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Spotti, M.; Kurvers, J.J.H.

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ICT-based applications for civic integration in The Netherlands

Policy drivers and limits in practice

Massimiliano Spotti and Jeanne Kurvers

Learning to become an integrated citizen

The importance of language education and digital inclusion is fully recognised by the European Union:

- The basic knowledge of the host society's language, history and institutions is indispensable for integration (*Common Basic Principles on Integration*, European Commission 2004).
- Language education is a priority topic for the future of migrants' integration in Europe (*Handbook on Integration*, European Commission 2009).
- Language education for integration in all EU Member States is acknowledged as important (European Ministerial Conference on Integration, Vichy, 3–4 November 2008).
- Non-EU nationals ought to participate in introductory courses either on a voluntary or compulsory basis with the purpose of learning the host country's language as well as its cultural norms and values (*Handbook on Integration*, European Commission 2007).
- Digital inclusion for all is an EU strategic policy goal (Commission of the European Communities 2005).
- E-Inclusion for all citizens means 'both inclusive ICT for mainstream society and the use of ICT to achieve wider integration objectives' (*Riga Declaration on e-Inclusion*, European Commission 2006).
- Cultural diversity in Europe should be promoted by 'improving the possibilities for economic and social participation and integration, creativity and entrepreneurship of immigrants and minorities by stimulating their participation in the information society' (*Riga Declaration on e-Inclusion*, European Commission 2006).

Against this background, and given the dearth of empirical evidence on learners' perspectives on the use of ICT for integration, this contribution draws on a qualitative study carried out in 2010 on behalf of the Director

General for Research of the European Commission. This study focused on the civic integration trajectory of newly arrived non-EU nationals hoping to gain permanent residency in the Netherlands and Sweden (Project Report Number JRC 59774 Technical Note; see Driessen et al. 2011). While here we just focus on the Dutch part of this study, the more general purpose of this comparative enquiry was to discover the drivers and barriers that influence the successful implementation and use of ICT in formal L2 education for civic integration and, on the basis of this, to formulate opportunities for a more holistic use of ICT in integration classrooms. To do so, the Dutch part of this study focused on three ICT applications. These applications were reviewed not only in terms of their technical specifications, learning aims and learning goals. The study also looked at their implementation in integration classrooms, through an empirical interpretive approach that availed itself of ethnographic data collection.

We begin with an overview of the spread of ICT in adult second language (L2) education in the Netherlands. We then provide descriptions of how three ICT applications were used in particular settings. The first application we report on was selected for the research because of its widespread use across integration courses, and because it represents the earliest of steps toward digital learning for Dutch as L2. The second application was selected because of its prize-winning innovative approach to integration through blended learning and because it embodies a consolidating trend in the field, that of contextualised second language learning. The third application was selected because it is representative of an emerging trend – that of adaptive learning – which has not yet spread widely across civic integration classes. Our chapter concludes by inviting the reader to reflect upon the implications that ICT has for migrants. It critiques the way that the transformational power of technology is harnessed to further nation states' own integration agendas. In these agendas, ICT has become the bed-fellow of learning the 'what' and the 'how' to become a citizen. It is seen as a way of enabling the rapid and effective inclusion of migrants into mainstream host societies. At the same time, the 'mainstream' is understood as a static array of norms and values with which new arrivals ought to align.

ICT for integration in the Netherlands

Back in 2010, the year in which the empirical part of this study was conducted, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment was the institutional body in charge of the civic integration of newly arrived migrants (see Spotti and Kurvers 2012). The Ministry actively supervised municipal authorities engaged in implementing its integration policy. Municipal authorities, in turn, supplied information to newly arrived

migrants about their integration trajectory, its cost and funding, and its length. They would also either cover or subsidise someone's integration costs for both courses and examinations and were responsible for applying financial sanctions on those migrants who either did not attend integration courses or who did not manage to complete the process within the 3.5 year timespan set for a full integration certification. Until 2007, municipalities had mainly relied on Regional Educational Centres (ROCs) to cater for the integration of newly arrived migrants. After 2007, an entire market developed around civic integration education. Municipalities in fact often put integration projects out to tender, for which parties were invited to submit financially competitive bids. As a result, there is now a wide variety of L2 training materials in the Netherlands, from general language courses to separate tools that have been developed to practise specific language skills, such as listening, grammar and pronunciation for particular groups of students, e.g., highly educated migrants who can function as independent learners. In 2010 'Knowledge of the Dutch society' became a compulsory part of the civic integration examination, and its content often became integrated with that of Dutch as L2 courses (see Kurvers and Spotti, this volume), every one of which would claim to make use of ICT. The definition of ICT used by the Ministry as well as by other educational establishments, however, is very broad. In fact, an 'ICT-assisted method for integration' covers any product that can store, retrieve or transmit information electronically in a digital format. For the study we report on here, the researchers (including the first author of this chapter) considered the full range of ICT tools, courses and applications available on the market in 2010: from more traditional paper based teaching methods that also contained computer-assisted training materials that ranged from a CD-ROM or a DVD, to more innovative web-based learning material with an online component. The range of ICT products for L2 learning in the Netherlands extends from small-scale applications for specific purposes or skills to complete courses that cover all language skills across different domains, such as work, education, recreation and childrearing. The year 2010 was a point when the Dutch government was promoting the use of ICT in L2 learning for integration, and it was the government which specified the targets that should be attained through the use of ICT. The opening of the market to commercial parties, as revealed in this study, led to the development and identification of a wealth of digital materials, most of which came at a cost for students, and it highlighted that an ICT commercial market was more favourable to those newly arrived migrants who had financial resources other than those provided by municipal authorities, and who could therefore afford to pay for extra tuition (see Spotti 2011).

In our study of ICT applications for adult new arrival language learners, the first author carried out classroom observations, focus group

interviews and interviews with individual learners and teachers. In the sections that follow, we describe in turn three applications designed for the learning of Dutch and contextualise these descriptions with extracts from our data.

The most widely used application: *Ijsbreker*

This section deals with the first case study carried out during our enquiry. The institution used for this case study is a public sector ROC with 18 locations spread across the western part of the Netherlands that offers preparatory courses at the upper-secondary level of vocational training. It also offers training and courses aimed at life-long learning (adult education). The education department of the college describes itself as the region's largest provider of Dutch language courses for newly arrived migrants, and also of professional development for migrants, supporting integration into mainstream society at large. The mission of the college is to 'provide educational grounds for the fulfilment of social responsibilities', to inspire learners to give the best of themselves, and to become self-sufficient in the development of their learning process 'in order to become citizens who can look at society with a positive, yet critical, outlook'. *Ijsbreker* [Icebreaker] was developed by ThiemeMeulenhoff (Jansen et al. 2010) as a language learning method for low-educated L2 learners. This application was not developed for the purpose of self-study. Rather, teacher supervision is needed for both its thematic and grammar-based units, with students' independent work comprising but a small component. *Ijsbreker* consists of three parts. Part 1 and 2 prepare students for the civic integration examination. Part 1 leads to level A1 (beginner), and part 2 to level A2 (elementary) on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. Part 2 is divided into two separate programs, depending on the candidate's needs: *Wonen in Nederland* (Living in the Netherlands) and *Werken in Nederland* (Working in the Netherlands), with the latter being more often used by men and the former by women. Once learners reach A2 proficiency level, they can move on to level B1 (intermediate) by following part 3 of the application entitled *Op Koers (On Track)*. This part prepares students for the Dutch State Exam, part 1 (see Kurvers and Spotti, this volume), an exam for a level of proficiency in Dutch above A2. All packages contain a workbook, a dictionary of frequent words, a teacher's manual and a CD-ROM version of the application. There is also a web-based version. The ICT component of this application is marketed as being useful in that students can practise their listening, reading, pronunciation and vocabulary knowledge independently on the computer.

Putting words in the right order

The episode that follows, although not fully representative of the functional and notional approach that informed this method and its later versions, deals with a student called Bejan and sees him engaged in ordering words according to the Dutch alphabet. Bejan is a 54-year-old man from Iraq who after 10 years in the Netherlands was granted a residence permit and was put on a municipality-sponsored integration course for 18 months. This reconstructed episode sheds some light on what drives the use of ICTs for second language learning in this integration classroom, and illustrates some of the shortfalls.

After completing the exercise assigned to him in the textbook, Bejan then moves to the PC to carry out those exercises that are part of its grammar-based study unit. One of the exercises requires him to put a series of words in the right alphabetical order. The words are: *Rood* (Red), *Rechts* (Right), *Rem* (Brake). The correct order is *Rechts / Rem / Rood*.

As Ms Lineke, his teacher, put it, Bejan has to learn not to look just at the initial letter of a word but to move on to the second, third, then fourth letter of the word. He finds it difficult to grasp this principle, as the feedback that he gets from the ICT application is not only in Dutch but it is also rather limited as it states either *goed* ('right') or *fout* ('wrong'). Ms Lineke is moving from one student to another to check that everyone is on task as well as to answer the students' questions, and she arrives at Bejan. They look at the first line of the exercise together and repeat the words that are on the screen: *Rood* (Red), *Rechts* (Right) and *Rem* (Brake). Ms Lineke then points out that he should move beyond the beginning of the words in his attempt to put them in the right order. He tries and the result is again incorrect. Ms Lineke then invites him to think about the letter that follows the first letter and to see whether, if all the first letters are the same, the second letter gives any indication of which word comes first. When asked to write down the alphabet as an *aide memoire* though, it transpires that Bejan only knows the first eight letters of the Dutch alphabet. Ms Lineke suggests to him that if he does not know the alphabet by heart, then there is very little that she can do about it and there is also very little that the computer can do to help him. Bejan then tries once more. Ms Lineke tells him that the alphabet is basic knowledge and that, at this stage, he should know it by heart. ICT, in the words of Ms Lineke, cannot bridge this gap as it requires prior knowledge and literacy skills that Bejan, like many others, does not have.

Bejan's case stands as an emblem for what we term *click-tive learning*. This is an approach to language learning that, rather than actively

engaging the learner with how language is actually used, bases its results on the number of exercises and clicks that someone manages to get right during their independent ICT learning activities.

The prize-winning application: *De Virtuele Wijk*

The second application is *De Virtuele Wijk (The Virtual Neighbourhood)* developed by ITPreneurs in Rotterdam. This application is part of the method *Thuis in Nederlands (At home in Dutch)* (ITPreneurs 2008), aimed at low-educated women following the integration trajectory, and has received an educational award for catering for blended learning, which in this case means blending together language learning with content that has immediate societal relevance. The application's goals are to have learners gather information about the facilities and services that are located in their environment, and allows them to find their place in the local spaces that they inhabit.

Often learners are limited by their lack of confidence as well as by a lack of Dutch when asking for information in formal situations. The learner sees on their screen ten buildings, for instance the municipality building or a library, where different types of formal interaction can be tried out with a virtual interlocutor. The chats deal with topics that learners face in daily life. They are presented as scenarios, for instance 'at the library desk'. During a chat, the text appears on the screen and the sentences are meant to be read in full and out loud. The designers suggest that the proficiency level that a learner needs is A1. As in real life situations, interactions are both formal and informal. Learners can also chat live with other people in the neighbourhood, although this activity also needs to be carried out under the teacher's guidance. At the beginning of their trajectory, every learner builds a profile based on personal information, e.g., their job, as well as their hobbies. Learners can communicate with 'real' people in their own neighbourhood, according to the postcode that they type in their profiles. People who have registered and who are currently online are listed on the learner's screen. Furthermore, learners can retrieve information about community centres and health centres in their own neighbourhood. The use of this information though can only happen through schools that have set up a link with these institutions in advance and have asked them whether they can access their information.

Learning in and about the virtual neighbourhood

The Dutch language courses provided at the centre that used this application are split in two: Dutch Language (*Nederlandse Taal*) and Integration (*Inburgering*). The Dutch Language course is further divided. The first course is for Dutch language skills for learners of Dutch. The

second aims at the improvement of reading and writing skills for learners who have Dutch as their mother tongue. The integration course is for newly arrived migrants on an integration trajectory. The preparation for the integration exam has a multimedia component where the learner 'learns the Dutch language with the help of exercises and films on the computer', and implies that learning through a computer can be carried out both in class and at home. The classroom, on the other hand, is pictured as a place for formal learning where learners get the chance to try out their Dutch in short dialogues with other learners, as well as by dealing with the vocabulary of everyday life situations. Learners preparing for the integration exam are assigned to a profile that is meant to correspond with their route to integration. This profile is determined during the learner's initial assessment at the centre. For each profile there is a matching method for learning Dutch. As stated in the school's introduction booklet:

in order to be integrated students must learn the Dutch language and build knowledge of Dutch society. Integrating means being able to function in practical situations, like – for instance – a talk with your GP, with a teacher or with your employer.

If the learner wants to work, she or he is assigned to the profile *Inburgeren en Werk (Integration and Work)*. She or he then uses the method *Nederlands aan het werk (Dutch at work)*. If the learner is engaged in child rearing and home-related activities then she is assigned to the profile *Inburgeren en OGO (Integration and Pedagogical Support)*. At the time of this study, it was assumed that only women would be accessing this profile.

The following insights were gathered from focus group interviews which the first author had with 15 users of this application during their integration trajectory. A first obstacle when trying to obtain optimal results from this ICT application is its technical implementation. In the lesson observed, the teacher's own knowledge of this application is sound. She first introduces her students to a video that deals with the task that they are attempting during the lesson, i.e., using the municipal library and stimulating their children to read. Furthermore, the teacher uses this video as a basis for questioning her students about what they will be doing in the *Virtuele Wijk*. However, this well-thought-out lesson fails technically in that the application does not recognise the postcode of some of the students, who are led to a different library rather than to the municipal library in their neighbourhood. Setting this aside, when students are engaged in responding to the prompts given by the *Virtuele Wijk*, it emerges that the activities do not enable them to develop communication and pronunciation skills. In an interview with Amar and Sera, both refugees from Iraq who came to the Netherlands 11 and 13 years ago,

and Rana, who originates from Afghanistan and who came to the Netherlands 12 years ago, we hear the following:

- Amar:* I use it [*Virtuele Wijk*] for all sorts of things, also for Dutch.
Rana: Yeah, yesterday, yesterday, you know, yesterday I used it for the exercises of the integration program, but I love talking and with *Virtuele Wijk* you cannot talk.
Sera: Yeah.
Rana: And also the accent counts, we cannot practise accent and then when we talk, we are foreigners, it is a matter of accent, they don't understand.

Tamusa and Arzoo are tangible proof of this. Tamusa came to the Netherlands for the first time in 1999 because of her husband's job and she was scheduled to complete her integration trajectory and sit for an exam in 2010. Arzoo arrived in 2002 as a refugee from Afghanistan; she is Russian speaking and she is now following an integration trajectory which she too was scheduled to complete in 2010. Tamusa adds:

You can read a lot with the *Virtuele Wijk*. Me and Adela [another Russian speaking student in this class], we read, we read but speaking, well you cannot really and the answer is already there, so you try to understand but speaking just does not happen.

Tamusa, Arzoo and Muhlise feel they have to learn both questions and answers by heart in order to achieve the language interaction goals of the application. This learning by heart does not provide the opportunities needed to actively produce language, and so does not contribute to the development of their oral competence and vocabulary growth. During the focus group discussion, they report the following:

- Tamusa:* This unit about the library was easy. I know it well.
Muhlise: Yes, yes, we know the language of the library. We go there with our children.
Tamusa: Yes.
Muhlise: But the insurance company was difficult, very difficult.
Arzoo: Yes, the language was difficult, the terms were weird.

Finally, the students point out that when they were given the opportunity to work with the Dutch language, they gravitated towards grammar. Grammar gives them security in that for them grammar 'is either right or it is wrong'. What this application brings to the learners is therefore paradoxical. While the application is intended for the development of language skills in real-life situations, its aims are regarded as ambiguous

by the learners. It is not always clear to them how the language introduced in the application relates to the real life situations they encounter, and whose language demands they need to meet. Nor is it clear to them whether the answer is right or wrong, unlike the activities that they carry out which practise grammar.

The innovative application: NT2 Nieuwslezer

We now move to the third and last application. This is a demonstration of how the development of ICT for L2 can become more than solely digital based, and can focus on adaptive learning. The *NT2 Nieuwslezer* (the *Dutch as L2 Newsreader*) is a direct outcome of research carried out at the University of Tilburg. Research has demonstrated that both young Dutch people and (newly arrived) migrants can reap enormous benefits in the development of the breadth and depth of their vocabulary by reading articles taken from newspapers on a daily basis (Werf van der et al. 2008; Werf van der and Vermeer 2008). To be of benefit, such newspaper articles should not be older than 24 hours, but nonetheless can deal with any topic. It is then up to the user to choose which article she or he wishes to read. The *NT2 Nieuwslezer* selects texts automatically and decides which level of language proficiency these texts are suited for. The *NT2 Nieuwslezer* then selects and adapts the articles that learners are given access to. This access is established on the basis of a test that learners carry out before opening the application. This test measures both their reading proficiency and vocabulary knowledge. When the learner encounters an unknown word, the application supplies a short explanation of the word's meaning as well as its translation. In this way, reading articles about current affairs in mainstream Dutch society not only stimulates an increased vocabulary but also motivates the migrant to build knowledge of Dutch culture. The Ministry of Home Affairs in 2010 selected the *NT2 Nieuwslezer* as one of the ten most successful innovations in the Public Sector (EDIA 2010).

On being 'computer very very literate'

Here follow the views gathered from two learners who used the *NT2 Nieuwslezer* in 2008. The interviews with the learners took place in English. The first learner, Harry, came from Colombia to the Netherlands in 2008. He is a qualified veterinarian who has now started his own business as a photographer and graphic designer. He reports that because of his job he can do almost anything with a computer, specifically with graphics and animations. On the *NT2 Nieuwslezer* he says:

The news items were not interesting because they did not match what I was looking for, I am searching for technical vocabulary for design and photography.

Yet this lack of specialist vocabulary contrasts with a more positive opinion that focuses on what he has achieved through this application:

I think it is a good tool in as much as it allows you to learn a lot of new words but it has to be subject specific.

The second learner, Goodluck, comes from Nigeria and has worked in the field of international development for more than a decade. He used to live in New York and now runs a web-based development organisation. He is in the Netherlands because of his wife's job. In expressing his insights about this third application, Goodluck states:

I think it was good. It was good because I could read and learn about where I live and what people do. There is some crazy stuff out there man. But I liked it and I did not have to ask for help when I was studying.

He mainly focuses on the autonomy that a learner achieves by using the *NT2 Nieuwslezer*. Autonomy in learning a language is relevant to ICT and L2 learning at large. He says:

If you are not computer literate then you are gonna find a problem. You will be confronted with how to do two things at the same time, studying how to use a keyboard, and then I tell you, if I don't know how to use a keyboard then I have difficulties. And sometime, one is just confronted with the basic difficulties or better the basic challenges of learning. I have a very great advantage, I am computer very very literate. More than average of course because I write, so when you have that advantage you are able to listen and to concentrate on the language. It is not appropriate to go to the class for me. I am gonna save time, I am gonna exercise judgment, be independent. I don't want any friction in terms of human relations, I can go on and on. So I think, this for me is perfect. Then people can learn two, three languages. I prefer to learn the basics and expand before I go to the class. If there is a book the book is pronouncing it for you but here you have a button, you can click on it. The computer is very perfect but they [other learners] should be exposed to computer first, then to language then go to the classroom.

Goodluck first focuses on computer literacy, on the lack of these skills, and on the consequences that this might have for someone learning a

foreign language. In his view a learner has to master these skills first and then she or he can move on to working on language skills. He also suggests a pedagogy that sees people starting with the computer, grasping a language through ICT and then coming into the classroom. He, in fact, is working on his own, in front of the PC all the time. He is well aware of his computer literacy and general literacy, as he reports being 'very very literate'. It is open to question whether Goodluck's approach – an approach which seems to align well with the application – would suit all students: although the application is adaptive to learners' level of competence, not every learner is able to manage an independent approach to learning in the way Goodluck and Harry do.

Conclusions and discussion

As we have shown, migration, integration and ICT merge into what Appadurai has described as a global technoscape (Appadurai 1996). This is a world where migrants need to handle increasingly complex systems of information that allow them to participate in multiple communities, communities where inclusion is understood in different ways. Rather than being something formal, stable and related to the start of a new life in the host country, learning to become an integrated citizen turns out to be part of a continuous cultural and linguistic encounter that the migrant has to negotiate in order to function within the overlapping socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political spaces that she or he inhabits.

The three applications we have examined here demonstrate the emergence of a number of features that characterize ICT and Dutch as second language learning. The first is the continuously evolving face of ICT. The first application showed an example of digitalised learning, the second of contextualising learning, and the third, and most recent, of adaptive learning.

There is also the co-option of ICT into a particular institutional discourse. This relates to a tendency to respond to cultural and linguistic diversity and difference from the mainstream by developing a culture of drilling and control over someone's identity and someone's conduct in society. In this account language learning and learning mainstream norms and values are viewed as pivotal to success in the host culture. While such a reaction may be difficult to avoid, we need to bear in mind that ICT is not a fast track to integration. We also bear in mind that migration can no longer be considered as a linear move from home country A to host country B, and with no further links to country A. It is thanks in part to ICT, indeed, that migrant networks have become more mobile, and less anchored to the host country, rendering integration a flexible and dynamic activity.

In acknowledging this, educators and policy-makers alike still need to be aware of classroom processes and of differences in literacy and e-literacy competence among migrant language learners. They still need to ask: ‘is this application too inaccessible for a student?’ ‘What does this tell me about what the student can realistically achieve?’ and – in terms of learning through ICT: ‘what has my student actually learnt from the application, through the clicking, through the feedback received?’ As Snyder and Prinsloo (2007: 174) warn us, the logic of bridging the gap in the digital divide often ‘overemphasises the importance of the physical presence of computers and connectivity to the exclusion of other factors that allow people to use electronic media for meaningful ends’.

The results of these three case studies leave us with one last consideration. No set of rules and procedures can *solve* the personal linguistic, cultural and ethical dilemmas people face in their lives as migrants: they can only highlight them. What is needed, in our view, is a profound reflection on the ethics of what is asked of migrants, of how authorities engage in relationships of trust and fostering of civic responsibility with newcomers. There are forces in society that define living in a receiving country as a purely professional set of activities, revolving around clear lists of procedures and standardised criteria of performance, and assessment as focusing upon the replication of uniform patterns of conduct that lead to integration. The weaknesses of this view are eloquently demonstrated every day.

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