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## Social-integration courses serve as a bridging function for migrants by increasing peer support and life learning opportunities

Emel Kiliç<sup>1</sup> and Wolfgang Jacquet<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Although migration and people's encounters with other cultures are significant life events, factors that influence migrants' relationships with host countries remain understudied. This study examined the socio-cultural integration of Turkish-speaking migrants in Belgium from their perspective, using a holistic approach for participants to share their stories. Fifty-nine Turkish-speaking migrants with different religious, national, and regional backgrounds who attended common classes in a (mixed) social integration course in Antwerp participated in the study. They were subdivided into six focus groups for interviews, which allowed participants to deconstruct their knowledge of local people, their subjective beliefs, and prejudices that separated them from other cultures. We found the focus-group interviews to be valuable interventions in the integration process. The study recommends that those who organise integration courses for migrants should approach this process with kindness, empathy, and an open mind.*

**Keywords:** Cultural-social integration; peer support; Turkish-speaking migrants; lifelong learning; Flemish society EU

### Introduction

After the Second World War, Europe experienced significant economic growth that necessitated a substantial increase in the workforce (Naydenov, 2018). Western European countries experienced an influx of immigrant workers in the 1960s—first from Southern Europe, followed by North Africa and Turkey. Thereafter, migrants from the former Eastern Bloc countries and the rest of Africa also arrived (Anciaux, 2014).

Since 2015, the migration crisis—which posed questions regarding human rights and democracy as values of the European Union (EU)—has been discussed in detail (Prisca & Vladimir, 2020). Globalisation, migration, integration, and multiculturalism have always been part of European history (Bade & Eijil, 2011). The question of migration and the social restructuring it necessitates has been the subject of many thinkers. Lévi-Strauss (1952) stated that every society has its own history and dynamics, even if they consider all cultures to be

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equal, while Furedi (2006) emphasised that fear is one of the dominant characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this context, migration and integration have become important concepts. Naydenov (2018) stated that European states have specific migration profiles. According to the official website of the European Union (2021), the number of people who resided in an EU Member State while holding the citizenship of a non-member country in 2020 was 23 million, representing 5.1% of the EU population. In 2020, 13.5 million people were living in one of the EU Member States while holding citizenship of another EU Member State.

Belgium has also witnessed an influx of migrants. Since the 1970s, specifically 1974, Belgian policy has become more restricted as the country limited labour immigration through initiatives that would ultimately slow down migration (Federaal immigratie centrum, 2014). In 2019, 114,578 migrants came to Belgium and obtained residence, of whom 65,065 were EU citizens. For more than half of EU citizens, resident permits are initially granted for professional reasons. The reasons for the influx of other country nationals include having a family in Belgium (45%), studying (17.5%), participating in remunerative activities (12%), and seeking international asylum (11.5%). Humanitarian and medical reasons account for a small proportion (2%). Other non-registered reasons, such as the limited number of unaccompanied minors (NBMVs) and victims of trafficking, are also factors (Agentschap voor Binnenlands Bestuur, 2021). Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore (2018) emphasise different ways of conceptualising migrant adaptation and migrants' diverse characteristics that shape integration opportunities and challenges.

The assumption that Belgium shares with the Netherlands that migrants would return stalled integration planning until 1985 (Bingöl & Özdemir, 2014). Petrovic et al. (2014) highlight that labour migration has occurred for over 50 years in Belgium, whereas the Flemish integration policy has only existed for 10 years. In 2014, the Flemish Agency of Integration formulated the integration policy, consisting of primary and secondary integration paths (Agentschap voor binnenlands bestuur, 2016). The primary integration path comprises a social orientation course, the first acquaintance with Flemish society, basic Dutch lessons, and career orientation. Guidance is also provided on possible careers, cultural activities, and studies. People are assisted in finding employment, along with individual support. By contrast, during the primary civic integration programme, migrants had to choose between either going to work or studying further. They would then act on their choice during the second integration programme.

(Agentschap voor Binnenlands Bestuur. (2021). The annual report of the Civic Integration Agency (Agentschap Inburgering en Integratie, 2015) declared that 37,045 new arrivals from the population register have been selected as the target group for integration.

The Civic Integration Agency (Agentschap Inburgering en Integratie, 2015) proposes that people gain knowledge of Flemish and Belgian culture and acquire skills necessary to participate in society through social-orientation courses. In addition to knowledge and skills, Belgian norms and values are also taught in the programmes (Agentschap voor binnenlands bestuur, 2016).



This study summarises and qualitatively analyses the opinions and perceptions of Turkish-speaking migrants who participated in social-orientation courses during the primary integration programme and their experiences of socio-cultural integration.

Turkish migrants were questioned about their situation before migrating to Belgium, their current situation, and their vision for the future. The questions posed to the migrants were the following: How will they use their social, cultural, and other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1987; 2018) to integrate with the new culture? How do they perceive harmony between their lives in the past and the future?

The Turkish immigrants were asked to narrate and discuss their problems, ideas, wishes, and solutions regarding the integration process. This study aims to better understand immigration, particularly the experience of Turkish-speaking people, and to explore how focus-group interventions, incorporating teachers, can facilitate the integration process. Thus, the group was deliberately heterogeneous, with language being the common factor.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Two groups of first-generation Turkish-speaking migrants were included in the study: those who were older than 18 years at the time of study (a nine-year old girl was present with her mother); who had resided for a long period in Flanders; and were following an integration path for foreigners. Participants were Turkish or other Turkish-speaking subgroups, such as Kurds, Arabs, and Bulgarians who were engaged in the same integration class for Turkish speakers.

Most participants had immigrated to Belgium from Turkey or Bulgaria, and two were from Denmark and Holland. The participants varied in occupation, age, and educational background, and among them, some had high school degrees; some never went to school; and some were university graduates. Their professions also varied, with teachers, students, artists, housewives, dancers, bar workers, caricaturists, psychologists, poets, professors, and unemployed individuals. Moreover, their families originated from big cities, small towns, or villages.

The youngest participant, an exception, was nine years old and was interviewed alongside her mother in the same focus group; the eldest participant was nearly 60 years old. Participants had diverse worldviews, philosophical and religious beliefs, and political thoughts. The interviews were conducted with a subgroup selected for diversity by including those who had integrated with the society years ago, had acquired an official language, and were employed.

The social orientation courses in the primary integration path were a primary factor in this research; therefore, we needed to collaborate with Atlas, an agency that supervises migrants' integration. The study, which investigated focus-group interventions, was also conducted with Atlas.

### **Method**

The study used a holistic approach based on intersubjectivity, hermeneutics, the hermeneutic circle, existential phenomenology (Heidegger, 2008), and transcendental phenomenology (Husserl, 1989), to examine participants' subjective experiences and feelings. Additionally, the

Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA), as part of hermeneutic phenomenology, was adopted (Palmer et al., 2010). The purpose of IPA was to understand and make sense of activities regarding a given phenomenon in a given context.

In focus groups, the participants interacted with each other, and teachers who were also immigrants with experience in the process joined the conversation and shared their opinions. The idea was to gather information until the ‘saturation point’. The focus group participated in meetings and informal activities in the class, such as eating, drinking, sharing local dishes, and chatting together, which facilitated students’ free self-expression within the group.

### **Analysis procedure**

This research focused on participants’ experiences with, and ideas of, potential ways to improve adult education and the socio-cultural integration process. Therefore, reliability was a prerequisite. Therefore, a thematic narrative analysis was applied, which focused on stories and sought to identify common elements across cases to theorise about (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). This form of analysis involves reading through transcripts several times, inductive coding, developing themes and subthemes, and identifying core narrative elements associated with each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Accordingly, validity was confirmed by cross-referencing within the research area.

The participants were informed that their participation in the study is voluntary and all efforts will be made to keep the data confidential. A letter seeking permission to conduct the study was sent to the organisation as well as the teacher involved in the study. All participants provided their informed consent. The names of the participants are anonymised. The study design was approved by an institutional agency.

### **Results**

The participants cited several reasons for engaging in integration courses—also called citizenship courses. While some voluntarily joined the courses, it was obligatory for others.

Respondent 26 explained that he wanted to know Belgium better and believed that the course was necessary for adapting to society. He said, ‘The course helped; we are informed of the place we live. Some people have been here for 30 years, but they don’t know anything about it. I am happy to join the course’. Respondent 22 considered the course useful regarding health [such as consulting a doctor] and paperwork. Respondent 21 stated that he had wanted to obtain comprehensive and useful information but had a few friends when he arrived in Belgium; therefore, he could benefit from the course. Respondent 20 aimed to complete his social-integration process in the new country.

Respondent 39, a 42-year-old housewife who came to Belgium 15 years ago, explained her reason for joining the course by stating that she wanted to learn about the Belgian life. She had seen and visited many places, such as museums or organisations, for a job, and supported migrants to establish themselves in the new country. She also said that with a guiding teacher, she saw places differently, and it helped her adapt to Belgium and learn about its laws and cultural issues. She said that she had not completed the integration course earlier because she had to raise her children alone, and nobody could take care of them while she attended the course. She shared her feelings in an informal way during the focus-group interview saying, ‘we know each other better now’. Other participants agreed with her.



The respondents, who had already interacted with native or international citizens, learnt from these experiences. Their classmates, who could not meet any Belgians because they belonged to a closed community, could evaluate during the course their cultural fear and asked others how they might have undergone these experiences. Respondent 38, a barman who had spent eight months in Belgium and was married to a native Belgian, had positive interactions with Belgians and shared them with his group and classmates. He visited children's organisations with his son and spouse and went to music events in his leisure time. He played football with his Belgian friends once a week. Conversely, Respondent 30 could not meet local people. She is a married woman of Kurdish origin who came to Belgium after marrying a Turkish man. She described her experiences with interactions with Turkish people and said that she mostly visited them with her mother-in-law. She jokes, 'wherever my mother-in-law goes, I go there too'.

The respondents assisted each other in their adaptation process during the course. They did not feel lonely when they supported each other, especially during festival days in the new country. The social-integration courses performed the bridging function for the participants; the respondents stated that it helped them maintain their culture while learning about another. For example, Respondent 6, a 31-year-old housewife from a small Turkish town, said she felt sad and lonely on festival days. She was emotional when she said that it had been more enjoyable in her homeland. However, with the integration-course group, she experienced valuable joy and pleasure. She said, '...I felt like I was experiencing the holiday today, right now'. Three groups of people celebrated traditional festival days differently. The first group, which attended the focus group on the first day of the Ramadan celebration, felt somewhat alone because they did not know people around them and were used to celebrating with a large group of family members. The second group could celebrate with large groups of family members. The third group, which mostly included participants who attended interviews, did not express any special feelings about celebration days, such as Ramadan, because of religious indifference or negative experience.

The teachers made vulnerable students in the focus group confident by saying that lonely feelings would pass with time. They discussed their experiences of learning the rules and norms of the new country and shared their feelings. Respondents who knew the language better helped others with their paperwork. They mentored those who needed help to understand and solve bureaucratic problems. Lower-educated respondents felt there was insufficient support in their environment to obtain advice or language aid, or interact with local people. They belonged mostly to closed communities, and their predecessors also maintained some distance from native residents. The respondents acknowledged this gap and wanted to experience the possibilities of integration because they did not receive sufficient support from earlier generations of immigrants. According to some respondents, the older generation simply wanted to keep their closed communities and did not want to guide them. Therefore, most respondents shared the vulnerabilities of not speaking the language and not being independent. They could either stay in their closed community, or be active in society because of the opportunities offered by the social-integration course. In the second group, the respondents who had been successfully integrated into the country for a long time, advised new migrants to be open to the native population, try to practice the language, and choose a place other than a ghetto to communicate with Belgians and to feel their receptivity.

Teachers with immigrant backgrounds empathised with the participants and were flexible towards them. People who had recently migrated stated that they faced difficulty in hospitals because they felt judged by doctors and nurses based on their inability to speak the language. Respondent 59 claimed that citizens had a right to complain but that they should not generalise the entire society—notably, nurses come from various countries. Respondent 59 said that new migrants' responsibilities include learning the language; however, doctors have the ethical responsibility of caring for all patients without judgment.

### **Suggestions and expectations regarding the integration course**

The participants shared various feelings about integration courses and said that the course allowed them to make friends, build a social network, discuss their future plans, and find ways to realise them. They said that they learnt a lot about useful aspects of daily life, such as social values, norms, and the types of responsibilities needed to reach their future goals. Highly educated immigrants were not always satisfied with integration courses, feeling that the courses were better for lower-educated migrants.

While Respondent 28 attended the course because of a contract with their organisation, Respondent 24 worked during the week and could only follow the course on Saturdays. He shared his feelings about the course as follows: 'the orientation course could be better, but it's good. We are happy now'. He further stated that he could make friends during the recess:

'I would very much like to own a house here. I guess we will face many issues. Traffic is an example. Half of my time is spent in traffic, where I can learn traffic rules. When a policeman stops me, new ideas can arise as I think about what I should do, since each individual cannot be treated in a different way'. (Respondent 24)

Respondent 68, a 28-year-old electrician, came to Belgium as an asylum seeker. He opines as follows:

'As we started this road, we all set out with the same responsibility. In Belgium, there were separate systems for the Flemish and French regions. When I first arrived, I stayed in the French region, where there was no integration course. I ran into it here when I got here. I was working, and my time was troublesome. Apart from that, there are other things I had to do. There were social things. While I was thinking of having time there, I started the integration course at the weekend. We started out of necessity, but the course had its benefits. Maybe, in ten years, we will learn our rights and understand the law. (Respondent 68)

Respondent 27 has been in Belgium for less than one year. He said, 'The course wasn't compulsory for me; I wanted it completely myself. I wanted to stay in Belgium permanently. The hours are, maybe, a little longer, and for working people, it gets shorter at weekends'. Respondent 25, a 35-year-old driver from Bulgaria, said he could only follow the course on weekends, as he worked during the week. He said that he had learnt a lot about Belgium that he had not known previously.

Respondent 43, who was 26 years old and moved to a Flemish town, said he was learning about laws and rules. He said, 'I see the course as an opportunity; it has been good for me. It's already a compulsory course'.



Respondent 20, a 41-year-old driver from Bulgaria, who was living in a ghetto-like community, said that he obtained sufficient information on the integration process from social media.

‘New migrants come with hearsay; everyone thinks they know “everything” but none of it is true. When I first came here, I went to Atlas on the third or fourth day. Applying to institutions and finding directions is a big problem here. There is no accurate information on social media. It goes with the age-by-date logic; it has been seven months, and I could not still obtain information that I required. We had to go to the language course in July-August. To survive here, it would be a great convenience if new migrants could obtain information on social media. However, talking to four men in the coffee house and three ladies in the neighbourhood does not work. We get incorrect information. Therefore, we’d better get some concrete information on the Internet. Unfortunately, we could not acquire proper information on Belgium. I had no means to get information except the temporary session in which I am taking part for a month and a half and this citizenship course. I don’t know what else I can say about it; people come here because of their spouses or political reasons and it is important for us to get the right information, which is available in other countries’. (Respondent 20)

Respondent 66 works as a barman. He is as highly educated as Respondent 27 and clarified that he did not learn much from the course. He believed that if the course was not mandatory, the quality of education would be higher. He wanted to freely choose the language of the integration course, stressing that a reform of these courses is necessary, as in other European countries.

### **Long-term interaction**

Respondent 59 shared his opinion about the integration course as an expert, saying,

‘Students attend the integration course and learn the language. After a course is completed, students lose their contact with us. I want to consult more but, after the course is finished, they get their certificates and leave. We do not know whether they will find a job in the community or find a place. We direct students to take steps to fulfil their future plans. However, we do not know about their development after the course. For example, when we see students outside the class, they inform us about themselves. Apart from this, we do not get much information. Two groups are now coming; one that wants to live here for a long time by integrating, and the other group is full of new migrants. During the first interview, we asked them about topics relating to them; they want to acquire information about the things they need to learn. Students do not ask us many questions. Only if they have personal problems, do they ask questions to get assistance’. (Respondent 59)

Respondent 58, an integration-course teacher, stressed that the social and cultural integration course should be called ‘the citizenship course’, instead of ‘the integration course’, to give it a more positive connotation. He said that they refer to it as such in practice. Respondent 59, an expert integration-course teacher, suggests a feedback day for the students after completing the course. As a teacher, he wants to guide his students after they have received certificates and to follow their progress. He said that he had proposed it; nonetheless, the people



responsible blamed the situation on their budgets. He said that lessons could be changed, but the course was generally three times a week for daily groups. He further explained it by saying,

‘It is important to make it obligatory. Apart from that, no one would come other than those with higher education. Before 2000, it was very rare for a housewife to apply for an integration course. Women who come now have higher education like men. Basically, the education of those who came in recent years is nil. As I am active in civil society institutions and mosques, they begin to send them to me, thinking that this won’t harm them. Most of them are still not sending people’. (Respondent 59)

Respondent 58, an expert who gives integration courses to Turkish-speaking immigrants, described the type of information the participants could learn through the course. If we asked them at the beginning of the course whether they knew about the values related to the Belgium community, their answer would be, ‘no.’ Therefore, we asked them about it at the end of the course. Apart from this, we discussed what democracy is in the course. Furthermore, in this building, we have established a division named ‘the democracy factory’. We explained ‘democracy’ to them in the democracy factory as part of the course and concepts, such as human rights, individual rights, responsibilities, and communal obligations. Therefore, the purpose of this course was to encourage students and make them understand what kind of a country they had come to, what kind of a culture they are faced with, as well as the values of different countries. If their habits do not conform to country norms, we make recommendations. saying: ‘This is not fitting. Give this up. If you do not give this up, you will have problems in the future’. However, we do not try to change people, but only inform them about the situation’. (Respondent 58)

Respondent 58 clarified that he informed participants about many things, such as, ‘social corruption’. ‘For example, if you have land or a house in Turkey, it is not suitable to live in social houses there. If someone receives an unemployment payment, they cannot work illegally. We informed them by saying that such actions constituted social corruption and fraud’.

### **Voluntary work, personality, motivation**

‘They want integration, but the mere statement that ‘we obey law and comply with rules’ is not enough. Laws are written, but there are unwritten rules. Rules are not specific. If you do something outside the community it will not be appreciated. Your actions while getting on or getting off trams and your actions at hospitals attract attention and not your personality. If you take one step, I will take one too. I tell you that you have to do things that will not harm your values and personality. On the third day, we will meet after all these things. You cannot be a citizen by just working and paying your taxes. For example, you can participate by doing sports, music, football, theatre, language courses, or voluntary work. However, there can be various difficulties. They can reply that they will be prepared in all subjects, which originates from both parties. Even if it is the most beautiful place in the world; if you do not like it, it won’t work. Loving is important here. Negative expressions can be expressed like: “It always rains here; there are difficulties every day”. One day, someone told me: “Teacher, look at this cold”. I said: “You are from Sivas”. He said:



“It is not that cold there.” We looked online, and it was minus 17 degrees. When they go to Turkey, they praise things here. In Belgium, everyone waits for their turn. There is no bargaining in Belgium. If you say you are a guest, this will block your integration’. (Respondent 59)

### **Cultural integration of highly educated and less educated migrants**

Highly educated participants were more open to new challenges and had opportunities to adapt to the new culture. Respondent 17, a 43-year-old woman with a Kurdish background, came to the country from a small town as a refugee. She said she was afraid of the language because she did not know it. She felt isolated from the others because she could do her job, and not go to the doctor. Moreover, Respondent 18 was a Turkish, came from a large city, and expressed courage in saying, ‘We’re taking the first step right now’.

Humour between facilitators, respondents, and researchers created an atmosphere wherein ideas were welcome. Receptivity towards trainees and their warm support and complete openness helped them build confidence and secure relationships in the new country. It also helped them talk about serious problems, such as their vulnerabilities in the new society. Furthermore, it helped the participants feel proud of their talents and abilities and share them with each other.

The guides for Turkish-speaking immigrants were completely open and shared their experiences as experts. The counsellor also played different roles. First, he played the role of a supportive or motivating teacher. Second, he offered guidance not only in realising language skills but as a co-parent in a therapeutic role; for example, to help them address family problems or give lessons related to sexual health. Third, he provided information on the Internet to support migrants in their family relationships, particularly those who were asylum seekers or experienced vulnerable situations. Facilitators’ openness in sharing their challenges helped the participants manage the difficult process.

Respondent 60 described her experiences by saying, ‘The Atlas agency was the vehicle. We had waited six months for my degree to be recognised, before my journalism and psychology degrees were recognised at an undergraduate level. Through the psychology association, I was told I could do therapy, although my degree as a clinical psychologist was not recognised. I had to take two classes; however, after the age of 50, it would be difficult for me to learn the language and teach them. Therefore, I opened my clinic. The people who speak Turkish here live in very difficult circumstances. Therefore, they don’t want to pay a psychologist’.

Respondent 61, a refugee, explains:

‘In the period when my wife came, there was a change in different legal regulations in Belgium. You couldn’t go to a language course without a residence permit. So, she couldn’t go to the language course because she didn’t have a residence card, which had a very bad influence on our relationship because I was the reason she didn’t go to the language course because she had chosen to live with me. Then I went for two years; I was so enthusiastic, and went to two language schools. In the end, it’s about practice; I understand what is said, I express myself, but I can’t speak forcefully or fluently. I had learned French, so I had a few words in mind. People here speak three

languages in secondary school. Therefore, when we have problems in the government office, they speak English, while we speak Dutch because we don't speak English. (laughs)'. (Respondent 61)

Highly-educated respondents highlighted the fact that the process was taking a long time, and if they did not get the equivalent certificate, they did not know how to find their place in society. New migrants are provided temporary residence permits that depend on the status for which they have applied. If their status is that of an asylum seeker, the permit will be valid for a very long time, even up to two years. However, for people in a long-term relationship, the permit will be valid only for six months. The process took longer for the respondents and posed limitations for implementing their future plans. Accordingly, the respondents, particularly the highly educated migrants who recently arrived, wished that the process would be shorter because they had invested their time in learning the language and following the integration process. Having no equivalence of their diploma or little chance with their talent and skills, they felt frustrated and wished for efficient guidance to prove their values and talents within the labour market. They think that their requirements to fulfil their responsibilities, such as learning the language, being active in the labour market, and being motivated to realise socio-cultural integration in their new country, should be shared with decision-makers.

Respondent 55, a Bulgarian Turk highly educated with a degree in engineering, was pleased about attending the course, even though it was not compulsory for her as a European citizen. She finished the course years ago and is working for a company:

'People who come from Europe generally have fewer problems because there are better agreements between European countries concerning professional recognition. In this regard, people ask for professional recognition, whose procedure is easier than that of academic recognition, which is mainly for people who come from outside the EU'. (Respondent 55)

Respondent 56, a highly educated Turkish-speaking immigrant, is a physician but works in a factory. He followed the course a few years ago, and found it interesting, saying he managed to learn about his personal rights, 'First of all, I get respect as an individual, and I have noticed that I am an individual'.

Respondent 13 had a career of 25 years as a professor. He came to Belgium a few years ago as a refugee. He worked in public universities, sharing his frustration with the labour market after following language courses and with the lack of sufficient support:

'We're dealing with empathy, and I teach communication. I know what communication is. I'm so sorry if they don't care about me, but what can I do? There was a study at a university in Limburg, and I joined it. I told the teachers there not to overshadow us, that we didn't want anything else, and to be open to us so we could do our work. Let's learn this language; that is, to provide such comforts. Everyone in the system sees everything. To be able to do enough of our job, they should not marginalise anyone'. (Respondent 13)

Respondent 54 was a 50-year-old expert and, as part of his professional occupation, gives guidance to new migrants. He agreed that the process takes longer for new migrants,



particularly those with academic degrees. Accordingly, they must wait six months for diploma equivalence and even longer for long-term residence permits. Moreover, they can begin a social-orientation course and learn the language. He said that people who come for family reunification get permanent residence permits more quickly than those who come here based on cohabitation, because it leads to an investigation. Meanwhile, those who come as asylum seekers are first given a temporary residence permit until they are recognised. There are exceptions; however, people can only get exempted if they cannot prove their status and submit an incomplete dossier. For example, if someone has a diploma but does not have a transcript or cannot submit a thesis, the authorities can assess the claim as an exception. People who have fled their country of origin cannot always request documents. Furthermore, those who come for family reunification can ask for documents because they can return voluntarily if they want to put their matters in order. Therefore, they must be able to submit a complete file.

## **Discussion**

In this research, participants had opportunities to express their feelings and opinions about the socio-cultural integration process through adult education in an informal way. This informal context allowed them to share their individual and social needs and find support. They expressed their feelings, suggestions, and ideas transparently and described the process from their perspective, a process underlined in phenomenological analysis. According to Elias (in De Mette et al., 2021), ‘phenomenology’ refers to a theory that explains the perception of phenomena as they appear. We aimed to consider participants’ subjective experiences and feelings. We aimed to collect data to understand the essence of participants’ mind through hermeneutical process. To achieve this, we used an ‘open question’ and semi-structured focus-group interview. This was conducted in an informal setting. This approach allowed respondents to feel more comfortable and share their experiences. Thus, we could gather valuable information for the research. Furthermore, the disadvantages of the culturalising approach, which operates according to the assumption that people’s communicative behaviour can be explained solely based on their ethical, national, or religious background, were recognised (Hoffman, 2002: 66), providing the opportunity to bring various types of Turkish-speaking people together to talk about their integration process.

Fundamentally, the respondents and counsellors wanted the course to have a long-lasting effect on their integration process and to help them realise their future plans and be active in society. Furthermore, counsellors want course participants to be able to return to their groups/communities and provide feedback on their difficulties and progress to get further support. Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Van Zichem (2013) emphasise that teachers’ feedback enhances students’ motivation. Van Zichem (2013) specifically stressed the significance of holistic education. The counsellors also want the trainees to engage in voluntary work and adult education to find their own way, but their limited time meant that they could not realise this.

## **Suggestions and expectations regarding the integration course**

During the focus-group interviews, participants reported that they could make friends, build social networks, and talk about their future plans and the ways to realise them. The respondents emphasised that they could only obtain limited information on social media and

biased information from their environments. Further, the participants repeatedly raised practical attendance problems in integration and language courses.

Spierts (2005) emphasises the significance of emancipation and participation. This is a challenge in their present organisation and life, as pointed out by the participants, and the emancipatory effect is clear from their responses. They learn a lot and acquire information they can use in daily life—for example, social values, norms, and responsibilities they must take up to reach their future goals. They can reconstruct their understanding of norms and values within the group, thereby receiving peer support and new perspectives. However, highly educated immigrants have higher expectations that the courses should be more effective for lower-educated migrants, but they are not satisfied (Kiliç, 2016).

### **Benefits of the integration course for the integration process and the role of the trainees**

Experienced experts emphasise the importance of long-term integration. They shared their opinions on the integration course that students attend while learning a language. However, after a course is completed, students obtain their certificates, leave, and lose contact with them. Thus, the teachers do not know whether their students ultimately find jobs or a place in the community.

Regarding integration classes, teachers' cultural sensitivity (Hoffman, 2002) and authenticity help the participants feel that they were communicating with a real person. Van der Laan (2000) discussed the fact that migrants could receive considerable encouragement from positive contact with teachers, which could be intensive or personal, or both.

Therefore, the sense of humour shown by facilitators, respondents, and researchers indicated that they welcomed ideas. Trainees' receptivity, their warm support, and their complete openness helped the participants build confidence and secure relationships in their new country and gave them a space to discuss serious problems, such as their vulnerabilities in the new society. Accordingly, this helped them share their talents and abilities with others. As mentioned earlier, migrants do not speak any of the required languages at first, and the facilitators try to support them. The respondents were generally satisfied with their tutors' support. Techniques and teaching are essential to the learning process (Jarvis, 2004: 144–145). In this regard, Staatsen et al. (1994) emphasised that one's ability to extract cultural information from teaching material and advise others on the use of authentic materials is vital. Accordingly, Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) stated that the goal of adult education is not to prepare people for life but to help them be more successful. Dewey and Dewey (1915) stated that teachers should try to make their lessons practical and effective.

### **The process can take long**

The respondents, particularly highly educated migrants, wished the process were shorter because they were investing their time in learning the language and following the integration process. Furthermore, there was no equivalence of diplomas or little chance of practicing their profession, which made them feel frustrated (Kiliç, 2016; Nohl, 2008). Applying their talents in the Belgian labour market was the key need of the highly educated respondents (Kiliç, 2016; Nohl, 2008), who thought that requests should be shared with decision-makers.

### **Empowerment of migrants within the integration process**



Experienced migrants emphasised that volunteer work, positive feelings, and the feeling of belonging to one's new country, along with migrants' personality, background, and motivation can be factors that influence the integration process. In addition, Van der Laan (2000) states that individual support and motivation are important for people in difficult situations. According to Spierts (2005), developing competencies is important to avoid vulnerabilities. Furthermore, motivation is a significant factor affecting learning capacity (Stiggins et al., 2002). In this respect, highly educated participants were more open to new challenges and had more opportunities to adapt to the new culture.

Adult education is a significant instrument for changing society (Jarvis, 2011). Those who migrate to a new social group complement each other. Turkish-speaking immigrants have a great opportunity to break intercultural tensions, enter into dialogues with each other for peer support, receive informal education, and do voluntary work and other activities together. Accordingly, Jarvis (2004) determined that adults consider participation in the learning process important because it fosters self-confidence and self-respect. During the focus-group interviews, new migrants and their teachers used the techniques of 'reciprocal teaching' (Martin et al., 2018; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994), a contemporary application of Vygotsky's theories. This method can be used in classroom settings. The cooperative learning method was also applied, which involves dividing students into small groups to help them discover new concepts together and help each other. This is particularly appropriate for those who cannot function in a larger group.

Peer support could be of longer duration and more efficient if the course period was longer with less insensitivity. This could be facilitated through feedback sessions at different intervals following their growth process. Guiding students in accordance with their own talent and abilities could provide them with greater opportunities in the labour market. After the integration course, 'returning days' can be organised, which can provide opportunities to avail extra support and consult experts in an informal setting. The integration-course communities and their interactions can help vulnerable groups who live in closed communities and do not have access to information realise their rights, which facilitates the integration process itself. Eventually, the sharing of responsibilities by all parties within the process can be essential to decrease cultural angst and result in a satisfied society.

From these findings, we can definitively assert that experiences and interactions among participants can be positive, with focus-group-like interactions being a transformative instrument. Furthermore, integration courses can reduce the Matthew effect, namely the process in which initial advantages and disadvantages accumulate over time, thus widening the existing gap (Bağcı, 2019), and new migrants, who have fewer opportunities in society, can see their social and cultural capital grow through lifelong learning. Therefore, all parties can be in a 'winner's empowerment' triangle rather than in a drama triangle (Karpman, 1968).

Furthermore, to find a way towards compromise and perspective, conflicts can also be modal to solve other conflicts within society, with informal meetings for getting to know each other and using empathy for all parties with realistic goals. These interviews can be used as an example of the difference between the topic-guided approach and team-meeting events regularly organised in companies, both owing to the company setting and the actual use of topics. Ultimately, the course is about living together, whereas team meetings are meant to

help people work together, with the former having elements of both working and living together.

Whether focus group events, mixing both native people and migrants in informal settings, could provide a basis for mutual understanding and realisation of a multicultural environment can be the subject of future research. Through such interactions, expectations and experiences could be shared, and vulnerabilities regarding the effect of the migration storm could be addressed with a more empathic attitude.

Ultimately, such additional events involving natives could create a more direct experience and exchange of ideas that could relieve fear and misunderstanding. Consequently, individual and family conflicts, from micro to macro levels, such as finding a ‘scapegoat’ to hide other pertinent issues, can be discussed in greater depth through a similar holistic method.

## Conclusion

Migration can be a challenging but rewarding experience. Those who facilitate migration and integration should approach these processes with kindness, empathy, and an open mind. In Belgium, integration courses are available to provide essential support for migrants so that they adapt to their new environment. By participating in group activities, meeting new people, and receiving language tuition and guidance, migrants can gain valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of living in a diverse society.

The overall impression obtained from this research is that integration courses function as a bridge among migrants and between themselves and the new country. Such courses provide a sound basis for helping individuals break their isolation and become members of society. Furthermore, focus-group-like interventions in informal settings can be an additional tool for empowering migrants and creating mutual understanding. Moreover, practical issues—concerning the equivalence of diplomas—remain bottlenecks and prevent the highly educated from becoming fully participating members of society. These are issues that those who facilitate integration courses should attempt to resolve.

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