



News from Language for Work (LfW):

Quick guide: How to help adult migrants develop work-related language skills – COMBI Multipliers’ event, Donostia/San Sebastian, Basque Autonomous Community, Spain, on the 6th and 7th June 2017

by Matilde Grünhage Monetti, coordinator of Language for Work (LfW)
(<http://languageforwork.ecml.at>)

At initiative of Petra Elser, LfW-Network member, I was invited to participate in a multiplier event for the COMBI project in Donostia, in the Basque region of Spain, on 6th and 7th June.

The project *Communication competences for migrants and disadvantaged background learners in bilingual work environments* is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. COMBI partners are acting in various officially bilingual regions in Europe. The once dominant languages of these regions have been minoritised through the hegemonic language policy of the nation-states – I prefer to speak of “minoritised” languages and not “minority” languages. In this sense the COMBI languages (Basque, Welsh, Frisian, Swedish in parts of Finland and the Sicilian dialects) are representative of many more in Europe.

The issue of these minoritised languages is particularly relevant in today’s context of migration, demographic change and the shortage of local staff in health and social care. Health and social care sectors across Europe have become heavily dependent on migrant staff. In bilingual regions these migrant workers face the double challenge of having to learn to at least a certain degree of proficiency both languages of the host country. It is to be expected that the older people they care for, in particular people with dementia, may react better to the language of their childhood: Basque, Welsh, dialect, etc., while other interlocutors and the environment in general may speak predominantly the “national” language.

The COMBI project therefore wants to provide vocational teachers in the health care sector and minority language teachers with innovative tools aiming at developing the language skills in the minority language migrants need for working in the health care sector (www.combiproject.eu).

For the event in Donostia I chose to present the Quick guide, since it encourages reflection on the essentials of L2 learning and offers advice and practical tips, how to support migrants develop work-related language skills. Each statement was illustrated with mini case-studies provided by Network members from all over Europe (<http://languageforwork.ecml.at/Portals>).

The meeting was held in Basque and in the project language, English. From the partners’ contributions emerged the different status of the minoritised language in the various countries due to historical developments. In the fields of policies next to the very functional approach of Finland with its focus on individuals as workforce, the Basque provider KABIA brought humanistic dimensions into the discussion talking about principles of care, linguistic equality, responsibility and social justice.

In the discussions the same issue emerged which was discussed at the Network Meeting in Graz (1st and 2nd June): language and communication as shared responsibility of all actors involved. To echo the title of a manual produced by the Swedish colleagues of [ArbetSam](http://www.aldrecentrum.se/Global/Bilder/TDAR/Spr%c3%a5ksam_handbok_engelsk_version%5b1%5d.pdf): Better language means better care and therefore higher quality, which is an asset for the whole society (http://www.aldrecentrum.se/Global/Bilder/TDAR/Spr%c3%a5ksam_handbok_engelsk_version%5b1%5d.pdf).

Another common theme was the shift of focus from teaching to learning and a growing interest for non-formal and informal arrangements, equally discussed in Graz. Another commonality is the growing interest for reflective and affective dimensions of learning. Particularly effective were the practical examples by other guest speakers: Cathrin Thomas, Arbeiterwohlfahrt, Bielfeld, Germany, presented some of her phonetic exercises and two French-Basque colleagues, Etcharry Formation Développement, Ustaritz, illustrated their holistic training approach. Finally the concept of translanguaging was vividly illustrated by the practical examples of the methodology used by Banaiz Bagara Elkartea in their Basque language courses, which is particularly effective in bilingual situations. The aim is not to train two monolinguals in one person, but language users who can draw on their entire linguistic repertoire: The languages in question are not treated as separate entities; the transition from one to the other is fluid.

A remarkable sociological insight on the employment rate of migrants in the Basque countries was presented at the conference: The number of women in work is higher than the number of men. Most of these women come from South America and work as domestic help in private households without social insurance.

The event itself was a good example of translanguaging with fluid transition between Basque, English, Castilian, and many more European languages!

I would like to close with an homage to the great Sicilian poet, Ignazio Buttitta (1899-1997), who has often written on the loss of his native “minoritized” language:

e sugnu poviru
haiu i dinari
e non li pozzu spènniri,
i giuielli
e non li pozzu rigalari;
u cantu,
nta gaggia
cu l'ali tagghati

and I am poor
I have money
but I cannot spend it,
jewels
and I cannot make presents of them;
(my) song
in the throat
with wings clipped.