

Mario Rieder

**The so called “integration agreement”
and its implications**

Presentation at the 8th International Metropolis Conference, Vienna 2003

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Beginning in 2003, non-EU foreigners arriving in Austria after 1998 have to sign a document obliging him or her to reach a specified degree of language skills in German and to gain knowledge about civics and “European democratic values”. This document is called the “*Integrationsvereinbarung*” (“integration agreement”) and is one of the central measures of the amendment of Austrian Aliens Law. The regulations of the “integration agreement” have provoked intensive discussion and criticism - by experts as well as by NGOs.

In my presentation I would like to

- 1) draw an outline of the “integration agreement” and its regulations
- 2) present the main issues of criticism by linguistic and legal experts
- 3) describe the implementation of the “integration agreement” since January 2003 and its implications for language training programmes.

What are the main regulations of the integration agreement?

The “integration agreement” has to be signed by applicants for permanent residence permits who have lived in Austria since 1998 or are newly immigrating to Austria after January 2003. The contract obliges them to attend and complete a so-called “*Deutsch-Integrations-Kurs*” (“German and integration course”)¹.

There are some ways to be exempt from the “integration agreement” and from attending “integration courses” – i.e. for children, for old or sick people or for so called “key employees” (skilled specialists) who are not staying longer than 24 months... – and for those who can present a language certificate or prove their language knowledge by other means. (But there are no specifications how this knowledge should be proved or evaluated in practise).

In the “integration courses” immigrants ought to be taught German, knowledge of civics and so-called “European democratic values” and they are

¹ The „integration agreement“ does not affect asylum seekers or refugees, since their status is regulated by different laws.

supposed to achieve Level A1 of the 6-level “Common European Framework” – within 100 units of 45 minutes.

The Austrian government pays a subsidy for participation in such a course covering 50% of the costs, up to a maximum of 182 Euro - provided that the course is completed successfully within 18 months. Those who do not pass these courses in time have to bear higher costs for the courses – at least 75% of the costs within 24 months and the total amount if they require longer than that time.

In addition the law provides sanctions if someone fails to attend or pass these courses: Fines of 100 Euro (after 2 years) or 200 Euro (after 3 years) have to be paid. After 4 years the permission of settlement won't be extended – with the consequence of deportation.

I think, even after a first glance at the regulations of the “integration agreement” it might probably be evident, that the term “integration agreement” is misleading in two aspects:

- 1) Firstly it is not an agreement – since an agreement is based on the free will and decision of both partners signing a contract. The immigrants however are obliged to sign the agreement and there is no way to negotiate its conditions.
- 2) Secondly the law has little to do with integration. It sees integration as a one-sided responsibility of the immigrant. And does not mention the role of the native Austrians in that process at all. A concept that has much more to do with assimilation than with an understanding of integration as a mutual process of immigrants and the host community.

And it defines integration as an ability of the immigrant, which can be taught and learned in so-called “integration courses” and measured by the degree of language proficiency. But better language skills do not automatically lead to better integration. Language skills can support integration but they cannot substitute integration on an economic and social level and they cannot substitute the access to political rights.

What are the main issues of criticism concerning the so-called “integration courses”?

The following remarks are based on my personal observations and experiences. But they are also supported by critical reports and analyses of linguistic, pedagogical and legal experts².

² Linguists like Hans-Jürgen Krumm (Institute for German as a Foreign Language, University of Vienna), „VERBAL“ (the „Austrian Association of Applied Linguistics“) or „ÖDaF“ (the „Austrian Association for German as a Foreign Language“), jurists like Sebastian Schumacher (expert for Austrian alien law) or Karin König (legal expert at the „Wiener Integrationsfonds“ – „Vienna integration fund“).

First of all there is a range of problems concerning the language learning aspect:

Pressure and sanctions are the worst way to motivate a learner. And there is no need to force immigrants to learn German: The everyday experience of NGOs and adult education centres shows that most of the immigrants are highly motivated to learn the language. But there are not enough affordable language courses and there is often a lack of supporting infrastructure like child care facilities to enable mothers to attend a course. If both – affordable courses and supporting infrastructure - are offered, the institutions are often confronted with a rush of potential learners that mostly cannot be covered by the existing capacities. (As it is evident in the so called “Sprachoffensive”, a language campaign providing affordable voluntary German and literacy courses for immigrants, subsidized by the City of Vienna)

The duration of the so-called “integration courses” of 100 units is much too short to enable learners to achieve basic knowledge in German. Even well educated European learners with extensive language learning experiences will find it a challenge to reach the level A1 within 100 hours of language training.

100 hours could be a first orientation in the language – but not more... Experts recommend a duration of about 300 hours – that would be a much more realistic frame to achieve basic language knowledge, as models in other European countries show.

Even if the learners manage to reach the level A1 – this is not an appropriate level of language knowledge to deal with contents like the Austrian political system, democratic values etc. as the learners are supposed to do (without providing special information materials in the languages spoken by the immigrants). And it is not a sufficient linguistic fundament for the “participation in social, economic and cultural life in Austria”, as the law generally demands.

The law does not take into consideration the different previous learning experiences of the learners. There is the same curriculum for unskilled workers with limited basic education and highly qualified employees with academic background. The law does not provide any special measures for illiterate learners – neglecting the fact that there is a high demand for literacy programmes for immigrants.

The financial aspect:

As I mentioned before the government covers only 50% of the costs, up to a maximum of 182 Euro – or even less, if the learners fail to complete the course within 18 months. That means, that the learners have to pay at least 182 Euro. In reality it is often more, since a seriously calculated course fee for an “integration course” with 100 hours is between 500 and 600 Euro. That increases the costs for the learners up to 400 Euro!

Some institutions however offer “integration courses” for only 360 Euro – but that shifts the problem from the learners to the institutions or the language teachers: Either the institutions have to put money into the courses to support the price. Or the teachers (nearly all free lancers) have to accept ridiculous low payments.

That leads us to another aspect: **the quality aspect.**

The quality standards for the “integration courses” are undermining the actual developments for quality standards for trainers and institutions in the field of second language training:

For example: It is sufficient for teaching in “integration courses” to have 10 years of experience of working with bi- or multilingual groups in public schools. It is also sufficient to have an academic background in language studies and 1 year of experience of teaching bi- or multilingual groups. No word about specific qualifications to teach German as a second language. In comparison: The “Sprachoffensive” in Vienna demands as a basic standard for trainers a specific qualification for German as a second language and corresponding teaching experiences.

It’s nearly the same situation if we look at the criteria for institutions that can potentially offer “integration courses”: The list contains a broad range of institutions from adult education institutions over humanitarian or religious organisations. The consequence is that institutions like the Austrian Red Cross without any experience in language training are now offering “integration courses”.

This unsatisfactory situation concerning quality standards for teachers and institutions is mirrored by the selection of the coordinating and certifying institution. It is the so-called “Fund for Integration of Refugees”, a unit in the Austrian Ministry of Interior. This institution – mainly administrating social welfare measures for refugees - has absolutely no experience and competence in language education. Nevertheless it is responsible for issues like the curriculum, teaching methods and materials, the qualification of trainers and the selection and evaluation of institutions that offer “integration courses”.

So far as the main regulations and conditions of the “integration agreement” are concerned.

But how does this law work in practise – and how does it influence the actual situation of learners and institutions? From my point of view there have been implications on two levels:

Firstly on the level of strategies and attitudes towards second language learning and teaching:

Since the first plans for the “integration agreement” have been announced in 2001 there has been a strong impact on future plans in the field of integration and language education – influencing the considerations of policymakers, adult education institutions, teachers and learners.

Amongst the learners an increasing demand for voluntary German classes arose - in order to anticipate their assumed future duties resulting from the announcements of compulsory German courses. A reaction that often burdened the work of language teachers and institutions and influenced the atmosphere in language classes – since it is not easy to work with learners that are driven by fear as a main motivation.

The institutions on the other hand often showed very excited and nervous reactions as well: Some of them hoped for great economic advantages resulting from “integration courses” (and got disillusioned very soon). Some of them felt obliged to concentrate their work on organizing “integration courses” – with the claim not leave this field to unsound institutions. Some announced to refuse to participate in the realisation of the “integration agreement”. Often the strategy of institutions changed nearly monthly caused by different rumours and announcement about the realisation of the “integration agreement”. And policy of granting subsidies was influenced by nearly the same expectations, hopes and fears.

The result was an increasing disorientation and uncertainty amongst educational institutions, teachers and learners – with a negative influence on continuous and sustainable development.

Irrespective of what their actual strategy was – many of the involved persons and institutions expected the following scenario when the “integration agreement” would entry into force: There would be a flood of thousands of participants, storming the educational institutions and demanding “integration courses”.

Some experts tried to tone down these expectations and fears. But only few institutions tried to maintain a clear line and to continue their current work without being scared away from their concepts by speculations. The institution where I am working (*“Volkshochschule Ottakring”* - adult education centre Ottakring) was one of the most prominent advocates of this clear and self-confident position. In my opinion, the reality after January 2003 totally confirmed this strategy.

That leads us to the second level of practical implications of the “integration agreement”:

The reality of “integration courses” as we could observe it in the last 9 months.

In a few words: I would say the implementation of the “integration agreement” and the “integration courses” was really a flop!

What we could observe this spring and summer was: A handful of potential participants of “integration courses” desperately looking for institutions offering those courses. A number of institutions desperately looking for participants and often being forced to postpone the start of courses. Or to cancel courses. Or to fill up nearly empty “integration courses” with other learners. At the same time the enormous interest of immigrants for appropriate designed voluntary language courses is still going on.

These observations are proved by recently published official data from the Austrian Ministry of Interior. Answering a parliamentary inquiry by the social democratic party, Ernst Strasser, the Austrian Minister of Interior, published the following statistic information about “integration courses”³:

Until the end of July only 44 courses with 135 participants having a voucher for “integration courses” have been completed

At the same time only 66 courses with 255 participants having a voucher had still been running.

Totally this is a number of 110 courses and 390 participants being affected by the “integration agreement”. (That means about 4 persons a course).

In the same time the institutions offering “integration courses” had to cancel 136 courses.

In comparison: Our adult education centre offered in 2002 a variety of more than 100 voluntary language and literacy courses for immigrants with about 1.300 participants. And the real demand for such courses was even much higher: we had to send away a number of potential learners since we could not offer enough free places in our courses.

³ Parlamentarische Anfragebeantwortung vom 26.8.2003

I think the conclusions are obvious:

Immigrants are very motivated to learn German. They do not need pressure by laws and sanctions - this pressure seems to achieve the opposite effect. What they need are affordable courses, qualified teachers, appropriate learning facilities and infrastructural support. I hope future integration and language policy will focus on these issues instead of complicating the task of educational institutions and teachers.

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