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Linguistic challenges of staff with migration background in office communication

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1 Introduction

Language knowledge is one key competence for migrants' vocational integration in the host country: Not being able to speak the language without mistakes is often estimated as being incompetent; thus finding adequate and qualified work is a big challenge for most migrants.

In this regard, teachers of "second language courses" point out that differentiated knowledge of terms, phrases, or codes of conduct required in working life would contribute to enhancing migrant's labor market opportunities; at the same time it boosts migrant's self-confidence by being endowed with specific vocationally needed knowledge. Another important aspect in this regard is that migration background is often prejudicial to job applications; especially young foreigners and adult migrants suffer discrimination in the labor market. Job application requests in written as well as spoken form in comparison to language knowledge necessary to carry out a job often differ.

Thus, it is crucial to sensitize employers regarding above mentioned discrepancies. Likewise, gaining knowledge about employers' perspectives and demands would contribute to trainer's work. The same is true for suitable teaching material which provides specifically needed terms, demands, or explains expectations to employees in the particular vocation.

The project **Meet the Need. Vocational Teaching Material Supporting the Integration of Migrants into the Labour Market** started in January 2011 and runs until December 2012. It is funded with support of the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme, Grundtvig. The project consortium is made up of 8 organisations from 6 countries: Research Institute of the Red Cross (Austria), queraum. Kultur- und Sozialforschung (Austria), lernraum.wien - Institut für Mehrsprachigkeit, Integration und Bildung (Die Wiener Volkshochschulen GmbH, Austria), Emporese Valdelsa Development Agency (Italy), Anniesland Research (UK), Association for Education and Sustainable Development (Romania), Thüringer Volkshochschulverband e.V. (Germany), and mht.consult ApS (Denmark)

Each project partner is working on (basic) teaching materials for a specific working field. This is conducted in close cooperation with practical experts of each respective vocation and with linguistic experts. Already existing material will be considered and incorporated into one Compendium. Concretely, the materials will be developed for the sectors retail trade, food service activities, office communication, health care, and construction.

In order to be able to create teaching material for a specific work force, the consortium had to gather information about those. Therefore three questionnaires had been developed in order

to interview second language teachers, employers and migrants that are employed in the chosen sectors. This research phase run between June 2011 and December 2011. The results are the basis for the development of the teaching material.

2 Rationale

Several studies have shown that the social status of a person is pivotal affected by his or her position on the labour market. Accordingly the position on the labour market - being unemployed or employed, having a job accordingly to ones educational level or if the income is high enough to allow a person to live an independent live and to actively participate in society - has an important effect on the identity and self-esteem of a person (Jahoda et al. 1982).

Germany has a long history of immigration. What started in the sixties as inviting guest workers to help out in German companies during the so called “economic miracle time” lead to a discussion if or if not Germany could be counted as country of immigration. The figure below shows the development of the numbers of foreign immigrants to Germany between 1951 and 2007 (Klingholz, R. et al, 2009):

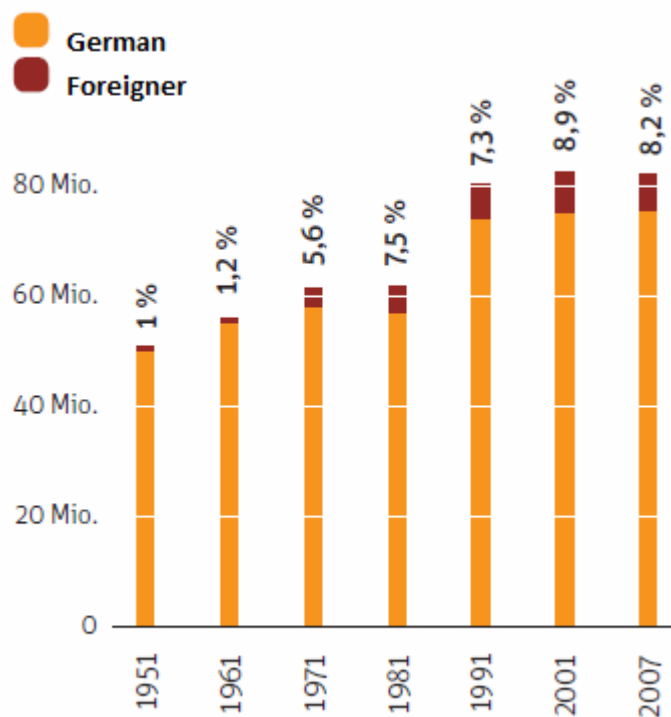


Fig 1: Development of the number of foreign immigrants to Germany

Approximately 8,8 % of the population in Germany (7 Million) is made up by immigrants. According to the study „Jobs for Immigrants - Labor Market Integration in Australia, Denmark, Germany and Sweden“, which was published by the OECD in 2009, the integration of these immigrants into the German labour market is poor. But a good integration into the labour market is a key factor for a successful integration into the German society (Seebaß/ Siegert, 2011).

According to Seebaß and Siegert in 2009 the employment rate of immigrants who are between 15 and 65 years in Germany was a follows:

	German	Immigrants in Germany
Male	56,1%	42,3%
Female	49,7%	26,7%

Table 1: Employment Rate 2009

In 2011, the German Ministry for Migrants and Refugees (BAMF) published “Working paper No. 36: Migrants in the German labor market”. According to this report the allocation of migrants in the different labour market sectors (subject to social insurance contribution) in Germany turns out to be as follows:

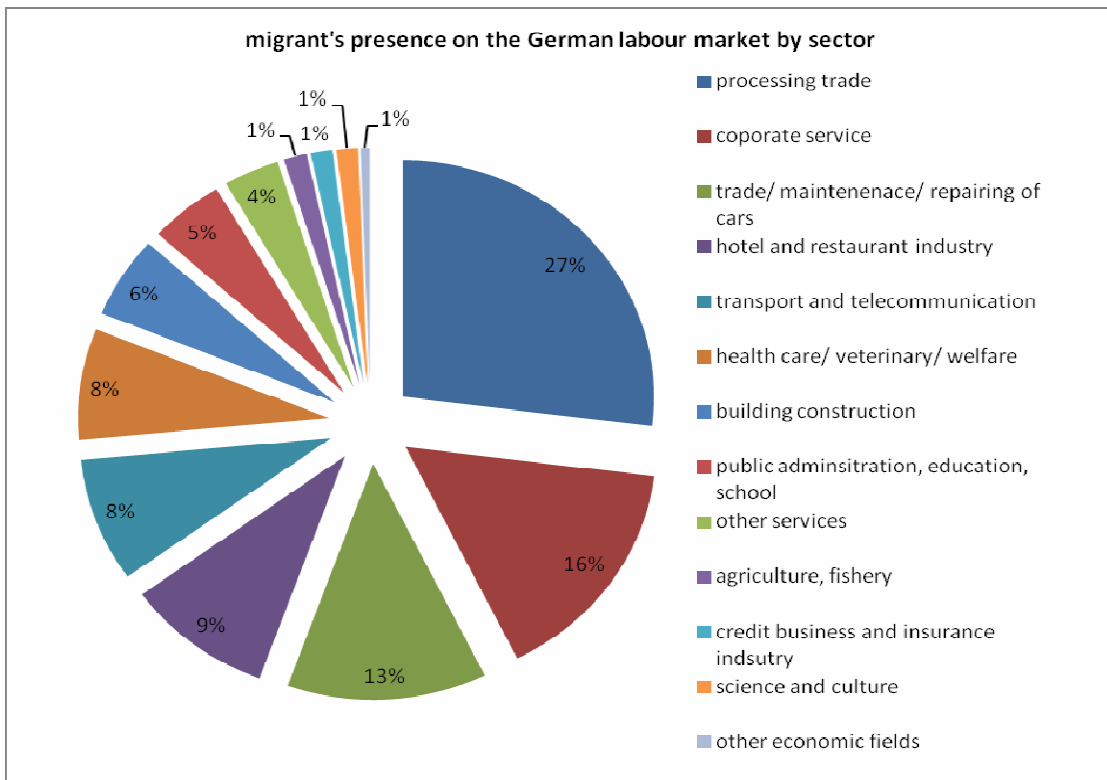


Fig.2: Migrant's presence on the German labour market

Based on the given data we can see that there is a difference in the number of male and female workers in the different labor market sectors. Women most likely work in fields such as corporate service (19,1%), trade/ maintenance (15,4%), processing trade (15,3%), health care/ veterinary/ welfare (15,8%), hotel and restaurant industry (10,2%) and public administration, education and school (7,6%). Men would work in the following sectors: processing trade (34,2%), corporate service (13,6%), trade/ maintenance (11,3%), transportation and telecommunication (10,6%), hotel and restaurant industry (9,0%) and building construction (8,5%).

The countries of origin of the migrants are: Greece, Poland, Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Russian Federation, Serbia, and Turkey. Some migrants are German re-settlers from Eastern and Southern Europe.

Originally it was planned that the TVV e.V. shall explore the accommodation sector. But after contacting several hotels and hotel organization we realized that most of the migrants (if the hotel has some working for them) either worked in the food sector of the hotel or in the cleaning sector. Therefore we decided to focus on the cross-theme office communication as in most sectors (e.g. health care/ welfare, education and public administration as well as hotel and restaurant industry) office communication skills are needed. In order to arrange supplies, make phone calls or to make proper documentations everyone needs office skills.

3 Methods used

3.1 Description of the sample

3.1.1 Overview of the sample

Method	Employers	m	f	Migrants	m	f	Teachers	m	f
Face to face interviews									
Telephone interviews	4	1	3	5	0	5			
Focus group									
Online survey							10	2	8
TOTAL each group	4			5			10		

Table 2: Sample

3.1.2 Interviews with employers

In order to reach those employers who employ migrants in the field of office communication we contacted employers we knew from the project “Vom Nebeneinander zum Miteinander”¹. We also asked migrants and second language teachers for help.

As those employers were spread around Thuringia we realised that it would be more resource oriented to have telephone interviews rather than face-to-face interviews. Also some of the employers were very reluctant to give information about their employed migrants.

In the end we were able to reach 4 employers from different sectors: Development and construction of Medical Devices, adult education, technical communication, research and social work.

3.1.3 Interviews with migrants

In order to reach migrants that have experiences in office communication we contacted some adult education centres which were partners in our project “Vom Nebeneinander zum Miteinander”. This project has a focus on supplementing the integration course² with a 6 weeks internship as well as 2 weeks of potential analysis of vocational skills. Migrants get the chance to do an internship in a local company such as restaurants, offices or kindergarten. This internship shall help them to increase their German vocabulary as well as to get some hands on practice concerning the work flow and work culture in German companies as well as to get an idea of a possible job career etc. We hoped that they could establish us with contacts to a) migrants and b) employers. Moreover, we were contacting further adult education centres who participate in ESF-BAMF language courses that have a special focus on “German for occupational purposes”. Through these contacts we were able to make appointments for telephone interviews with five female migrants working in the field of office communication. We decided on the method of telephone interviews due to the fact that they were all scattered throughout Thuringia. Four out of the five are originally from Russia while one is from Denmark. All of them studied German at the university. The time of their stay in Germany ranges from 6 months to 5, 5 years.

¹ Translated in English „from coexistence to cooperation”

² In Germany each migrant who wants to become naturalized has to addend the so called integration course. This course is made up of 600 teaching units German as a second language plus 45 teaching units of the so called orientation course. The orientation course includes history of Germany, the political system, culture, religion, social behavior etc.

3.1.4 Interviews with teachers

In order to reach “German as second language” teachers who are experienced with “German for occupational purposes” we came back to our teachers’ network. Via E-mail we informed the respective teachers about the project and the aim of the survey. As we didn’t succeed in reaching them for face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews, we agreed to adapt the interview guideline in order to send it out as questionnaire.

In the end we received 10 filled out questionnaires from “German as second language (GSL)” teachers who are experienced in teaching “German for occupational purposes”. However their level of teaching experiences as GSL teachers ranges from 1 year up to 33 years. All of them are teaching at the Volkshochschule³.

9 out of those 10 teachers stated to have experiences in both specific vocation related German courses as well as with specific vocation related teaching material.

3.2 Description of the explored sector (technical data)

The employers that have been interviewed within this questioning work in 4 different fields:

- Educational sector
- Social work sector
- Development and construction of Medical Devices
- Social research

Three out of the 4 companies can be counted as small-scale enterprise which means they have between 10 and 49 employees. While one can be counted as large-scale enterprise, which means it has over 500 employees.

All together there are 40% male and 74% female employers. The social work and educational field are responsible for the high number of female employees.

In total the workforce within the questioned organisations is made up of 11,6% migrants out of whom 100% are female migrants. This high number of employed females is typical for the field of office communication.

³ Adult education centre.

4 Results workforce

4.1 Recruitment process

The recruitment process in Germany follows certain rules that should be considered by job applicants. All of the interviewed employers follow those rules more or less accurately.

In order to find suitable employees the interviewed employers stated that they advertise:

- Via print media such as newspapers and technical magazines
- Via online media such as job portals and their own website
- Via intranet and networks

Also two of the employers stated character reference as a possible source for new employees.

In all cases it was necessary to send in a job application either via e-mail or by post. This application normally consists of the following parts:

- A letter of application
- A Curriculum Vitae
- A professional made and up to date photo of the applicant
- Copies of credentials and supporting documents

All documents have to be brought together in an application folder. The applicant has to make sure that all documents are in a decent quality.

If the applicant has sent in his job application successfully he or she will be invited to a face-to-face or telephone interview. Depending on the position some organizations also test the applicant.

4.2 Challenging situations and language competences

4.2.1 Occurring challenging situations in (daily) work

The following typical tasks that can occur in the office sector have been named by employers and employees:

- 1) *Planning of events/ meetings*
- 2) *Preparation of events/ meetings*
- 3) *Writing of (official) e-mails and letters*
- 4) *Request for information*
- 5) *To invite offers (e.g. for printing, order of office supplies)*

- 6) *Coordinate tasks*
- 7) *Participate in meetings*
- 8) *Preparation of documents (e.g. power point presentation, press review)*
- 9) *Human relations*
- 10) *Phone calls with clients, cooperation partners, colleagues, suppliers*

4.2.2 Language competences in challenging situations

Operation	Challenge	S	L	W	R
Planning of events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work with checklists - Planning - Communication with partners and colleagues 	X	X	X	X
Writing of official letters, e-mails, project applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - formal greetings/ salutation - spelling 			X	X
Communication with colleagues, other departments, clients/officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understanding of implicit information - understanding of abbreviations, technical terms - speaking pace - Formal and non-formal addressing/ correct salutation (when to use what?) 	X	X		
Staff meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verbal reporting of progress - Understanding of technical terms - Understanding or abbreviations - Note taking for minutes 	X	X	X	X
Preparation of material/ documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spelling - Read and understand information's 	X	X	X	X

Table 3: Language competence needed in challenging situations in work

4.3 Dealing with challenging situations

Within the interviews it was often heard that the interviewees were often afraid to make official phone calls because of the expected prejudice from the clients on the phone concerning their foreign accent or because they were simply afraid to make mistakes while talking. A big problem seems to be the use of specific terms, the right articulation as well as the use and understanding of abbreviations and correct salutations in both phone calls and writing of letters/ E-mails.

Within the questioning not only challenges but also suggestions and strategies to overcome stated difficulties were explored.

When asking the migrants what they would do in order to overcome the stated challenges they most likely stated:

- "I would ask my colleagues to explain certain terms to me."
- "I watched my colleagues – to learn how they would deal with certain situations."
- "I asked questions."
- "I asked for help."
- Reading of technical literature
- Remembering certain work steps

When asking the employers how to overcome those challenging situations they named the following tools and measures:

- To have talks on a regularly base
- To offer the possibility to take part in external organised further education, e.g. language learning
- To set up individual mentoring programs

4.4 Supportive activities

4.4.1 Supportive activities for employers

Working in a diverse team can be a challenge for all team members as well as for employers. Different language skills and cultural aspects can lead to misunderstandings and dissatisfaction on all sides. Therefore employers were asked what kind of supportive activities they would wish for themselves in order to overcome such challenges.

All four employers stated that intercultural competence training would be necessary to better understand certain behaviours or actions as well as to get sensitised for certain aspects of what it means to be a migrant. One suggested "*to have brochures available concerning "do's and don'ts" in dealing with employees with a migrant background*". The interviewee also thought about "*having a collection of links and information of the country the migrant comes from available so that everyone can get familiar with the country of origin*". Another suggested to "*talk with other local companies (active in similar work areas) about their experiences and to exchange ideas and strategies*."

4.4.2 Supportive activities for migrants

Both the employers as well as the migrants named the following ideas to improve the support for migrants dealing with occurring linguistic challenges/ barriers:

- The use of a mentoring system at work that helps and supports directly the migrant at his work place.
- A connection between the mentor and a parallel running language course so that a language teacher can create a tailored language course for the migrants (fitting his (language) needs of the workplace).
- An intercultural open environment at work.
- Help from colleagues - migrants wish to ask questions to their colleagues at work without feeling stupid.
- The visit of language courses for specific branches e.g. economics, communication in order to improve competences

4.5 Value and use of different language of employees

The use of the languages of the employees with migration background depends on the field they work at. The migrants who stated that their native language was of value for the company work in organisations that either operate internationally (technical communication and medical aid sector) or work closely with migrants (adult education, social work sector).

The employers do not only value the language skills of the employees but also the intercultural competences and the knowledge of the host country's code of behaviour. Especially concerning demands of clients or learners e.g. from Russia or Spain, dealing with problems or in contracting phases this knowledge is of high value.

4.6 Experience with language courses

4.6.1 Experiences of employers

All four employers stated that their company does not offer any in-house German language course. The reason for this can most likely be seen in the fact that 3 out of the 4 employees work in small-size or medium-size businesses. Therefore they employ only a small number of migrants (3 out of 4 have less than 10% of migrant employees).

However, 2 out of 4 employers said that they use the offers of language courses of Volkshochschulen as well as searched for other options to improve the language as well as work skills of their migrants. Those further education courses were either partly or fully paid

by the employers according to the motto “the better the skills of my employees the better can my company run”.

4.6.2 Experiences of migrants

Three out of the 5 migrant women that were interviewed attended the required “Integration course”⁴. The other two studied German at the university. The three who attended the “integration course” agreed that it helped them to improve their German skills on a everyday speech level. Now while being employed they feel it would have been better to also learn more speech that would help regarding to their current job situation. They suggest supplementing language courses with:

- Internships in local companies to gain experiences in using German in a work environment
- Exercises on German work culture
- Exercises in work tasks, e.g. how to make an official phone call? How to write an official letter?
- How to apply for a job
- Do’s and don’ts in job interviews

As ideas for helpful activities to improve the language competences the interviewees named the following:

- A mentor at work that helps and supports directly at the work place and gives feedback to a language teacher so that he can create a tailored language course for the migrants (fitting the migrant’s needs and the needs of the workplace)
- Help from colleagues - the possibility to ask questions without feeling stupid
- An intercultural open environment at work
- To visit language courses for specific branches, e.g. economics, communication

Based on the interviewees with both the migrants and the employers some recommendations can be highlighted:

- A welcoming atmosphere is essential to employees and employers. If the team the migrants are working in does not have, to some extent, intercultural competences, work can be very difficult. Therefore intercultural competence training for co-workers could be of help.

⁴ B1 Level

- Employees with migration background sometimes feel intimidated due to the mistakes they make while writing letters or making phone calls with clients.
- To offer specific language courses focused on general office communication and/or characteristics of daily office routines in German offices (cultural tools etc.) are seen as very helpful.
- Further education for employees in order to deepen their knowledge in their field of work as well as to further improve their German language skills.
- Especially in organisations who operate internationally or deal with migrant groups, multiple language skills are valued and therefore an advantage.

4.7 Success stories and suggestions

The employers were asked to share success stories as well as suggestions concerning the employment of migrants. AG1 told the story of women from Russia. Thanks to her profound knowledge concerning her home countries code of behaviour and her native tongue she is of great help when dealing with clients from Russia or east European countries.

5 Results language teaching

5.1 Challenges in teaching and learning vocation related language

The teachers that filled out the questionnaire all have experiences in teaching German for vocational purposes. Most of them are involved in special courses such as ESF-BAMF courses for the vocational integration of migrants. Those courses are either focused on general vocational training or specific vocational fields such as care, service sector, logistics or office communication. The challenges that those teachers face can be divided in target group specific challenges, organisational challenges and content challenges:

target group specific challenges	organisational challenges	Content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Heterogenic learner groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Different aims - Different motivation - Age - Different level of vocational skills and degrees - Different levels of language skills/levels in courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Size of classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specific German Terms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ intercultural problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ structure of the courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ professional terms
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Finding of appropriate material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ diversity within vocational fields
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ teach about vocations teachers most likely have no practical experience in

Table 4: teaching challenges

5.2 Concrete material related aspects

All teachers agreed that the material to be developed with the project shall focus on the language level B1 and above) and not on A1 to A2 levels. This is due to the fact that learners

in courses that focus on A1/ A2 firstly need to manage the basics in German as a second language before they can start to learn specific terms and expressions for vocational fields. Furthermore the material should give specific information about the vocational fields as teachers are often no experts in the “to be taught” vocational areas.

The teaching material ought to consist of different exercises and styles that can be easily adapted to different language levels and learner groups. As the teachers have not much time to prepare for courses the material also should be easy to use and without big effort or preparation of the teacher, e.g. easy to make copies, suggestions how to use certain exercises.

The material should be available as book or handout (to make copies of it) or as word document to be able to adapt it. It should be supplemented with pictures and authentic material.

5.3 Availability of teaching material

The main resources teachers use to find material and to prepare courses are the internet, language books but also conferences, events organised by publishing companies as well as magazines, platforms/forum where they can exchange their ideas with colleagues.

Material is adapted to the needs of the learners and the purpose of the lessons. A lot of material is developed by the teachers themselves. Newspaper articles as well as material from everyday life/ authentic material (e.g. medicine packages, forms) as well as workbooks from vocational education schools are used.

It can be said that for the dissemination of the Meet the Need material (Compendium) the internet as well as conferences can be seen as the best way to distribute the material.

5.4 Practical teaching experience and suggestions

When asking teachers to name successful practices that worked well in previous teaching situations in regards to vocational related teaching a variety of answers were given. According to the teachers the following practices proofed to be successful in vocational related teaching:

- Role-plays/ scenario techniques, e.g. making a phone call, a meeting with colleagues, small talk with colleagues, presentation of a product
- Station learning
- An integrated internship in a company
- Use of visual aids/ original material
- Work with different media, e.g. computer, short films

By having a closer look on the named practices certain aspects can be derived that can be seen as success factors for teaching vocational related German:

Success factors	
original material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connection between class room and real life - Exercise with real material - Practical exercises
Practical work experiences/ role plays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non theoretical learning of language and grammar - Direct use of already acquired language skills in real life and work situations - Practical exercises - Learning of concrete situations
Link up of lesson topics with personal interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More practical and real life connected - Connection between language learning and personal life
Independent learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trains different social behavioral patterns - Self-time- management - activating

Table 5: success factors

Those practices have helped to support the interest and the motivation of learners to learn German. Also they helped to prepare for certain vocational situations. In any case a teacher needs to be aware which of the practices fit to his/her learners. Different learning styles and cultural aspects have to be taken into account. Not everyone will be willing to try out a wheelchair (for authentic impressions) or do other things that might be seen as embarrassing.

The interviewed teachers were also asked about successful material that they have used within their language classes. The following material has been named:

- Textbooks such as
 - Aspekte (by Langenscheidt)
 - Dialog Beruf (Huber)
 - Ziel (Huber)

- online links such as:
 - www.wirtschaftsdeutsch.de
 - www.deutschewelle.de

- Other material:
 - Pictures of specific vocational situations
 - Worksheets with lots of pictures/photos
 - Short movies/ scenes

When asked for further important aspects concerning teaching practices and material or wishes concerning the development of material the aspects below have been stated:

- Need of clear and easy to use material concerning the writing of applications.
- More material to exercise job interviews, conversation with the boss or colleagues.
- More material to train e.g. writing of official letters or e-mails.

6 Summary

Within the frame of the Meet the Need project interviews and a survey have been carried out between May and December 2011. The aim of those questionings was to figure out the challenges and needs concerning the teaching of German as a second language for the vocational field of office communication. Therefore 4 employers, 5 migrants and 10 teachers have been interviewed.

The result of this poll can be summarised as follows:

- The **field of office communication** is a wide one. Office skills are highly needed in fields such as education, social work, the service sector or technical areas. Therefore the tasks are manifold ranging from making phone calls, ordering of office supplies, preparation of documents, or planning and preparing meetings.
- The **most challenging situations** according to employers and employees with a migration background are: making official phone calls, writing official letters/e-mails, choosing correct salutations and dealing with intercultural matters.
- In order to **overcome such challenges** employers and employees correctly, the following recommendations given by the interviewees can be highlighted:
 - o A welcoming atmosphere is essential to employees and employers. If the team a migrant is working in does not have, to some extent, intercultural competences, work can be very difficult. Therefore intercultural competence training for co-workers could be of help.
 - o Employees with migration background sometimes feel intimidated due the mistakes they make while writing letters or making phone calls with clients.
 - o To offer specific language courses focused on general office communication and/or characteristics of daily office routines in German offices (cultural tools etc.) are seen as very helpful.
 - o Further education for employees in order to deepen their knowledge in there filed of work as well as to further improve their German language skills.
 - o Especially in organisations who operate internationally or deal with migrant groups, multiple language skills are valued and therefore an advantage.
 - o A mentoring program to support migrants directly at their place of work.
- **Teachers have to face several challenges** concerning the teaching process:
 - o Missing of adequate material for specific vocational fields
 - o Heterogenic learners
 - o Organisational difficulties (rooms, facilities, etc.)

- To carry out **vocation related teaching successfully**, a teacher should consider to use the following methods:
 - Role-plays/ scenario technique, e.g. making a phone call, a meeting with colleagues, small talk with colleagues, presentation of a product
 - Station learning
 - An integrated internship in a company
 - Use of visual aids/ original material
 - Work with different media, e.g. computer, short films

7 Literature

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