

# ENABLING SKILL AND COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LANGUAGE MENTORS AT THE WORKPLACE

**Sarah LUKAS**  
**Monica BRAVO GRANSTRÖM**  
**Roswitha KLEPSE**  
**Karin SCHWEIZER**  
University of Education Weingarten, DE

Email: [lukas@ph-weingarten.de](mailto:lukas@ph-weingarten.de)

**Keywords:** *Lifelong learning, second language learning, integration on the job, mentoring, human-resource development (HRD)*

*Author's note: This research was funded by the European Union, EU programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), VS-2017-0437 17.*

## ABSTRACT

The globalized society of today is marked by significant challenges, such as increasing complexity and rapid changes in the labour market. Through university lifelong learning, skills and competence in society can be developed. Higher education institutions (HEIs) and their offers of continuing education at university level thus play an important role. As an example, the project *Language Training on the Job (LaTJo)* within the EU programme FIER (Fast Track Integration in European Regions), in which a model for language mentoring at the workplace was conceptualized, is presented here. The project, conducted by the Academy of Continuing Education (AWW) of the University of Education Weingarten (PHW), adopts an important issue: fast integration on the job for migrants and refugees. Hereby, the focus is on the colleagues of the newcomers and hence aims at the dissemination of societal tools to support the integration process. Furthermore, it transfers academic knowledge to society. Applying training directly on the job circumvents a number of obstacles to engaging in lifelong learning. The following paper introduces a mentoring concept in which employees are trained as language mentors. Subsequently, key findings of the accompanying evaluation are presented. The article concludes by discussing lifelong learning, the possible roles of universities in work-based learning and actual as well as future challenges.

## INTRODUCTION

### Lifelong learning

The globalized society of today is characterized by significant challenges, such as increasing complexity and rapid changes in task areas and job profiles in the labour market. Through university lifelong learning (LLL), skills and competence in society can be developed. In the current European discussion on education policy, the concept of lifelong learning has been given a strategic and functional focus. The European Commission regards lifelong learning as a key competence, and the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000), still an influential

education policy document, states that "*Lifelong learning* is no longer just one aspect of education and training; *it must become the guiding principle* for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts" (emphasis in original). In this line, the EU has set the goal to include 12.5% of the European population in some kind of LLL. To support LLL, key factors that lead to participation have been identified at three levels: the individual (e.g., Landberg & Porsch, 2022), the educational provision level and the socioeconomic context (Boeren *et al.*, 2010, p. 47). In this article, we focus on the educational provision level.

It is not just in the EU that LLL is stated to be important for society development (see also, e.g., UNESCO 2022). In Germany, however, LLL is not nearly as firmly anchored as the numerous political declarations of intent would suggest (Wolter & Banscherus, 2016). Higher education institutions (HEIs) and their offers of continuing education at university level play an important role when it comes to LLL. The conditions for such offers, however, struggle with several challenges regarding implementation, e.g., the legal demand of full-cost calculation for continuing education courses, leading to high course fees, or narrow entry requirements (Cendon *et al.*, 2020). This might impede the participation of learners from various demographic, social and economic backgrounds and on different educational pathways in the HEIs' offers. Refugees, in particular, often do not meet all requirements, despite possibly being in greatest need of continuing education since their professional qualifications may not be acknowledged in their new country of residence.

The University of Education Weingarten (PHW) in Germany meets those challenges with an institution focused on LLL, the Academy for Continuing Education (AWW). The AWW aims to promote lifelong learning by offering in-service continuing education courses in the workplace as well as at the university that address global challenges at the local level. The AWW responds to a wide range of local needs through proactive initiatives such as the project described in this paper, which establishes a model for language mentoring in the workplace. Integration in the European labour market is an ever-relevant issue (e.g., Omanović *et al.*, 2022) in which different European measures of labour market integration are to be examined.

## Lifelong learning for fast integration in the labour market

The research presented in this paper was conducted within the frame of the European project *FIER – Fast track integration in European Regions*<sup>1</sup>. The aim of this project was to facilitate and accelerate integration processes of refugees in Europe. It was coordinated under the integration strategy labelled "Fast track" in Sweden, which recaps activities that shorten the time between arrival at the new country of residence and taking up employment. These activities include language training, general education and professional education, and combine them with job experience. The actions within this project met the challenges of the waves of refugees taking place in Europe in the years from 2015 onwards. More than 2.8 million refugees were estimated to be living in Europe in the year 2021 (Statista, 2022). More than one million people with refugee backgrounds migrated to Germany between 2015 and 2019 (Brücker *et al.*, 2019). With the war in the Ukraine, approximately another one million have arrived (as Ukrainian citizens can move within Europe without a visa, no exact number can be stated, Mediendienst Integration, 2022). These numbers clearly indicate that migration and the challenges associated with it are a very important issue that needs to be addressed. Project partners in *FIER* included institutions from Sweden, Norway, Turkey, Belgium, Germany and Austria. They worked together on different strategies to implement fast track integration in the working place, considering their own countries' challenges and conditions, but also learning from each other and sharing experiences.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://fierprojecteu.com/>

In the following, the subproject *Language training on the job (LaTJo)* (in Germany) is presented in more detail. Its focus was to implement a training programme which could train mentors at the workplace. The rationale behind this project was to train the colleagues of the newcomers as language mentors. In doing so, the mentors are given professional tools to support the integration process of newcomers (i.e., mentees) in a more structured and guided way. Furthermore, they provide an informal education possibility. Thus, the mentors take on two roles: they are beneficiaries of university LLL and, after completion, they act as multipliers of lifelong learning opportunities. This is especially important with regards to lifelong learning opportunities for refugees, as they often hesitate to participate in formal processes of the respective trade. The mentors play an important role in guiding the actions of the mentees. Moreover, the professional learning is accompanied by language learning units. While the trade is learned, relevant professional language is trained as well. The innovative character of this approach is that the training focus is not on the migrants, but on the professionals that (already) have a permanent position and very good language skills of the host country (Germany in this case). Completing a language course in the host country's national language has been shown to be one of the significant factors to gaining employment for refugees (Lochmann *et al.*, 2019; Månsson & Delander, 2017, p. 55). The overall aim is to provide better conditions to support migrants in engaging in decent work, as stipulated in the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 8 (United Nations, 2015).

The idea is that for a successful integration process, all involved parties have to contribute. The term integration is used here to define a process of convergence, cooperation and interaction between two cultures (Jeuk, 2015, p. 110-111). It is hence acknowledged that influence between new migrants and long-time residents is mutual (Feldman, 1994, p. 213) and that this can also be valid within an organisational context (Omanović & Langley, 2021, p. 3). In order to configure integration successfully, opportunities to learn, educate oneself and to develop new skills must be offered to all parties included in the integration process. This is the starting point for the training for language mentors on the job. The basic concept of the training is presented in the next section<sup>2</sup>.

### Concept of language mentor training

The target group for language mentor training is individuals working in a permanent position with very good language skills in German. A professional background in language teaching is not required. The training was initially drafted for the hotel and gastronomy sector. After three runs in the hotel sector, the mentor training was broadened and conducted in the industry sector. It is therefore adaptable and applicable in diverse professional sectors.

The aim of the language mentoring training is to enable trained language mentors to configure the workplace as a learning environment. It is through such proactive human resource development (HRD) initiatives that companies begin to gain recognition as learning organisations. The mentors should be able to plan, implement and reflect on language support processes for the mentee. They are able to accept and even appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity as contributors to the mutually influential integration process. Intercultural challenges are met competently. The mentoring targets three key competences: language competence (of the mentee, see Trim *et al.*, 2013), action competence (of the mentee, see Nieke, 2012; Stäudel, 2008) and social competence (since the latter is interactive, of both, mentor and mentee, e.g., Ebert, 2018; Euler & Reemtsma-Theis, 1999).

In order to achieve these goals, language mentors are first trained in language learning and diagnostic processes as well as in the didactic of video-supported learning. Furthermore, the mentors receive training in intercultural communication as well as in giving feedback. After a

---

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed description of the concept can be read in Klepser *et al.* (2022) as well as Lukas *et al.* (in print).

practical phase in which the mentors train the learning contents with their mentees, a second input phase deals with the role of the mentor, introduces the method of collegial case advice and ensures the consolidation of the transfer by discussing the process and results of the practical phase.

The training consists of two core learning units. The first – language learning processes and diagnosis – introduces the concept of profile analysis according to Griefhaber (2012), based on the processability theory of Pienemann (1998). Profile analysis is a diagnostic tool that allows the assessment of a learner's language skill level and corresponding learning goals based on the placement of verbal elements, primarily the finite verb. The version applied for this project was created for German. However, language profile analyses exist for other languages as well, such as for Swedish as a second language (e.g. Håkansson, 2003).

The second core learning unit in the training – video-supported learning – has the advantage of being very flexible. The mentors learn to create a learning video with work-related actions, accompanied by linguistic explanations with a focus on relevant vocabulary. The videos can be made without professional equipment, for instance with a smartphone. The mentors are trained in how to develop a screenplay that uses language appropriate to the language level of the mentee. The mentee can then watch the video on their own at any time and learn the words and sentences used. Afterwards, the mentee can make their own video on which the mentor can provide feedback regarding actions as well as on language.

## EVALUATION OF TRAINING

Within the framework of the FIER project, the mentor training was conducted in four different groups, three of them in the hotel and gastronomy sector and one in the industry sector. The trainers were academic staff from the AWW. The training was evaluated throughout the project phase by interviews with the freshly trained mentors (19 mentors were interviewed). The aim was to investigate if the mentor training was rated as effective by the mentors (part of the evaluation results can be read in Lukas *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, for the second trainer group, four of the mentees working together with the mentors in the training were interviewed<sup>3</sup>.

An important step in the process of language mentor training for many participants was to become aware of their own language and way of speaking. They also said that they reflected more on the choice of words they used after the training and also on the accuracy and speed of pronunciation. The use of profile analyses was reflected as very helpful by almost all participants. It encouraged more attention be paid to the language level of the mentees. The ability for a perspective change seemed to have been stimulated by the training. Two of the participants said they had developed a deeper understanding for the challenges of understanding a foreign language when spoken quickly and slurred.

The method of working with learning videos was evaluated positively by all participants. Independent of time and place, repeatability and flexibility were some of the reasons provided. The effectiveness of this method was clearly affirmed. When asked which work assignments were particularly suitable for the learning videos, many answered that the assignments should not be too complex and that smaller work steps should be selected from a larger sequence of actions.

Some challenges were also identified. These included the additional expenses involved, the fact that there could be some loss of authenticity when communicating more consciously and less naturally, and that clients might form a bad impression of the mentee. It was also noted

---

<sup>3</sup> Please note that in three of the groups, the project team only had contact with the members.

that there is a lot of staff turnover, and hence the training was not worth the effort. Some mentioned not being comfortable with acting in a video.

The mentees all stated that they learned a lot linguistically at their workplace through contact with colleagues and guests. They also reported having learned new words through shooting the learning videos. Half of the respondents said they had learned both language and action while shooting the videos, while the other half said they had learned only language. All respondents stated that comprehending other people at work is a challenge. Comprehension problems were particularly high for all respondents when dialect was spoken. Half of the respondents also said they had increased comprehension problems when their interaction partner spoke very quickly. Still, the importance of social contact to colleagues was emphasised in the interviews as well. The mentors were their contact persons for dealing with problems and questions regarding work. Private matters were also discussed with the mentor. Receiving feedback was an important aspect of the mentor programme to them.

## DISCUSSION

The rapid global changes of the past years require that HEIs take action. Competences needed to face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been described under the concept of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (González-Pérez *et al.*, 2022). Among those, lifelong learning, cultural awareness and communication have been mentioned (van Laar *et al.*, 2017, p. 582). HEIs have the responsibility to react to changing requirements and provide opportunities to acquire the requisite skills (Cendon *et al.*, 2021). Committing to its mission statement, the PHW addresses the challenges regarding lifelong learning on different levels. Through project structures, challenges such as entry requirements and high entry fees can be overcome. In such a way, people not working in the academic sector can also profit from high-quality continuing education. However, in order for HEIs in Germany to be able to support university lifelong learning in a more sustainable way and on a larger scale, a firmer structure and state funding are needed. The project dependency has to be reduced.

The evaluation of the presented project confirms that professional language can also be trained at the workplace by non-professional mentors. Undoubtedly, the mentors need structured training to be prepared for this task. By means of the training, they receive tools, based on scientific findings to implement mentoring on the job. The methods used in this training were accepted and appreciated by both mentors and mentees. The profile analysis, in particular, was considered very helpful by the mentors, offering a relatively easy way to diagnose language level and to adapt level-appropriate support. The introduction to video-based learning was also seen as a valuable tool to accompany the mentoring process.

The conducted evaluation, however, only offers a limited overview of the effects of mentoring in the workplace. Academic research investigating effects of mentoring for refugees is still scarce (Bagnoli & Estache, 2022) and it is therefore important to foster research in this area to be able to design relevant mentoring structures. Specifically, language mentoring on the job is still a vastly ignored component in researching mentoring programmes. Therefore, the importance of accompanying research in university lifelong learning should not be ignored. If the challenges of a fast-changing society are to be met successfully, a circuit of training concepts, developed according to state of the art, society transferable, evaluating research, is indispensable for the acquisition of greater (or changed) knowledge.

Universities have the responsibility to engage in providing LLL opportunities. In doing so, they contribute to the transfer of academic knowledge, based on scientific findings in society. It is also important to include non-formal and informal LLL opportunities in these considerations. So far, awareness of this appears to be more prevalent in the Scandinavian countries than in Germany (e.g., Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). The project presented here

shows an example how this can be implemented in a German context. Learners from various demographic, social and economic backgrounds were trained in academic knowledge of language diagnosis and support processes as well as didactic tools and basics of intercultural communication. This enabled them to contribute to socio-political processes in a meaningful and active way.

## REFERENCES

- Bagnoli, L. and Estache, A. (2022) 'Mentoring migrants for labor market integration: Policy insights from a survey of mentoring theory and practice' *The World Bank Research Observer*, 37(1), pp. 39–72. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkab005>
- Boeren, E., Nicaise, I. & Baert, H. (2010) 'Theoretical models of participation in adult education: the need for an integrated model', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 29(1), pp. 45-61. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370903471270>
- Cendon, E., Elsholz, U., Speck, K., Wilkesmann, U. & Nickel, S. (2020) *Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung an Hochschulen: Herausforderungen und Handlungsempfehlungen. Ergebnisse der wissenschaftlichen Begleitung des Bund-Länder-Wettbewerbs: "Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen"*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:19035>
- Cendon, E., Schulte, D. & Mörth, A. (2021) 'University continuing education as an innovation lab for future education – potentials and limitations', *European Journal of University Lifelong Learning*, pp. 15–25. doi: <https://doi.org/10.53807/0501asxt>
- Colardyn, D., & Bjornavold, J. (2004) 'Validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning: Policy and practices in EU member states', *European journal of education*, 39(1), pp. 69-89.
- Damelang, A. & Kosyakova, Y. (2021) 'To work or to study? Postmigration educational investments of adult refugees in Germany - Evidence from a Choice Experiment', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 76(100610). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2021.100610>
- Ebert, H. (2018) 'Bedeutung sozialer Kompetenzen', in J. H. Becker, H. Ebert, & S. Pastoors (eds.) *Praxishandbuch berufliche Schlüsselkompetenzen*, pp. 9-17. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-54925-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-54925-4_2)
- European Commission (2000) *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ac11047> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).
- European Commission (2017) *Peer Review on 'Integration of Refugees into the Labour Market': Strategies and targeted measures to support integration of refugees into the German labour market*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18666&langId=en> (Accessed: 17 June 2022).
- Feldman, D. C. (1994) 'Who's socializing whom? The impact of socializing newcomers on insiders, work groups, and organizations', *Human Resource Management Review*, 4(3), pp. 213-233. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/1053-4822\(94\)90013-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/1053-4822(94)90013-2)
- González-Pérez, L.I. & Ramírez-Montoya, M.S. (2022) 'Components of Education 4.0 in 21st Century Skills Frameworks: Systematic Review', *Sustainability*, 14(3). doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14031493>

Grießhaber, W. (2012) 'Die Profilanalyse', in Ahrenholz, B. (ed.) *Einblicke in die Zweitspracherwerbsforschung und ihre methodischen Verfahren*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 173-193.

Håkansson, G. (2003) *Tvåspråkighet hos barn i Sverige*. Malmö: Studentlitteratur.  
Jaschke, P., Löbel, L.-M., Krieger, M., Legewie, N., Kroh, M., Jacobsen, J. & Schacht, D. (2022) 'Mentoring as a grassroots effort for integrating refugees - evidence from a randomised field experiment' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(17), pp. 4085-4105. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2058918>

Jeuck, S. (2015) *Deutsch als Zweitsprache in der Schule: Grundlagen – Diagnose – Förderung*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer

Klepser, R., Schneider, A., Dam, E., Eiberger, C., & Lukas, S. (2022) *Language learning through company mentors at the workplace. Training manual for language mentors at the workplace*. Available at: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:747-opus4-4113> (Accessed: 27 June 2022).

Lukas, S., Schneider, A., Dam, E. & Klepser, R. (in print). 'The training of language mentors at the workplace', in Bernert-Bürkle, A., Federighi, P. & Torlone, F. (eds.) *Fast track labour market integration of immigrants. Work-related learning of culture, language and profession*. Bielefeld: wbv Verlag.

Landberg, M., & Porsch, T. (2022). 'Learner Identity and Lifelong Learning: A Mixed-Method Study' *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy*, 3(3), pp. 59-68. doi: <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2022.3.3.305>

Lochmann, A., Rapoport, H. and Speciale, B. (2019) 'The effect of language training on immigrants' economic integration: empirical evidence from France', *European Economic Review*, 113, pp. 265-295. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2019.01.008>

Lukas, S., Klepser, R., Bernert-Bürkle, A., & Bravo Granström, M. (2021) 'Lebenslanges Lernen im Betrieb: Integration am Arbeitsplatz durch professionelle Qualifizierung und alltagsnahes Sprachmentoring', in Sander, I & Efinger, C. (eds.) *Der Betrieb als Sprachlernort*. Tübingen: Narr, pp. 216-237.

Lukas, S., Kaiser, B., Dam, E., Schneider, A., & Klepser, R. (2022) "'In der heutigen Zeit ist nur noch der Küchenchef Deutscher". Entwicklung eines Sprachmentoringtrainings am Arbeitsplatz', *Sprache im Beruf*, 5(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.25162/sprib-2022-0005doiL>

Mayring, P. (2010) *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*. Weinheim: Beltz.

Mediendienst Integration (2022). *Flüchtlinge aus der Ukraine in Deutschland*. Available at: <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asy/ukrainische-fluechtlinge.html#c3462> (Accessed: 10 October 2022)

Ministry of Employment, Government Offices of Sweden (2016) *Fast track – a quicker introduction of newly arrived immigrants*. Available at: <https://www.government.se/fasttrack> (Accessed: 17 June 2022).

Månsson, J. & Delander, L. (2017) 'Mentoring as a way of integrating refugees into the labour market - evidence from a Swedish pilot scheme' *Economic analysis and policy*, 56, pp. 51-59. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eap.2017.08.002>

Nike, W. (2012) *Kompetenz und Kultur: Beiträge zur Orientierung in der Moderne*. Springer VS: Wiesbaden.

Omanović, V., Tarim, E., & Holck, L. (2022) 'Practices of organizing migrants' integration into the European labour market' *European Management Review*, pp. 1-12. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12533>

Omanović, V. & Langley, A. (2021) 'Assimilation, integration or inclusion? A dialectical perspective on the organizational socialization of migrants' *Empirical Research*, pp. 1-22. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F10564926211063777>

Pienemann, M. (1998) *Language processing and second language development*. John Benjamins: Amsterdam.

Statista (2022) *Anzahl von Geflüchteten und Asylsuchenden in der EU in den Jahren 2010 bis 2021*. Available at: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1182205/umfrage/fluechtlinge-und-asylsuchende-in-der-eu/> (Accessed: 09 October 2022).

Stäudel, T. (2008) *Handlungskompetenz für Auszubildende: Band 1. Anforderungen, Bedarf und Maßnahmen für Schlüsselkompetenzen im gewerblich-technischen Bereich*. Berlin: Pabst Science Publishers.

Trim, J., North, B., Coste, D. (2013) *Gemeinsamer europäischer Referenzrahmen für Sprachen: lernen, lehren, beurteilen*. Berlin: Langenscheidt.

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2022) *5th Global Report of Adult Learning and Education. Citizenship education: Empowering adults for change*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381666> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

United Nations (2015) *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Available at: [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E) (Accessed: 26 July 2022).

van Laar, E., van Deursen, A., van Dijk, J., & de Haan, J. (2017) 'The relation between 21st-century skills and digital skills: A systematic literature review', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 72, pp. 577–588. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.03.010>

Wolter, A., Banscherus, U. (2016) 'Lebenslanges Lernen und akademische Bildung als internationales Reformprojekt', in Wolter, A., Banscherus, U., & Kamm, C. (eds.), *Zielgruppen Lebenslangen Lernens an Hochschulen: Ergebnisse der wissenschaftlichen Begleitung des Bund-Länder-Wettbewerbs Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen, Band 1*. Münster: Waxmann, pp. 53-80.