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Online Digital Mentorship – How Might a Digital Communication Tool Facilitate Informal Learning and Integration of Newly Arrived in Sweden

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Abstract: The arrival of large groups of refugees is one of the great challenges in Europe today. In Sweden around 100 000 new immigrants is expected to arrive from Syria only during 2017 and there are large groups from various countries already staying in Sweden that are not properly integrated. There are no quick and smart solution to solve the inclusion of the large number of new citizens and the idea should rather be a holistic approach combining several initiatives. Lack of language skills is one of the underlying reasons for new arrivals exclusion from the labour market and social networks. Online informal language learning and digital mentorship with two way communication between New Arrivals and established Swedes might be a way to facilitate the inclusion and integration process.

The aim of the study was to examine to which extent a digital communication tool could act as a resource in order to make the integration process more effective for newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Research was carried out as a qualitative cross-sectional study with data gathered by semi-structured interviews. Five educators who are actively working with newly arrived immigrants and refugees were interviewed with use of the Skype tool. A thematic analysis was conducted to find patterns and to create themes and categories that could answer the main research question: How might a digital communication tool be designed to facilitate the integration and inclusion of new arrived refugees in Sweden? The answers could be structured according to two overall themes: “Usable” and “Flexible”. The theme “Usable” consisted of three sub-themes Ease of Access, Improved language skills and Integrity Facilitation, while the theme “Flexible” was divided into two subcategories Adaptable and Educational content.

The findings confirm that a digital communication tool would support integration of new arrivals by facilitating personal dialogues with established Swedes. The recommendation is to create an online platform that supports language learning and enables multi-way digital mentorship in a social network with benefits for the established Swedes as well.

Keywords: Newly arrived refugees, Immigration, Integration, Inclusion, Online communication, Informal online learning, E-learning

1. Introduction

Large groups of refugees have arrived to Europe during the last years with a peak in 2015 when there were more than 1.3 million asylum applications (Migrationsinfo, 2016). Many newly arrived are for several reasons not yet integrated into the Swedish society and the actual situation can be seen as one of the biggest contemporary problems in Sweden (Andersson, 2016). Resources provided by the government are often not sufficient to integrate the newly arrived. Lack of integration can result in
large groups being isolated from the rest of the society and in conflict with the local population. Lack of language skills can be an underlying reason for exclusion in the labour market and for the absence of social networks in Sweden.

One reason for the large streams of asylum seekers to Sweden last years is the multi-sided armed conflict in Syria (Lundberg, 2016). At the same time there has been an increase of new xenophobic political groups with attacks where refugee quarters have been burnt down (Delin, 2015; Ewald, 2015). The problem is huge and complex and there is a need for constructive initiatives. If Sweden was able to financially manage the huge peak of asylum seekers in 2015, there must now be possibilities to reinforce the integration of these newly arrived immigrants. In Sweden, language learning for newly arrived is an activity that should be carried out by the local municipalities. As found in a study by Fahkro (2011) there is a discrepancy between the language that is learnt in the courses run by the municipality and the actual spoken language in daily life. The language is the most obvious barrier to establishment in society and on the labour market (Fahkro, 2011).

1.1 Problem and Aim of the study

Sweden’s reception of asylum seekers and immigrants has not been flexible enough to cope with the increased number of newly arrived in an efficient way (Swedish National Audit Office, 2015). The identified problem that this study has tried to address is the lack of efficiency in the official establishment process of newly arrived. The overall aim of the study has been to examine to which extent a digital communication tool could act as a resource to make the integration process more effective for newly arrived immigrants and refugees.

2. Extended background

During the last five hundred years different population groups from different nations have migrated to Sweden and the phenomenon is not new. However, the last years the numbers of refugees have been the highest since the Second World War. An effect of this has been more asylum seekers to Europe and Sweden than ever before. The most frequent country of origin is Syria, followed by Afghanistan, Kosovo and Eritrea. (Migrationsinfo, 2016). The figures below show the challenge; 2016 Sweden received 163 005 immigrants a record year of all times (figure 1), 2015 1,6 million people in Sweden where not originally born in Sweden (16% of the population, see figure 2).

![Figure 1. Immigration in Sweden 1943-2016, (Statistics Sweden, 2017).](image1)

![Figure 2. Percent foreign born in Sweden, (Statistics Sweden, 2017).](image2)
2.1 The language barrier

Good language skills is probably the fastest way to integration of newly arrived. Lack of language skills is also a barrier to education for immigrants not least in higher education (University of Osnabrück, 2017). The provided language courses for newly arrived are a good start, but there seems to exist a discrepancy between the spoken Swedish in the courses and Swedish spoken by established Swedes. Interviewed learners missed practical exercises on conversation skills (Fakhro, 2011).

Speaking skills is also important to create a social network, and a study by Rama & Seid (2011) showed the importance of a social network if newly arrived should establish contacts on the labour market. Without a job or a social network immigrants often end up in exclusion and language proficiency is a key to integration (Rama & Seid, 2011). To support a smoother integration process there is a need for more flexible channels for learning the Swedish language.

2.2 Digitisation and the use of ICT in educational contexts

The use of Information and Communication Tools (ICT) in educational contexts have rapidly increased during the last decade. Two investigations by the Swedish School Council in 2008 and 2012 confirms the increased number of computers in Swedish schools. There was also an increased use of technology enhanced learning in Swedish schools for adult education. About 80% of the schools in Sweden use some kind of digital platform for learning and communication. (Swedish School Council, 2013).

A study by Condie and Munro (2007) discussed the potential of technology enhanced learning and how it can increase learners' performance. Furthermore, the study showed that ICT can support learning in general and the early stages of language learning in particular. "More specifically, ICT was found to support language development in general, particularly at the early stages, whereas it tended to have positive effects in science and mathematics on specific concepts and, in learning modern foreign languages, on the acquisition of sub-skills such as word recognition and vocabulary building." (Condie and Munroe 2007, page 22).

Holcomb (2009) concluded that the use of ICT can be a good way to improve learners’ language skills. This study had a focus on how ICT and e-learning might be part of an online communication platform for informal language learning.

3. Method

This study has been carried out as a qualitative cross-sectional study with data collected from five educators who all are actively working with larger groups of newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Cross-sectional studies are conducted to get an overview of a context or a phenomenon at a specific point in time. The majority of cross-sectional studies have a quantitative design with the use of questionnaires or structured interviews, while qualitative cross-sectional studies tend to use semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2006).

Given the goals and logic of a qualitative approach, purposive sampling was the choice to collect the understandings of selected individuals’ experiences. To support this aim, a purposive sampling strategy should build on a selection of individuals or groups that can provide a special insight into the research question (Devers, & Frankel, 2000). The research question to answer in this study was: How might a digital tool be designed to support the integration of newly arrived immigrants in Sweden?
3.1 Data collection

Data was collected by semi-structured interviews, with the idea of interviews as a communication session where the researcher leads the communication by asking questions to the informants (Johannesson and Perjons, 2012). Interviews is a method were the researcher can collect a broad set of data from a small number of informants. Interviews have a focus on informants self-report, what they say they know and what they say that they believe.

Semi-structured interviews as described by Denscombe (2014) with a question scheme permitting follow-up questions to interesting answers seemed like a good choice for this study. An advantage with semi-structured interviews is that the dialog can be enhanced and adapted to each specific informant. Since informants were located with a wide geographical spread interviews were conducted by with the Skype online communication tool. To use an online tool for the interviews was also interesting since the research question to answer includes the design of a communication tool.

Questions were created in an open-ended way and formulated to gather data related to the research question. Interviews were conducted in one hour sessions where the interviews have been recorded with the informants consent.

3.2 Data analysis

Patterns and themes in the interview answers were identified in an inductive thematic analysis process. Compared with a deductive thematic analysis that is based on theory and earlier research an inductive analysis is data driven and more depending on the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study of an area with few earlier studies and theories an inductive approach seemed suitable.

Thematic analysis is one of the most frequently used methods for qualitative data to identify patterns and themes that are of use to answer the research question. This analysis has been carried out in six phases: 1) Get familiar with the data, 2) Generate initial codes, 3) Identify themes, 4) Review themes, 5) Define and name themes, 6) Write up the analysis. Important of course is that the second phase is carried out thoroughly to find the information patterns that are related to the research question.

4. Results and discussion

The first obvious finding was that all five interviewed pedagogues expressed consensus on the benefits of a digital online tool for language training. In the thematic analysis two themes were easy to identify in the informants answers; Usable and Flexible. Later sub-themes were distinguished and the relationships between them were outlined, see Figure 1 below.
Figure 3. Empirically generated themes and sub-themes.

4.1 Usable

This section presents the sub-themes of the main theme “Usable” one by one with selected quotes from the interview answers. All respondents were positive to the idea of an online digital tool, but if the tool should be usable an important requirement is what could be categorised as “Ease of Access”.

Ease of Access

The first obvious finding is the general positive attitude towards the concept of a digital mentorship enabling a dialog between newly arrived and established Swedes. Several respondents also brings up Ease of Access as important “It should definitely be easier for all involved, independent of geographical distance.” (Respondent 3) and “Yes, the advantage is the easy access, just to call someone for a five minute chat, but of course face-to-face meetings are important too and this should just be a complement” (Respondent 4).

Answers also contain the idea of ‘Easy in easy out’ with opinions like “An advantage of digital meetings is that you can disconnect whenever you want without being impolite, which also can make it easier for people to contact each other” (Respondent 1) and pattern found in several answers was “It’s easier if it’s digital”. One respondent brought up the ideas of ‘anytime, anywhere’ and to integrate the tool in the formal education: “Yes, if it could be possible to speak to someone whenever you want, or whenever they want. And also to make Internet chats part of educational sessions.” (Respondent 2).

To summarise, respondents were positive to the idea of an online communication platform with easy access. Online digital mentorship was also considered as an important complement to the more formal teaching and learning sessions for newly arrived. Several respondents also brought up the fact that many newly arrived do not have any conversations in Swedish outside their formal training.

Improved Language Skills

Most important aspect of the theme “Usable” was if the digital tool and a digital mentorship might improve users’ language skills. Respondents also highlights that participants in courses for newly arrived often asks for more contacts with established Swedes, to learn to know new Swedes and to create a social network. “It’s very much about learning to use the language on a regular basis in various contexts. I think that the idea of a digital mentorship with conversation partners available anytime is good. To be able to speak not only in arranged sessions” (Respondent 4).

On the question about why newly arrived immigrants have such great difficulties to establish themselves on the Swedish job market some of the answers were:

“They never get a chance, but also the lack of language skills that makes it hard to communicate, in Swedish as well as in English” (Respondent 2).

“Language, language is the most important! First you must learn the language before you can integrate. If I speak perfect English, and you speak perfect English we can communicate, but integration is about speaking the local language, not to speak a foreign language” (Respondent 3).

“Well, it’s very much about learning the language, and then to get into the labour market and like get into the society” (Respondent 4).

The importance of language skills is clearly stressed and also that learning the local language is the key to employment as well as integration. This can be found in all respondents answers and it is also
mentioned that the vast majority of newly arrived really want to learn Swedish. A digital online tool should be versatile but channels for language learning are essential.

Integrity Facilitation

Integration can be seen as the next natural step after improved language skills, when you are able to communicate, integration can start. To meet established Swedes is also what most immigrants want according to the respondents, but it is not clear how. One idea that is highlighted is that getting in touch with one Swede often leads to contact with more Swedes. However, Swedes are not always easy going and easy to get in touch with. Too often immigrants only stick to their community where they can speak their mother tongue and the first contact with the Swedish society has been described as a cultural chock. "It's like a cultural chock and often with huge differences between the Swedish society and the countries of emigation. It's another culture and fast integration is often not the case" (Respondent 3).

The described culture clash can lead to negative consequences such as feelings of isolation and loneliness. This can in a longer perspective result in low motivation and exclusion. The respondents’ suggestion is that facilitated contact with Swedes is the obvious recipe to integration. "If you get a decent contact with a few established Swedes, it's a start of a social network that later have good probabilities to extend" (Respondent 1). To establish the first contact has been described as the hardest when there exist a language barrier and a culture clash. All respondents like the idea of 'Digital mentorship' with the basic idea of one newly arrived immigrant and one established Swede interact in a dual mentorship where the established Swede also learn from the immigrant.

4.2 Flexible

Even if “Usable” and usability can be seen as the most important patterns, answers which can be categorised within the major theme “Flexible” were also frequently found. Most of the respondents emphasised aspects of flexibility such as geographical flexibility and time flexibility. Flexible has been divided into the two sub-themes: “Adaptable” and “Educational Content”.

Adaptable

Since accommodation is hard to find in Sweden’s bigger cities the newly arrived are mainly located in rural regions and small cities. With a South to North span of 1800 km in Sweden face-to-face sessions can be costly as well as time consuming. “Looking at the map of Sweden and where the newly arrived are located, it can be hard to find a ‘real’ physical mentor in these sparsely populated regions. A digital mentor can be a good alternative if you live + 100 km from the nearest city” (Respondent 2). The same idea was brought up by Respondent 3: "Yes, it (a digital tool) could easily cut the distances, easier then to get in touch with someone”.

Other quite expected responses coded in this category were "Don't need to travel, possible from home", "Time efficient, chat anytime" and "Reduces distance, increases availability. Time shortage for F2F meetings". However, a bit more unexpected response was "You get more courage and brave to speak when it’s online, since you always have the possibility to quit the conversation fast". Like in all situations there is never a perfect match in all contacts and if one contact does not feel right you can try and call someone else.

Most respondents stressed the benefit of an adaptable communication tool connecting people from different parts of Sweden. This could also be a way for newly arrived to explore the differences between various regions of Sweden and also as an integrated part of their education. This sub-theme can be summarised with a short quote from one of the respondents "Efficiency, talk anytime from anywhere and also as a part of the education".
**Educational Content**

Another aspect of “Flexible” is educational content flexible enough to engage both partners in a digital mentorship. A digital tool must enable benefits for the established Swedes as well, and by doings so, enabling a two-way conversation where both partners learn something. People are naturally curious, but they also have prejudices. "Curiosity as well, and to learn more about other people and other cultures. And with a strive to be helpful" (Respondent 2). Additionally, flexible educational content in the sense that different persons have different preferences and different educational needs. To label persons briefly as newly arrived do not include anything about their earlier education or pre-knowledge. Some persons have fled from a civil war without completing secondary school, others have high academic degrees with unique special skills. For that reason there must be various ways for immigrants to establish themselves on the Swedish labour market.

"Information do not reach everyone, and even The Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) who have an important role to play do not know what is available. People who should go the 'Short Way' end up in basic training and vice versa" (Respondent 1). The Short Way (Korta vägen) is an initiative for job seeking immigrants having an academic degree or three years of academic studies. In the Mid Sweden region of Jämtland and Härjedalen the initiative is run in a collaboration between The Peoples University (Folkuniversitet), the Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) and The Mid Sweden University (Mittuniversitet). The Short Way is given as a half year programme on full time identifying the personal competency and possible further studies at university level. Sessions include things like defining professional roles in Sweden, validating degrees and creating a plan for a Swedish career. Beside the concrete goal of employability there are also activities on the understanding of Swedish culture and the Swedish society (The Short Way Östersund, 2017). With a focus on using immigrants earlier acquired competencies this program is to the successful initiative developed at the University of Osnabrück in Germany (University of Osnabrück, 2017). However, a basic difference is that the condition in Sweden is that the application of asylum must be approved first.

Flexible could also be interpreted as mass individualisation with individual levels for educational content and language learning. An example of this is the Swedex language test that is divided into the three levels A2, B1 and B2. Swedex was developed as a European Union project in the SOCRATES programme. Swedex tests can be taken at 92 places in 32 countries (Swedex: Swedish Examinations, 2017), and to provide information about the Swedex tests would of course be interesting to integrate in an online tool for digital mentorship.

5. Conclusion and suggestions for further development

Findings show that a well-designed online communication tool implementing the idea of digital mentorship would have good probabilities to facilitate the integration process of newly arrived immigrants in Sweden. A requirement specification could be based upon the two major themes, “Usable” and “Flexible”, and their five sub-themes; “Ease of Access”, “Improved language skills”, “Integrity Facilitation”, “Adaptable” and “Educational content”. Firstly, newly arrived immigrants is today, more than ever, a heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds. For that reason the first important design requirement must be Ease of Access, without costs for the end-user, without complicated login procedures and with good usability and user-friendly features. A digital tool should facilitate, not complicate otherwise the tool has a risk of staying unused.

Secondly, the most important requirements for a digital tool is the potential to be “Usable” in the sense of facilitating improved language skills and integration. As found in earlier research (Fakhro, 2011) and projects for newly arrived (University of Osnabrück, 2017), local language skills is the prime key to start a social network and to get integrated in the new society. The first contact with the Swedish society can create a cultural shock and an online digital mentor might be a way to handle the shock.
Finally, the other main theme “Flexible” must be part of the requirements as well since both the geographical spread of immigrants and Swedes ready to interact with them, and the lack of time are brought up by the respondents. An online tool must be flexible to use both in time and space, but also regarding information and educational content. Newly arrived immigrants are a heterogeneous group with huge variations in terms of earlier education, experience and preferences. Another aspect of flexibility is to have more flexible and joyful learning activities, online and offline. An example that is a bit different is The Rockin' pots choir that was started in Östersund in 2015. Things like the names of weekdays and months in Swedish are learnt by singing well-known Swedish rock songs. What makes the initiative particularly interesting is that the choirs also contains established Swedes and that it is possible to join the choir before your asylum application is approved. Language learning and integration does not necessary have to be formal and boring and several immigrants have stopped their anti-depressive medication after joining a choir (The Rockin' Pots, 2017).

5.1 Further work

It can be argued that the presented requirement themes need to be complemented, and probably must aspects like integrity, motivation and joyfulness also be considered. To build a full-fledged online tool with features for language training and digital mentorship would need some funding. Meanwhile, the first implementation of a prototype has started in a small scale at:

https://www.snackasvenska.nu/

'Snacka svenska' means chat in Swedish and participants can earn 'Lingo points' for their successful adventures in the Swedish language (Hansson, Boman & Junselsius, 2017; Boman & Jungselsius, 2017).

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