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Host language learning and sense of belonging: the perspective of migrant students

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Introduction: In this article, we explore the role of the host language, and of civic participation, in the integration and inclusion of adult migrants and refugees in the Northern region of Portugal. To do so, we set the research question “What is the role of the host language, its learning and its use in the integration and inclusion of adult migrants and refugees in Portugal?”. This study draws on the works of Ager and Strang, Narli and Özaşçılar, O'Reilly and Silver to explain the establishment process that adult migrants and refugees go through in the host society, and is guided by the perspective that host language is not merely a communicative tool, playing a transformative role, enabling learners to move from passive positions to active, agentive ones. As sense of community plays a role in this process, we mobilize the model proposed by McMillan and Chavis.

Methods: We conducted an extensive qualitative study on the perspectives of adult migrants learning Portuguese as host language students in public schools and social organizations which included 20 semi-structured interviews.

Results and discussion: Our main results show the host language as facilitating these students' sense of belonging in the host society, boosting, on the one hand, their autonomy and self-confidence, which contributes to their empowerment, and individual agency; and on the other hand, the ongoing development of social relations and networks that counter isolation, exclusion, and marginalization.

KEYWORDS

host language, education, inclusion, integration, interactions, sense of belonging, migrants

1 Introduction

The arrival of migrants and refugees in a host country raises questions about the conditions for their successful establishment processes (Ager and Strang, 2008; Castles et al., 2014). Although the concepts of *migrant* and *refugee* have evolved according in response to the demands of contemporary society, accordingly to the UNHCR website, it is possible to define *migrant* as individuals who move across borders voluntarily, often to work, family or education; while *refugee* is understood as individuals who are forced to flee due to conflict, persecution or violence. If children and young people require specific responses that promote and extend their education into adult life, specific educational responses cannot be overlooked in the case of adult individuals who arrive in a new country and society (UNESCO, 2018). Therefore, we ask: how do adult migrants and refugees relate to the official language of the host country? The need to communicate, participate and establish oneself in the host society becomes increasingly real (Oliveira et al., 2007)

and, in this context of migrants and refugees, it assures autonomy, agency and interaction (Kuhlmann, 2016; Mogli and Papadopoulou, 2018). In this work, we propose to answer the research question: what is the role of the host language, its learning and its use in the integration and inclusion of adult migrants and refugees in Portugal?

But first, we believe it is important to look at the Portuguese migration landscape has evolved and is marked by several distinct trends. Portugal's migration dynamics are strongly connected to the historical milestones of this country and Europe (Matos et al., 2012): the end of the dictatorship period led to the decolonization in Africa and the arrival of *retornados* in Portugal; after that, the beginning of the 21st century was characterized by the arrival of immigrants from Eastern Europe; and in the following years there was a large emigration of highly-qualified Portuguese people to other European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (Padilla and Ortiz, 2012). So, we can see that the phenomenon of immigration is recent in Portugal, as it has become more present at the beginning of the century, becoming more evident in 2007. This was when the immigration law No. 23/2007 was approved, which defined different types of response to the increase in immigration (Ançã, 2003). It was only in 2017 that the migration balance turned positive, due to a more open migration policy, facilitating the participation and citizenship of immigrants and their descendants (Oliveira, 2023).

Although, Portugal is still struggling with an aging population, it has seen an increase in its foreign population. According to the 2023 Migration and Asylum Report of the Portuguese Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA) (2024), 33.6% of the foreign resident population has increased compared to 2022, mostly of Brazilian and Angolan nationality. However, other nationalities are also from non-Portuguese speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, India, Italy, Nepal, China and France. A total of 1, 044, 606 immigrants reside in Portugal (Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos, 2023). Even though there are no references on this matter for the years 2023 or 2024, in 2022, the Portuguese Migration Observatory indicated that immigrants recognized learning the host language as a fundamental aspect of their integration and inclusions processes, registering 31, 373 immigrants enrolled in Portuguese language learning programs (Oliveira, 2023).

That same year, Ukrainian nationals represented the nationality with the highest number of students attending Portuguese host language classes, followed by Indian and Nepalese nationals. It is interesting to look at this diversity considering the migrants' linguistic background influence in their experience with the host language. Indeed, the linguistic distance between the host language and the language of origin has an impact on migrant's linguistic performance and relationship with the host language (Martins, 2022). And so, in cases of greater linguistic distance, English also functions as the first host language and bridging language during early stages of integration and inclusion, particularly for migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan or India, who tend to have contact with this language from an early age. These prior linguistic resources, however, don't replace the need to learn Portuguese, as it remains the only official language, and the primary means of access to rights, services, employment opportunities, and participation in the host

society. According to the EF Education First (2023), Portugal ranks 8th globally, classified as having very high proficiency in English; still, this language is not recognized in an institutional setting, which reinforces the importance of host language learning for equitable access and meaningful participation in the host society. At the same time, migrants from Spanish-speaking countries (such as Colombia, Venezuela or the Dominican Republic) tend to experience fewer difficulties when learning Portuguese, due to the linguistic proximity between the two languages (Martins, 2022).

Consequently, it becomes crucial to also consider and examine how integration and inclusion processes are understood and experienced by migrants in Portugal. The establishment processes of migrant groups in the host country shape their trajectories and their participation in the host society. In fact, is not only an issue of those arriving but also something that must concern the ones hosting, as integration and inclusion processes are bidirectional (Berry, 2012; Castles et al., 2002; Hynie, 2018; Korac, 2003; Narli and Özaşçılar, 2020; Pesquero Franco, 1995). This means the host society has a role in welcoming migrants and refugees, a role it may recognize. These two (different) processes complement each other (Decmann, 2021; Narli and Özaşçılar, 2020) and play an essential role in the reception of migrants and refugees. In this work, we assume integration as a multidimensional process that responds to the immediate needs that newcomers (might) have, such as employment, housing, education for children and healthcare (Ager and Strang, 2008), whereas inclusion is understood as a more abstract process connected to sense of belonging, participation, self-confidence and autonomy development (Narli and Özaşçılar, 2020; O'Reilly, 2005; Silver, 2015) in the host country.

The host language is a common element of both that can be described as the (potential, strongest) link with the host society. Therefore, the host language is a holistic instrument that encompasses cultural, social, linguistic and emotional issues that are not only about those who speak and use it but also about the society in which it is used (Pinho and Ançã, 2022). It is consequently a way of accessing and answering those immediate needs (Piller and Takahashi, 2011) and a way of recognizing and identifying with the society in which one lives (or hopes to live in) (Martins, 2022; Mendes, 2020). Host language is, therefore, more than just a language (Grosso, 2010; Kuhlmann, 2016): it is also a way of transforming a passive subject into an active one (Miranda and Fernandes, 2022). This perspective on language shares similarities with Paulo Freire's idea of education and liberation, by affirming that, going beyond linguistic issues, learning and education in the host language presupposes the development of a critical awareness that fosters conditions for individuals to act in the host cultural and social context in a transformative way (Freire, 2018).

Host language learning can happen in formal, non-formal or informal educational contexts. One thing these contexts have in common is a learning process that is not limited to a strictly linguistic dimension and considers the daily reality of those who learn (Norton, 2013; Sorgen, 2015). In Portugal, there have been several learning and training programs in the Portuguese language for foreign adults. Currently, and since 2020, the program in place is the Portuguese Host Language (*Português Língua de Acolhimento—PLA*), regulated by Ordinance no. 183/2020 (Presidency of the

Council of Ministers, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Labor Solidarity and Social Security, 2020), August 5th and amended by Ordinance no. 184/2022 (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Labor Solidarity and Social Security, 2022), July 21st. This program is promoted by public schools, the Institute for Employment and Professional Training (IEFP) and vocational training centers (Centros Qualifica) and it certifies competence levels A and B, both presupposing a workload of 150 h, according to the National Qualifications Catalog, which corresponds to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) language levels. Although there is no updated information on the number of national institutions offering this course, it is known that, during the school year of 2021/2022 31,373 students were enrolled in these courses, 59% of whom obtained certification (Oliveira, 2023). It is important to highlight that, in Portugal, learning the Portuguese language is recognized as optional for newcomers. At the same time, the course certification is essential for applying to a permanent residence permit, as well as long-term resident status and Portuguese nationality (for those not coming from countries that have Portuguese language as their official language). However, it is important to highlight that enrolling in these classes can be difficult, as there are long waiting lists and the response from these institutions is not enough for the people who are interested in learning Portuguese.

In addition to these formal language learning contexts, there are some other contexts that also provide language learning support even if they don't provide certification. Usually, these are promoted by social and community organizations that are responsible for integrating and including migrants and refugees. Besides, informal interactions, characterized as "social and cultural processes" (Callanan et al., 2011, p. 646), may provide relevant learning opportunities. Learning improvement is as important in real communication situations as in formal learning contexts (Bianco and Cobo, 2019; Sorgen, 2015). These interactions are connected to the construction of social networks, and therefore they are not an individual process, but one shared between the host society and newcomers, promoting active participation and fostering wellbeing in the host society. The complex and dynamic social networks built through interactions should promote enough of social capital, i.e., "connections among individuals" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19), to support social mobility and the use of economic, cultural or human capital¹ (Kindler et al., 2015; Pulinx and Avermaet, 2017; Strang and Quinn, 2019). In this regard, Putnam (2000) describes three types of social capital: *bonding social capital*, between those belonging to homogeneous social groups (sharing social and demographic characteristics); *bridging social capital*, which refers to heterogeneous social groups (relationships between individuals from different social classes); and *linking social capital*, the connection between individuals

and the State structures. We believe these three categories are important but as Strang and Quinn (2019, p. 18) explain, there should be "a more nuanced conceptualization of the relationship between bonds and bridges (...) by acknowledging a continuum linking these forms of connections rather than binary categories." This interconnection simplifies the initial period of transition and adaptation in which bonds promote emotional and practical support, creating opportunities for the development of bridges based on cultural exchanges centered on trust (Strang and Quinn, 2019). Moreover, the significant role of linking social capital cannot be overlooked: it eases the access to relevant institutional information, political resources and feelings of support (Abamosa, 2020) and it is also vital for wellbeing and identity reconstruction (Pulinx and Avermaet, 2017). Furthermore, linking social capital is essential for bonding and bridging social capital, as migrants and refugees claim access to services, respect for their rights and engagement in the host society and all of these aspects begin at the community level (Elliott and Yusuf, 2014).

Through their four studies, Lambert et al. (2013) demonstrate that having positive social relationships promotes a sense of security and belonging in an unknown society and community. The authors also address the influence of social relationships in developing a sense of belonging by stating that close relationships allow for individuals to feel part of a whole. Hence, the host language has an important role here too, because it is at the center of these interactions and negotiations. Valentine et al. (2008) show that language is not only the identity constructor nor is identity a determinant of language, but they are both recognized as mutually constituted. Language, spaces and identities are reconstructed through this encounter with other people, creating and developing a sense of belonging. This feeling is often associated with feeling "at home" and built through participation in the community (Gilmartin, 2008). The case of migrants and refugees in a new country shows how previous identities are used to interpret, understand and accommodate the information acquired and identity reconstruction, creating one fluid and hybrid identity (Amit and Bar-Lev, 2015; Bhabha, 1994).

As McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposes, there are four important elements that connect to the sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. The dynamics between the elements, and their mutual influence, create a strong sense of community, which may relate to how the interaction between different groups and the emotional bonds built, improve migrants' and refugees' experience in a new and unknown context.

In this work we will look at the role of the host language and community participation on migrants' and refugees' integration and inclusion processes. Particularly, by analyzing interviews with adult migrants and refugee students from both public schools and social organizations from the Northern region of Portugal, we will look at the role that language learning has on generating a productive sense of belonging.

2 Materials and methods

We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with migrant and refugee adult Portuguese as host language students from public

¹ According to Bourdieu (1986), economic capital is the financial and material resources one has, and cultural capital corresponds to the knowledge and symbolic resources the individual acquires through her/his life. Human capital, on the other hand, focuses on individual agents and on the learning and personal qualities that help individuals to improve their lives and participate in the society (OCDE, 2001).

schools (13 interviews) and from social organizations working for the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees (7 interviews) from different areas in the Northern region of Portugal. Participants came from a wide range of countries, 12 different countries including Argentina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, France, India, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Ukraine, the United States of America and Venezuela. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65 years old, and regarding gender there were 12 males and 8 females. We asked the participants how long they had been in Portugal. There were diverse responses since some participants had been in Portugal for 5 years, 2 years, 1 year, or for 7 months or 2 months; the participant who had been in Portugal the longest had been there for at least 7 years and the one who had been there the least had only been there for a month. All the participants were, at the moment of the interview, enrolled in Portuguese as a host language classes or had been enrolled in the previous school year; also, our data includes the experiences of A.1/A.2 or B.1/B.2 level students, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe et al., 2001). This diversity of participants was significant in gathering varied experiences.

We opted for qualitative methods by conducting semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection, because these, by allowing the construction of knowledge based on the experience of the subjects we spoke to (Creswell and Poth, 2018), they recognize the importance of these individual experiences and of meaning construction and comprehension processes (Leavy, 2017). Also, we agree Fedyuk and Zentai (2022) when describing the richness and thickness of this method by stating the exploratory and cooperation nature of it in terms of knowledge production, and therefore, it is an indispensable methodology when analyzing groups in vulnerable situations, people on the move or these people's autonomy and agency.

We guaranteed the ethical care of anonymity and confidentiality, and we also read an informed consent so that participants would be aware of all the aspects and aims of this research and reaffirming that participation had to be voluntary. The participants were recruited by a member of the research team who visited schools, institutions and social and civic organizations offering Portuguese as a host language courses. The research project was presented to the students and the contact details (name, email and telephone number) of those who expressed interest in participating were collected. Subsequently, individual appointments were scheduled in agreement with each participant, and the interviews were conducted accordingly.

The data collection started by asking the participants to fill in a small infographic sheet collecting information on some aspects of their personal, social, and cultural experiences in the host country when using the Portuguese language. We used different types of questions such as multiple-choice questions (in which the students could choose more than one option), numerical scale questions and two open-ended questions asking for a description of at least three feelings that arise when using the host language and a description of future expectations regarding the relationship with the Portuguese language. Our aim was to get in touch with the personal and social spheres to understand the current and future perspectives of adult migrant and refugee students on the role of the host language, learning it, and its use in integration and inclusion in the

host society, particularly the dimensions that involve community participation. This infographic facilitated the subsequent interview, serving as a map that helped to guide the interaction and direct some questions.

The interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese (when requested by the participants); on some occasions, we also used technological tools to support the translation and mutual understanding, such as *Google Translate* or *Deepl*. These conversations were recorded using an audio recorder for later transcription and were all analyzed in the language used by the person interviewed.

In order to analyze all the data, we opted for content analysis and, thus, explore its meaning through a rigorous examination and verification of the written data (Cohen et al., 2007). Content analysis validates and replicates inferences about data in its context (Rossi et al., 2014), in a flexible, but systematic and objective way (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Elo and Kyngas, 2008). This process must be connected to the main goal of research, and so it should answer to the research question. Also, this data interpretation considers the meaning of the results, and looks for patterns, and connections between them (Mertens, 2015). In this work, content analysis was carried out inductively, always looking for emerging categories that could arise. All the data was codified and categorized with the support of NVivo. We followed the step-by-step description provided by Mertens (2015) and started by preparing the data for analysis, by organizing and transcribing it; next, we began the initial immersion phase, which is when we first connected with the data; the codification and categorization phases were next and we reduced, clarified some aspects relating them to the main goal of research and to the research questions and thought about themes and relations between them; lastly, we interpreted the data. The analysis of the interviews provided us with 6 categories, divided into 11 subcategories and 7 sub-subcategories that describe the host language's role in migrant and refugee integration and inclusion, especially considering the dimensions of community participation. The main categories of analysis were *Portuguese as a host language classes*, the *learning space*, the *migration process*, the *relationship with the host society*, the *host language and the future dimension*. In the next section, we have divided these categories into 4 groups whose results will be presented in this order: (i) why, where and feelings associated with speaking the host language; (ii) the classes and the learning space; (iii) relationship with the host society; (iv) learning the host language (as a sign of respect; its uses; exclusion; integration and inclusion), and (v) future expectations.

3 Results

In this section, we will present the results obtained from data analysis of both the data collected in the infographics and in the interviews, analyzed together. We believe these two instruments were useful to understand the participants' experiences in the host society. In the following paragraphs, there will be explanatory notes about the excerpts extracted from the interviews which contextualize, identify themes and interpret meanings according to the theoretical framework used in this work. These were built from the content analysis.

3.1 Why, where and feelings associated with speaking the host language

Through the infographic sheet we asked the participants about the meaning of being able to speak the Portuguese language (“What does it mean to be able to speak the Portuguese language?”). The results mostly considered the possibility of being able to feel part of the Portuguese community in the first place, followed by being able to develop social relations and, lastly, to be able to find a job. Through the infographic sheet we also learned about the contexts where the Portuguese language was most used (“Where and when do you use the Portuguese language?”). Results point to shops (and public services) as the most common contexts and highlight conversations with friends/neighbors/family (social networks and social relationships), in the workplace and lastly in school. The description of their expectations in terms of the relationship with the Portuguese language in 5 years]“What do you hope your relationship with the Portuguese language will be like in 5 (five) years?”] emphasized the improvement of oral skills and intercommunication and complete mastery of the language. Interestingly, there were also mentions of increasing the connection with the Portuguese community and improving individual skills to continue studying.

Speaking the Portuguese language has different meanings to different people and the participants were asked to describe 3 feelings that would arise when using this language [“Can you name 3 (three) feelings that arise when you speak Portuguese?”]. We noticed the prevalence of positive feelings, with negative feelings appearing more in older age groups (between 41 and 60 years old). These groups of participants mentioned embarrassment, doubt and lack of self-confidence when using the Portuguese language. Taking in consideration the gender of participants, happiness and self-confidence appeared both in male and female participants; the latter also highlighted other feelings like satisfaction, belonging and being proud of themselves. The length of stay in Portugal showed that negative feelings were more common for those who had been in Portugal for less time.

3.2 The class and the learning space

When explaining why Portuguese language classes were valuable and important, the participants referred to understanding and getting in touch with the Portuguese culture and overcoming cultural shock:

“You learn a lot of things, not just Portuguese, but also culture, customs. We’ve been studying Christmas dinners, Easter, religious customs, the revolution, historical festivals.”² (Ar. 1)

The participants predominantly saw the learning contexts and the classes as important social spaces, affirming them also as relevant contexts where a multicultural relationship is established,

² This citation was translated to English in order to integrate the manuscript.

creating opportunities to meet other people with the same needs. The teacher has a fundamental role in fostering these connections:

“I think it’s really helpful, yes. It’s helping me learn Portuguese and it’s also helping me meet people. Which is good. (...) It gets me out of the house, because I work from home and stuff like that. And here you get to meet a lot of people.” (E1)

“Yes, totally. There’s a very multicultural relationship. We have Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Argentinian classmates (...) The teacher *** was a fundamental pillar in bringing us all together in class. At first, we were all shy.” (see text footnote 1) (C1)

“It was here that I met many Portuguese people (...) I learned at school and here I met many people who are helping me.” (see text footnote 2) (N2)

For some people, these learning spaces are not important social space, and interestingly it appears connected to the academic focus, or the absence of common languages among students:

“Yes and no, but that depends on us (...) Basically we make groups within the same classroom because we still do not master Portuguese, which would be the language with which we could communicate. So, if it is important, it is a social activity, but we do not manage to do so, because of the same barriers.” (see text footnote 2) (V4)

“Well, social, not so much, because no, it’s not a time to chat, to meet people, because really we all come here for the same thing: it’s really to learn the language and we are focused on that.” (see text footnote 2) (V3)

3.3 Relationship with the host society

The relationship with the host society was described as good. The participants mentioned positive aspects about the Portuguese society and stressed how the creation of personal bonds and learning the host language are closely related. They also mentioned how the reception from Portuguese people became different as they used and mastered the language more.

“They help me a lot. The people I’ve met help me a lot. They are good people, and they help me with the language and if I say the word badly, a wrong word, then they help me with the word and if I don’t understand the meaning of the word, they help me with the translator.” (see text footnote 2) (C2)

“Sometimes I speak wrong. They say to me, No, this, go like this.” (I1)

Nevertheless, to interact with the older generation is said to be more difficult as they lack other languages besides Portuguese, even though students recognize they appreciate their attempts to speak Portuguese:

“People, especially the older people, do appreciate the fact that you try.” (A3)

“The older generation, they don’t know English, and it’s very difficult to deal with them. (...) They are, they are very

helpful. This is a very good thing of Portuguese people. They are very helpful, even though it means when I try to, I don't catch their words, they try to speak two times, three times and when I use google translate to understand what they are telling me, they are very cooperative." (I3)

3.4 Learning the host language

3.4.1 Learning the host language as a sign of respect

A considerable number of participants connected learning the host language with respect for the host country. They mentioned it as a necessary effort that they should be willing to make:

"I should be respectful enough to learn the language of the country. (...) I feel like I should be willing to learn the language and be able to interact with others." (A1)

"It is my responsibility to learn Portuguese for my life." (see text footnote 2) (C1)

"When you're living somewhere you need to be able to speak the local language." (E1)

"[Learning the host language] it's also a form of respect for the host country." (see text footnote 2) (F1)

3.4.2 Learning the host language: uses

In the infographics, three dimensions were associated with the host language: work, social relations and feeling part of the host community. In the interviews, the participants were asked to talk about their choices when filling in the infographic. During the interviews, even some participants who had not chosen the work dimension in their infographics, recognized its importance. Knowing the host language is seen as increasing job opportunities and business development, and labor mobility:

"It's important to be able to speak Portuguese. I think people who are hiring are looking for a person who expresses themselves well, who understands well, who can communicate well." (see text footnote 2) (Ar. 1)

"It has helped me to develop my relationship with my customer and to gain more customers, uh, being, uh to after learning this, the language. It helps a lot to develop my business and to grow myself and my business." (I3)

As we saw, employment is one of the dimensions where social relationships are established. The next dimension of analysis is about the establishment of social relations and how these are connected to learning the host language. The participants underlined that these interactions are also excellent and important learning opportunities. Also, by interacting with people around them, the participants revealed that their social networks have expanded. Being able to share a common language with other people brings to the participants a sense of independence and agency in their integration and inclusion in the host society:

"My neighbors are older, and they only speak Portuguese, so the more Portuguese I know, the better I can communicate with them." (E1)

"Not speaking Portuguese is a very big restriction on starting social relationships. Speaking Portuguese in the store is not a very big social relationship (...) and for me, speaking to other people is a condition of independence and freedom." (see text footnote 2) (F1)

Both work and social relations contribute to participants feeling part of the Portuguese community and society. This was emphasized in the interviews where participants talked about feeling accepted and as having a place in the world again:

"Knowing more Portuguese would help me to (...) feel accepted by the community." (E1)

"When you don't have the native language of a place, a country, any language, you feel bad, like you're on an island. So, language is like a rescue for me." (see text footnote 2) (C2)

In addition to this, to feel and be part of host community increases the possibilities of interacting with other people in Portuguese and actively participate in the host society:

"The thing is when you cannot speak to someone, you cannot connect with the community. (...) When I will be able to speak the language, I will be able to connect with the community and participate in the community in a better way." (P1)

"Being part of the community, being able to talk, laugh with others, in other words, creating those links with people is difficult when you cannot communicate with them." (see text footnote 2) (V3)

3.4.3 Learning the host language and exclusion

In the interviews, the exclusion experienced in the host society was predominantly connected to the host language, as all participants mentioned some situation in which they had felt excluded because of their language or because they didn't master nor speak the Portuguese language. The respondents mentioned they felt excluded from conversations, and they felt limited in terms of establishing *bridging relations* (Putnam, 2000).

"In terms of the conversation, I'm excluded because I obviously don't have enough knowledge of the language." (A2)

"I feel that when I don't talk, there are times when I feel a bit excluded because the person I am talking to doesn't understand me. So, sometimes they give up asking or talking to me, because they don't understand me (...) Many times they give up saying something funny or inviting me to something to talk to me because they don't understand me (...)" (see text footnote 2) (V3)

For some, this exclusion is associated with discrimination in the workplace, and in everyday situations.

“Yes, at the health center. I was ill and I went to ask to see a doctor and I didn’t understand anything the lady was telling me and I didn’t know when the date she’d given me was and I couldn’t get there on the day.” (see text footnote 2) (N1)

“When I finished my contract at that clothing store, because it was only for Christmas, and then I was looking for work, I went into a store that needed someone, and a lady who was there, she was Portuguese, treated me badly because I didn’t speak Portuguese.” (see text footnote 2) (R1)

The language barrier is difficult to overcome, especially in a national context where many public services do not use any language other than Portuguese. That was felt by the participants, who referred to these situations as also excluding:

“I’ve been to the post office and, because the majority of people don’t understand English, they just speak Portuguese. And I’m trying to communicate and I’m using Google Translate and it’s difficult and they just keep speaking Portuguese and I just find it’s a problem.” (A3)

“Yes, in some places where I have to explain myself. And the guys don’t get it because they don’t know English. You have to use Portuguese sometimes and I am not very comfortable.” (I2)

3.4.4 Learning the host language: integration and inclusion

These two subcategories were very important to understand the intersection between integration and inclusion and the host language. In the results, the intersection between learning the host language and integration appears particularly connected to obtaining Portuguese nationality: “We want to be Portuguese to get Portuguese citizenship.” (A2).

As for the intersection between learning the host language and inclusion the results indicate it to be more about autonomy, interaction and the development of sense of belonging. The autonomy acquired by learning, using and mastering the host language supports the development of self-confidence and empowerment, essential to, and constituent parts of, inclusion.

“Because it gives you confidence, okay? You know, by being able to say, and even though it’s not correct, but just being able to talk to someone else, it gives that intimacy as well. Being able to interact with someone, you know.” (N1)

Interactions and sense of belonging development are connected, as they foster and enhance each other.

“I definitely think I can integrate better into the culture, but I don’t know if I’ll ever feel like I’m a Portuguese national. But the truth is the language is helping me, because anytime I can speak with someone, it feels a little bit better and like you belong a little bit more. It’s like an achievement.” (E1)

“Naturally you feel included, as much as you speak the language, you just blend, you know, you’re talking, and you feel accepted.” (N1)

“Well, because as I began to speak more, I began to have more friendships with Portuguese people, which at the beginning was not possible (...) After I got to know the language better and was able to understand and perceive better, I was able to start having friendships with people from here.” (see text footnote 2) (V3)

3.5 Future expectations

Regarding future expectations, data coming from the infographics showed there was a commitment to improve skills and communication in the Portuguese language and to master the language, as well as to invest in connecting with the host society. When the participants talked and explained what their aspirations would be, the results were in the same line. They hoped to improve their communication skills and become able to speak in any situation:

“Be totally capable of speaking to people from wherever and get away with a good conversation as far as possible.” (A2)

Participants also expect to have more professional opportunities, better jobs and better ways to connect with Portuguese customers and suppliers.

“I feel like I have a lot more opportunities that will open up so for instance if I were to try a different job.” (A1)

“If I want to open here any job, like a shop or some companies, it’s better for us to survive, to make good connection with people. If we hire Portuguese staff, you need to use Portuguese.” (I1)

In the future, the participants expect that once they have completed the language course and mastered it, their social networks will change, they will be bigger, composed of many connections:

“It [the proficiency in Portuguese] would make it socially a lot easier to be able to make friends and join like hobbies and stuff like that if I can speak the local language.” (E1)

4 Discussion

In this section, we will look at the results presented before and discuss them to further understand the role of the host language in the integration and inclusion of adult migrants and refugees in Portugal based on the experience of host language students. We will articulate the concepts of integration and inclusion (Ager and Strang, 2008; Narli and Özaşçılar, 2020), social, cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1997; Putnam, 2000), agency and sense of belonging (Sonn, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Lambert et al., 2013; Strang and Quinn, 2019).

The results show a clear role of the host language has a role as a mediator of integration and inclusion. These two processes are understood as complementary, bidirectional and take place

in the interaction and relationship between newcomers and the host society. Thus, the participants mentioned how language was important to answer the immediate need of these people in the host country (working, studying, interacting) and language as an inclusion tool, developing their participation and sense of belonging in the host society and reducing isolation and exclusion feelings, which positions the host language as multifunctional, operating in both the integration and the inclusion processes (Ager and Strang, 2008; Beacco et al., 2014; Damiani, 2021). The feelings highlighted by the participants, divide them into 2 groups: barriers and facilitators. Barriers were felt in the intermediate age-groups (41–60 years old) which could explain why these participants chose embarrassment, doubt and lack of confidence; those barriers could be explained by the emotional challenges that these people were facing at the time of the interview. Facilitators were felt in the other age groups (20–40 years old and 61–70 years old) where were emphasized more positive feelings like gratitude, interest and commitment, which could act as learning and integration and inclusion drivers. The participants revealed they felt proud of themselves, and they had managed to overcome difficulties, which strengthen resilience and, also, contradict the pre-established idea by stating that there isn't an age for learning (Cabete, 2010; Chiswick and Miller, 2001; Krumm and Plutzar, 2008; Martins, 2022). These facilitators are of great importance because they generate self-confidence and agency, the basis for social participation in the host country, thus creating individual empowerment. Not only these factors have impact on the learning process, but they also influence learners' integration and inclusion processes, as they transform the learner's commitment to learning and mastering the language and empower him/her in terms of their attitude toward the host society, making them not only more confident, but also more participative and open to the experiences he/she can find there (Noels et al., 1996). Language proficiency, in this sense, strengthens not only the learners' autonomy, but also their capacity to act, to exercise rights and responsibilities, and to engage more fully in the host society (Grosso, 2010; Kuhlmann, 2016).

In fact, the reference made by the participants regarding the importance of the host language in answering to their immediate needs plus the feelings highlighted by them can also explain the process of linguistic integration these people go through/are going through in the host society. Based on mutual respect, this process happens through the integration process and continues in the inclusion process, going beyond the simple acquisition of language proficiency, questioning not only these migrants' and refugees' own beliefs, cultures and identities but also the host society's (Damiani, 2021; Kramersch, 1998). It assumes language as material for the (re)construction of individual cultural identities, which are now hybrid and dynamic (Damiani, 2021; Council of Europe, 2014; Mendes, 2020; Parejo, 2003), as we saw; and it is, therefore, an essential and a multifaceted component of the integration and inclusion processes (Beacco et al., 2014). It is clearly connected to the development of a sense of belonging, wellbeing, recognition and respect in the host society, as it is connected to the use and exercise of rights and duties in the host society (Grosso, 2010; Kuhlmann, 2016). This linguistic integration process is closely linked to the emotional journey that characterizes integration and inclusion in

a country where everything is new. It is also influenced by age, life context and the stage of integration and inclusion which people find themselves. Hence, there is this emotional dimension that should be taking into consideration throughout the host language course (Beacco et al., 2014; Grosso, 2007; Semedo, 2011).

The reference made by the participants regarding the importance of being introduced to, getting to know and contacting the Portuguese culture is also worthwhile analysis. They often referred to both elements as being one; to understand one, one must understand the other. The classes were one of the essential contexts for this connection to happen because they explained and gave meaning to the experiences these people have or had in the host society. Sorgen (2015, p. 243) places the host language as the "entry point into the new culture" and Esser (2006) clarifies this relationship between host language and culture, explaining the first one as a symbol and a source from which it is possible to understand and get in touch with the host society's elements, norms and values. As we saw in the Introduction section, the host language is characterized as a crucial and essential holistic element for the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees, designed also to make the learner aware of his/her rights and duties, relating to the socio-economic and political-cultural reality of the host country, fostering empowerment among learners (Cabete, 2010; Caldeira, 2012). Thus, this model must constantly keep up with social changes and cultural issues, also investing in socio-cultural knowledge (Grosso, 2010; Porto et al., 2018). Language and culture are two equally important elements, as they are at the same level (Grosso, 2010; Mendes, 2020). It also demonstrates and reinforces the idea that integration and inclusion processes also involve a cultural socialization process, in which individuals can learn cultural and social codes and build relationships, and where language functions as a vehicle of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) and mutual recognition (Damiani, 2021).

In this regard, it is important to highlight that facilitated access to cultural capital does not only happen through language classes, since it also arises in interactions with the host society, through a process of socialization with nationals and other immigrants (Lima et al., 2019; Sorgen, 2015; Weng and Choi, 2019). As we saw, this contact is about the sharing of traditions, attitudes and values which require cooperation between the host society and the newcomers (Grosso, 2010). The participants showed how this interaction can be advantageous for some and not for others, yet we recognize the important and very positive outcomes it produces. Thus, and as some of the interviews revealed, getting in touch with people from different backgrounds who struggle with their exact needs is important, amplifying the learning space into a social space too, where there is social capital exchange. This underlines what Morrice (2007) states about social capital, when this author defines it as an influential learning tool in which it is possible to observe, practice and develop the communicative, interactive and oral skills. By doing so, these spaces contribute to participants' wellbeing and their sense of belonging (Lambert et al., 2013; Sorgen, 2015; Pulinx and Avermaet, 2017).

The social-learning space is also important for the participants' wellbeing (Sorgen, 2015), allowing not only the establishment of social relations (Morrice, 2007), but also enhancing active participation and citizenship in the host society (Pulinx and

Avermaet, 2017) and fostering sense of belonging (Lambert et al., 2013). Nevertheless, this association between the construction of social networks and socio-political-economic-cultural and linguistic knowledge construction and integration and inclusion demonstrates the existing connection between cultural, social and linguistic capital, in which, through the social networks established in and out of class, migrants and refugees obtain privileged information, get to know the host society and practice communicative skills (Bourdieu, 1997; Putnam, 2000). Jiménez (2011, p. 4) explains this holistic side of integration and inclusion processes by stating them as a “culmination of everyday interactions between and among immigrant newcomers and host communities.”

All these lines about social capital and interactions ring a bell on the dimensions chosen by the students when asked about the meaning of being able to speak the host language, as one of those dimensions was to be able to establish social relations. The interviewed migrant students emphasized the important learning opportunities provided by social relations, the construction and/or expansion of social networks, and independence and freedom as the main outcomes for this issue. In the literature, one of the main contexts for this interaction to happen is the workplace: Ager and Strang (2008, p. 169) explain in their model of integration that work is one of the “key areas” and “potential means” as it provides access to many other people, among which social relations are created and developed; other authors have also been mentioning this (Andersson, 2015; Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019; Liebert et al., 2020). Our research suggests that the job dimension isn’t the most significant way to obtain and establish social relations. What we think from our results is that work may be a favorable context for establishing these relationships, but not the most important one, and that may be due to the fact that some of our participants had not yet found a job or had their qualifications recognized. Although not all participants were sure of the role of language in the professional dimension, as many of them were not yet working, others nevertheless recognized its importance in accessing the job market and establishing relationships within this context and in fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion. When working, migrants feel they are somehow contributing to the host society and are thus able to achieve economic independence, acting upon the construction of economic and social capital (Ager and Strang, 2008; Jiménez, 2011). The social relations and interactions that also happen in the job place, as all of them, are a privileged way of learning and practicing the host language, which was also mentioned by our participants; they are also a way of developing a sense of belonging in the host community.

As we have explained before, integration and inclusion are two different but related processes which drive the establishment of migrants and refugees in the host society. Despite being two different processes, these two have the main goal of promoting links between migrants and refugees and the country that hosts them, fostering a sense of belonging and wellbeing. The McMillan and Chavis (1986) we discussed earlier showed how a sense of community was created in interaction. On the construction of emotional bonds Sonn (2002) narrowed this model by adapting it to the specific context of migrants and refugees. This author explored the cultural negotiations and external factors’ impact on



integration and inclusion processes to conclude by highlighting the agentic and active role migrants and refugees have on their own establishment processes, promoting belonging, identification and connection through participation, interaction and meaning co-construction (Sonn, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Our results clearly demonstrate the importance given to the interaction and to the participation that can exist through the Portuguese language use; the confidence and autonomy it produces on the interviewed fosters and sustains empowerment, agency and sense of belonging in the host country. Here, we can understand the role of the host language as an expression of empowerment and recognition. At the same time, it decreases the likelihood of exclusion, marginalization and isolation as it is connected to the expansion of individual social networks.

Therefore, it is not possible to identify or distinguish which work, social relations or feeling part of the community contexts is more important or productive in terms of adult migrants’ and

refugees' integration and inclusion. Rather, what can be concluded by this work is that the combination of these three elements creates a suitable and conducive environment to integration and inclusion in the host country, which is sustained and supported by the use (and learning the) host language. The host language, in this sense, emerges as a structuring and transversal element in these processes, in which it adds the emotional, cultural, social and political depth. In [Figure 1](#) there is a diagram explaining the relationship between the three dimensions (employment, social relations and feeling part of the community) and the host language, demonstrating the development of sense of belonging in the process of integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees.

5 Concluding remarks

In this work, we sought to answer to the research question: "what is the role of the host language and citizenship in the integration and inclusion of adult migrants and refugees in the Northern region of Portugal?". By conducting 20 semi-structured interviews with adult migrants learning Portuguese as a host language students, we also hoped to understand their current and future perspective on the role of the host language, learning it and using it, in their integration and inclusion in the host society.

Some obstacles faced during data collection configure limitations of the research presented here. Accessing migrant spaces was difficult, and finding and establishing contact with them was a complex process. Also, as we approached schools, the indication of potential interviewees was sometimes made by the teacher responsible for the Portuguese language classes (in the public schools) or by the person in charge of the social organization, in some ways limiting the participation of others, something we tried to overcome as much as possible.

Still, the results emphasize the multifaceted role of host language in the integration and inclusion of adult migrants and refugees in Portugal. Its learning and use go beyond mere communication, as it is seen as an enabler of integration and inclusion by supporting important and essential dimensions such as employment, social relations and the feeling of being part of the host community. By promoting these dimensions, it reveals itself as a source of autonomy, self-confidence, empowerment and individual agency which, in turn, contribute to inclusion. Throughout this work we have also shown how integration and inclusion are two different but complementary processes that impact the migrants' and refugee's establishment journey. Thus, the beginning of their linguistic integration journey happens as a process that continues through the inclusion process, and which includes opportunities to develop a sense of belonging contributing to the host country's social cohesion. Likewise, the host language and its use prevent the growth of situations such as isolation, exclusion and marginalization. The relevance of the connection between host language and sense of belonging is well-illustrated, and it may support not only further exploration, but also intervention, creating spaces where meaningfully learning and interacting come as one.

This study highlights some political implications regarding the host language and the integration and inclusion of adult migrant and refugees. As we hope to have showed, the host language stands

out as central to integration and inclusion processes, not only as a mean of communication, but also as a developer of sense of belonging and individual agency. As such, we believe it would be essential to consider both emotional and cultural dimensions of learners, accordingly to their age, purpose in Portugal, migratory background and life trajectories, in order to design more responsive language policies that go beyond the technical instruction and promote effective participation in the society.

For future research, it would be interest to look at the different contexts individually to see if there are similarities or differences between these host language learning contexts, what differences there are and how these are understood and perceived by those who teach and learn.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by ethics review of the Education Sciences Doctoral Program - University of Porto. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MQ: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, ID: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, PF: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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