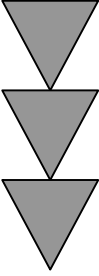


**DEVELOPING FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS AND LITERACY
THROUGH FAMILY LEARNING**

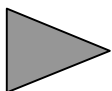


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Abstract

The aim of this article is to offer readers an overview on how linguistic skills can be improved through a non-formal way of learning called Family Learning (FL). We discuss and establish what is commonly understood by FL throughout Europe and present methods and examples of FL practitioners that have managed to improve the linguistic skills of their target groups. Family Learning generically means an informal method of learning born from work undertaken in the voluntary sector and spread by Family Literacy programmes in the USA. The focus of FL is to value learning that takes place within the home and from the family. FL course provision shares strategies to make the home an effective place for learning and to support the learning ambitions of both adults and children.

Keywords: Family Learning, literacy, informal approaches to FL, life copybook, EU projects



Family Learning

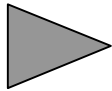
Family Learning is informal in nature and many curricular areas can be addressed through this delivery method. Outcomes include the development of skills and knowledge that are relevant to life in a modern society: learning about roles, relationships and responsibilities, learning how to understand, but also basic skills such as literacy, ICT or numeracy. By drawing on their hopes for their children, families become interested in new learning approaches that engage both adults and children to address issues connected to poor life chances such as educational underperformance. As far as the improving of linguistic skills is concerned, we will focus mainly on two perspectives whose development we had the opportunity to observe and sustain along two projects co-financed by the European Union and implemented in Romania by the EuroEd Foundation. One of the projects, European Family Learning Network (EFLN) aims at facilitating FL practitioners from all over Europe access to resources, expertise and best practice examples. The partners are institutions from the UK, Ireland, Italy, France, Finland, Malta, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, Poland and Germany. Via the website developed (www.efln.eu) those interested in creating or improving their FL initiatives (be it tentative sessions embedded in curricula in countries where FL is not widely-spread or institutionalized or those taking place in centres that already have well-established FL programmes, both for families and practitioners) can download and share didactic materials and experiences with fellow-practitioners. It is also designed for facilitating FL practitioners' endeavors for finding partners and for working together towards developing advocacy documents for reaching decision makers. The EFLN project has also organised 4 trainings targeting FL practitioners who had the possibility to attend the events by applying for a Grundtvig mobility. EFLN has started in 2006 and it will continue until 2009 and, by that time it will have developed, besides professional development untouchable assets such as expertise, network developing and new projects between professionals that have gained contact with each other during the EFLN experience, tangible outcomes such as an advocacy document to which all the project partners have contributed and which can be downloaded from the project website, training materials and periodical newsletters for disseminating the project results.

The other project that has contributed to the development of a number of new skills, including linguistic skills, by means of FL is called FACE IT! (Family Learning and Active Citizenship – an Integrated Training) and it is also a EU co-financed project developed between 2006 and 2008, coordinated by the EuroEd Foundation. The FACE IT! project uses the framework of Family Learning as a means of developing Active Citizenship skills and knowledge at community level. The integrated training element of the FACE IT! project has enabled established teachers, trainers and tutors to learn new skills in this regard. As all the

international training episodes and materials have been designed in a widely circulated foreign language, the gradual exposure of the training participants to the content delivered through the EN or FR channel has contributed to the improvement of the participants' FL skills.

The two directions mentioned above in regard to how the two FL experiences have contributed to enhancing linguistic skills have emerged from observing how the partner institutions in the two projects have contributed to the development of skills whose improvement was crucial in the local context at the time of implementation. On one hand FL activities have been proven successful when working with immigrants who do not speak the language of the country they live in and thus experience integration problems. We will follow, from this point of view, how linguistic skills can be developed in a foreign language by using FL. On the other hand, in many European countries the problem of resident disadvantaged categories whose members have a low level of literacy skills due to various reasons such as previous education experiences is an actual and stringent one. Thus, one aim of FL practitioners is to help the local citizens develop their basic skill in order to thus contribute to achieve social cohesion.

In both situations the factor holding the motivation of the target group to a high level is the parents' desire to assist their children in being educated for a better future compared to their parents'. Most parents are motivated to help their children with their school duties but they do not know how and, even if they would be able to do it with no or little training, they are afraid to get involved in the unpleasant experience education has proved to be for them. Under the umbrella of being good parents and developing FL activities for helping the children, these people themselves can be trained and a new opportunity of learning arises for them.



The Life Copybook

EPFF (Espace Pédagogie Formation France) is a non-governmental organisation set up in 1994 to support children in their learning through innovative pedagogical methods and more particularly in teaching them in developing skills for "learning to learn".

It has since become a specialist of adult literacy, more specifically basic skills, and has been organising parents' courses for migrants and/or disadvantaged parents since 2002, scheduled on the school year and taking place in schools.

The adults are motivated to take part in French language classes because they want to integrate on one hand, and, on the other hand because they want to be able to help their children. The focal point of involving the students in the courses is

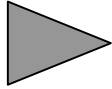
getting their attention on their personal life and on the importance of their families (especially children). One activity aiming at improving French language skills is entitled “The Life Copybook” and is addressed to migrant mothers. They are advised to design a chronological pattern of their lives up to the present moment, focusing on the most important milestones and using the means they have for communicating in the foreign language. To begin with, most of them do not know how to read or write in French so the tutor starts small, asking them to do a little „research”, look for representative cultural images of their country in magazines, newspapers or maybe the internet (traditions, animals, places) and then go on with their birth date or name, by using letters cut from newspapers, enabling them thus to learn the alphabet. Then they are able, after a while, to replace pictures with words made up of printed letters or even hand-written. Being able to write short sentences describing life stages, daily routines, life moments connected to their children come next. What is interesting about this method of providing life skills – including linguistic ones- to adults is that it strongly relies on the motivation of the learners, connected to their desire to be good parents.

On the other hand, non-formal learning plays a central part, mainly because formal learning would fail due to the lack of familiarity of the learners with the real educational contexts and concepts in the host country. Instead, learning by doing plays an important part. As learners cut, paste and draw, they are able to see a final product of their learning in the end (the copybook itself which has often become discussed and shared with the family members of the learners). Sometimes the family feel they need to involve in this process another family member and these ‚invited’ participants are also exposed to personal development by writing or drawing something in the notebook too.

In this context the role of the tutor is that of a facilitator, moderator and less of an evaluator. As there is no explicit evaluation of the language skills accumulated, the learner alone can appreciate if progress has been made and, by using the Life Copybook progress is easily quantifiable, even for uninstructed people, as the new knowledge is written down. Another sign of progress declared by mothers participating in the course is that they do not need the “child translator” anymore. The “child translator” is widely spread in migrant families in France as education is obligatory for children, no matter their ethnic/national/educational background. They learn thus how to speak French, but the parents do not, as they are not obliged to go to school, so any social duties are resolved through the child who often translates for the entire family.

FL can also bring improvements in the literacy skills area, because not necessarily migrant families have problems with reading and writing. People with unpleasant or no educational background at all, belonging mainly to disadvantaged categories, also experience literacy difficulties. It is hard to motivate them to come back to school (which has proved to be in most cases unattractive), so, again, as in the case

described above, their best wishes for their own children is what can make them interested in improving their own literacy skills: sometimes the reason is very practical, such as being able to read bed-time stories or helping the child with his/her homework, or evaluating the school performance and monitor the children's progress. Improving literacy skills does not end with being a supportive parent: it goes beyond this to improving their own professional profile and aiming to a better carrier.



Conclusion

In this article we have tried to emphasize the importance of non-formal learning in acquiring language skills. FL has proved to be efficient in working with disadvantaged groups that do not have the resources to learn a foreign language in a formal context. The Life Copybook activity is based essentially on a strong motivation, on learning by doing, on focusing on a context relevant to the learner. There are, among the partners involved in the EFLN project, others that have developed similar activities through EU programmes; these aim directly or indirectly at developing linguistic skills. One wide-spread example is "Mama lernt Deutsch" (Mommy learns German)¹, targeting migrant mothers. Activities with this name are developed both in Austria and Germany. The aim is to acquire at least an A2 level in German after one semester of 150 hours of classes. The courses rely on the creativity, adaptability and motivation of the tutors, as they work with people that sometimes also need to learn the alphabet and that have a poor contact and perception of the assimilating culture. The language activities focus on authentic structures, real situations and places approaching themes such as: learning to know each other, health, kindergarten, school routine, education, work, celebrations, holidays, social contacts etc. With practising teaching of foreign languages in this context, the tutor must also be aware of the need to adapt the learning materials to the context of the course participants.

Even if sometimes the participants do have language knowledge, they are afraid to use it, feeling that mistakes would make them lose face.

In conclusion, EU projects cannot be conceived outside the spectrum of linguistic and intercultural development of the participants and/or of the target groups involved; analyzing the various goals and the impact EU projects have, more often than not among the declared or the ensuing outcomes of the projects, the final reports register the linguistic progress of those involved alongside an array of interesting informal contexts and formats in which new learning takes place. There

¹ <http://www.wien.gv.at/integration/deutschlernen/pdf/mld-curriculum.pdf>

is a richness of educational experiences in these project approaches that could always prove beneficial to all those interested in expanding and varying the pedagogy and the materials for teaching a foreign language.

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