that follows immigration," especially in its initial stages. At this point, migrants should be able to secure a place for themselves. As pointed out by Penninx & Garces-Mascarena [11], securing a place is a very literal task for migrants. It involves finding a home, employment, income, schools for their children, and access to healthcare facilities. Furthermore, it entails finding a place in a social and cultural sense, as migrants must establish cooperation and interaction with other individuals and groups, become familiar with and utilize institutions of the host society, and gain recognition and acceptance within their cultural specificity. It is emphasized that this process is a "two-way process" in which both the individual and society actively undergo a process of change and adaptation. The host society "is not left unaffected, as the size and composition of the population change, leading to the emergence of new institutional arrangements to accommodate immigrants' political, social, and cultural needs" [11]. Within this process of change, various dimensions are involved, including legal, political, and economic aspects. Despite the concept of integration and the definitions given to it being a problematic issue, it is currently used in all documents addressing the challenges faced by individuals who, for various reasons, plan their life paths in a non-native country. European documents and policies regulating this process also use the concept of integration to define the settling process of an individual or a group of individuals in a new country. Therefore, throughout this work, we will use this term, fully aware that it is a problematic

concept and has generated extensive debate, especially in academic literature [11]. A fundamental role in the integration process, as we have defined it, is played by the learning of the language of the host country. At the European level, some fundamental documents confirm the primary role of language learning in the integration of migrants. Within the Council of Europe, an institution whose stated mission is to "promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, which underpin its policy together with an enduring concern for social inclusion, social cohesion, and respect for diversity" [10], the LIAM project was initiated in 2006. The aim of this project is to produce materials for those involved in designing language integration pathways, as well as for all teachers who are engaged in teaching languages to foreigners. Within the LASLLIAM, published in 2022, the importance of adopting an ethical approach to language teaching is reiterated, considering each individual's multilingual repertoire as a value and recognizing its significance in shaping subjective identity. In this view, it becomes a source of richness and not an obstacle to learning other languages. Furthermore, within the introduction to the volume, it is emphasized that linguistic integration must respond to the right to access higher education and the right to "allowing migrants to develop their potential and participate actively in the life of the host country," taking on those linguistic skills required to navigate the public and work spheres [10]. Within the LIAM project, a series of documents aimed at those involved in teaching languages to groups characterized by vulnerability, such as refugees, were also developed. In 2016, the project for the creation of a Toolkit for the linguistic support of adult refugees was launched, with the aim of offering a series of tools, divided by thematic areas, that can be useful, especially to volunteers who provide linguistic support to refugees but do not have specialized training in language teaching. Another point of agreement among European documents and the literature on language teaching to adult migrants is the attention given to the real communicative needs of these learners. While focusing on the specific linguistic and communicative needs of learners is a fundamental aspect of designing any teaching path for any type of learner, its relevance becomes even more evident when dealing with these types of learners, whose social and psychological condition is characterized by a particular state of urgency [2; 9].

1.1 The Evolution of Language Teaching: From Form to Usage

In the 1970s, a shift occurred in the field of language teaching, redefining the focus of linguistic competence and the teaching methods derived from it. There was a shift from a definition of competence based on the mastery of linguistic forms to one based on the mastery of language usage. This implies that competence is defined based on the ability "to master not just a single variety of language, but a repertoire of varieties and registers, and to handle them appropriately to produce communicative acts suitable for specific situations" [5]. Consequently, the analysis of learners' communicative needs becomes paramount, serving as the starting point for designing educational programming and specific learning objectives considered as "discrete and capitalizable units" [5]. The choice of linguistic forms to teach is no longer based solely on linguistic criteria but primarily on external or extralinguistic criteria, identified through the analysis of the situations in which learners will linguistically interact and the type of actions they wish to perform within these situations [5; 3]. Only through the preliminary analysis of needs can one identify the most relevant situations and communicative acts for learners, to which the necessary linguistic forms can be correlated. Furthermore, the notion of need should be understood in a dynamic perspective, as the specific needs of learners evolve over time, based on new goals and linguistic competencies attained. This dynamism is even more apparent when discussing adult learners, who are characterized by greater social and psychological mobility, and it must be considered in course design. Another fundamental aspect in the teaching of adult learners is the degree of control that the learner perceives over their learning journey. It is essential that they actively participate in setting the goals of the educational path. In his works on adult learners, Malcolm Knowles [7; 8] argues, for instance, that an adult learner initiates or resumes an educational path only if they are involved in the discussion and negotiation of objectives, and if the learning process is based on their daily experiences, content they perceive as real and useful for their fulfilment [9].

2. Communicative Situations and Linguistic Needs

As previously emphasized, it is essential for those involved in language teaching to pay attention to the real communicative needs of learners. For adult foreign learners, in particular, a critical issue is their integration into the workforce within society [2]. Job insecurity not only leads to economic instability but is also linked to the isolation that characterizes the situation of many migrants and refugees. The risk is that a vicious cycle may develop where limited language proficiency hinders the

search for and acquisition of employment, making it increasingly unlikely for migrants to establish social relationships that would allow them to enhance opportunities for language practice. As Beacco et al. [1] highlight: "approaches which separate language classes from the other dimensions of integration are far less likely to succeed than integrated approaches that embed language learning in the workplace or some other participatory context and thus ensure that from the beginning the language of the host society is part of the linguistic repertoire that the adult migrant deploys in daily life." Despite the substantial volume of research in this field, ongoing research remains indispensable because it can genuinely determine the success or failure of the integration process. Bianco, R. & Ortiz Cobo, M. [2] underscore that focusing solely on employment is insufficient and demonstrate the multitude of communicative situations in which migrants must linguistically navigate. For example, they provide the testimony of a Pakistani refugee, Hamad, who emphasizes the need to obtain a driver's license: "The problem here is that if you do not have a car, you are disabled. I need a motorcycle to go to work. In winter, you cannot walk or cycle in the rain. Next year, I will go for my driving license. I need to speak Italian well to do it" [2]. Despite this point also being emphasized in the Italian adaptation of the Toolkit for the linguistic support of adult migrants, there are still no specific studies and resources available to address this need. Therefore, we aim to contribute to an initial analysis of this situation.

3. Method

To conduct an initial investigation into the impact of language barriers on the acquisition of a driver's license by adult foreigners in Italy, we have decided to use both the survey and the interview tools. These tools enabled us to gather some preliminary data for analysis. In the following sections, we will present what we consider to be the most significant findings.

3.1 Survey

The survey aimed to investigate the opinions of adult foreigners who, at the time of administration, were currently enrolled in driving courses. It was administered to six adults of foreign origin. The following areas were particularly examined:
- Motivations and the necessity of obtaining a driver's license.
- Difficulty in understanding the bureaucratic procedures for enrolling in a driving school.
- Difficulties encountered in following driving lessons and studying manuals.
- Perception of the language used in lessons being different from "common" language.
- The level of difficulty encountered in completing the exam quizzes.
- The level of difficulty encountered in practical driving lessons and the practical exam.
- Their perception of how their language proficiency influenced their driver's license acquisition journey.

Given that the survey was administered to only six individuals, the data is not considered suitable for generalization. Nevertheless, it reveals some interesting results that can serve as a starting point for future research. In all cases, participants responded to the question regarding their perceived competency in the Italian language with "quite well" (on the following scale: "I do not know Italian; I know little Italian; I know Italian quite well; I know Italian very well"). The first noteworthy result is that all participants defined the need to obtain a driver's license as "extremely important" (four participants) or "very important" (two participants) on a scale that included "Not important; somewhat important; Very important; Extremely important." Regarding the difficulty encountered in understanding and completing bureaucratic steps for enrolling in the driving course, it appears that this is not a particularly challenging aspect for the individuals who responded to the questionnaire. Out of the six participants, two reported no difficulties, three encountered few difficulties, and one participant encountered quite a few difficulties. Another interesting finding is that five out of six participants believed that it was necessary for the driving school instructor to explain technical terms better. While there is not total uniformity in responses, all participants indicated some degree of disparity between the language used in lessons and the "common" language. One participant perceived the language used in lessons as "extremely different" from common language, another participant as "very different," one as "quite different," and the remaining two participants as "slightly different" (the remaining participant did not respond to this question). Regarding the difficulty in completing the theory exam quizzes, the results are inconsistent. One participant claims to have encountered "many difficulties", one participant reported "quite a few difficulties", three participants "few difficulties", and finally, one participant claims to have encountered "no difficulties". However, it should be noted that two of the three participants who reported encountering "few difficulties" did not pass the exam. As for the practical exam, we only have the answer from one of the participants, as the others have not yet taken it. This participant reported encountering "a lot of difficulty" in the practical exam.

3.2 Interview

The interview was conducted with a volunteer who, within a humanitarian association, assists some foreign adults in the process of obtaining a driver's license. Below are the most significant excerpts from the interview.

Interviewer: *From your experience, do you think obtaining a driver's license is a necessity for the people you assist?*
Interviewee: *For all of them, having a driver's license would be essential. Some of them live far from their workplace in areas not served by public transportation, and they have to commute using bicycles or electric scooters in any weather condition, waking up very early to get to work on time. This, of course, limits their ability to seek or accept better jobs when the location is farther away and hardly reachable without a car.*

Interviewer: *In your experience, have they encountered difficulties during the process of obtaining a driver's license?*
Interviewee: *I have been assisting some people for a year now, and so far, none of them has obtained their driver's license. Only one attempted the theory exam, unfortunately without success. The others still have significantly inadequate preparation, even though they attend driving school lessons to which they are enrolled.*

Interviewer: *Do you think the difficulties are related to language proficiency?*
Interviewee: *Obviously, partial knowledge of the language makes it more challenging to understand the quiz questions. However, I observe that the Italian used in the quizzes, sometimes distant from what is commonly spoken in everyday Italian, is an additional cause of the mistakes they make. Sometimes, I am surprised by the language used in formulating the questions and the terms that are used. An example would be the use of the term "proiettore di profondità" to refer to high beams. There are many other examples as well.*

Interviewer: *Do you think it would be useful to create educational materials for language teachers to facilitate the understanding of the terminology used in the quizzes and driving manuals?*
Interviewee: *I believe having dedicated educational materials would be useful since they always have to rely on materials and texts written by Italians for Italians. However, I also think that for a foreigner who needs to learn or enhance their knowledge of our language, learning the terminology used in the driver's license quizzes could be a source of confusion.*

4. Conclusion

From the gathered information and the conducted interview, several significant conclusions emerge. Firstly, it appears that obtaining a driver's license is a pressing need for adult foreigners. This need is often linked to their daily mobility and job opportunities, particularly when residing in areas with limited or unreliable public transportation. As partially supported by the reference literature and primarily by the interview, these individuals frequently encounter challenges in passing the exams. While the survey responses do not reveal significant trends concerning aspects like the difficulty of the quizzes, the fact that even those who indicated having encountered "few difficulties" in completing them later failed the theory exam warrants revisiting and further examination of this issue. All questionnaire participants seem to express the need for clearer explanations of the technical terms used in lessons, and they perceive, albeit to varying degrees, a difference between "common" language and that used in lessons. In contrast, the interview clearly highlights the difficulty these individuals face in obtaining a driver's license, which is closely related to their language proficiency. The interviewed volunteer also emphasizes that the language used in the quizzes could pose challenges even for native speakers due to its specialized nature. However, he expresses doubts about the feasibility of using specific teaching materials to aid in understanding the linguistic content presented in practic al lessons and driver's license quizzes. Overall, we consider these findings as a starting point for conducting further in-depth analyses in the future.

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