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### I speak, thus I belong?

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# Chapter 5

## Second language lessons taught by volunteers to immigrants residing in the Netherlands: Well intended, but also beneficial?

### Abstract

The current study explored whether informal second language lessons taught by volunteers were related to improved language learning, cultural integration and ease of independent participation in the host society. The longitudinal study (time lag: 6 months) was conducted with a small sample of socially isolated immigrants ( $N=85$ ) who resided in the Netherlands and voluntarily participated in Dutch language lessons. In line with our expectation, overall small, but significant progress was found on three indicators of second language proficiency as well as on perceived ease of independent participation in the host society. However, contrary to our expectation, participants showed no progress on two indicators of cultural integration, *attitudes* towards the host culture and *identification* with the host society. These results suggest that second language lessons provided by volunteers can be useful for immigrants to bridge the time they have to wait before they can follow formal language courses. At the same time the findings indicate that it should not be assumed too readily that improvement of second language proficiency necessarily fosters other forms of integration.

### **This study is based upon:**

Van Niejenhuis, C., Otten, S., Flache, A., & Van der Werf, M.P.C. (2017). Volunteers teaching second language lessons to immigrants residing in the Netherlands: Well intended, but also beneficial?

## 5.1 Introduction

All over the world, countries are struggling with the integration of immigrants. How can integration best be facilitated? Researchers have suggested that being proficient in the language of the host country is a key factor for immigrants' integration in the host society (Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1980; Gordon, 1964; Hagendoorn, Veenman, & Vollebergh, 2003; Schumann, 1978). In line with this, much policy is directed at fostering immigrants' second language acquisition. In some countries, a certificate testifying proficiency in the host country's language is even a prerequisite for getting or maintaining a permit for permanent stay (for example Canada, Government of Canada, 2016; the Netherlands, Immigration- and naturalization service, 2016). Both researchers and policy makers attach high importance to second language proficiency because it is presumed to facilitate the actual use of the second language and thereby eventually binding immigrants more closely to the host country's social and ethnic community (Clement, Noels, & Deneault, 2001).

To actually learn the second language, immigrants are often referred to organizations which the government assessed as qualified and are facilitated by the government in getting access to and financing language courses.<sup>1</sup> However, not all immigrants receive this support from the authorities. In the specific case of the Netherlands, where the present research was conducted, this mainly concerns immigrants who have been living in the Netherlands for decennia already (e.g. partners of former Turkish and Moroccan guest workers who arrived in the 1960 and 70's), immigrants coming from other European countries (e.g. Polish workers), and newly arrived immigrants who do not yet have a legal status and are therefore not allowed to follow the 'official' lessons (e.g. asylum seekers waiting for a humanitarian status). In order to also support these immigrants, in the past decade many non-governmental organizations initiated easily accessible, free Dutch language lessons given by volunteers. Despite the good intentions of these organizations and their volunteers, it is an open question whether these initiatives are actually beneficial in terms of language learning and foster integration. Not surprisingly, the lessons given by volunteers differ from the official lessons in their methods and materials used to teach the language. Furthermore, in contrast with the majority of the teachers of official language lessons, the volunteers are generally not especially trained as teachers for Dutch as a second language. Some of them (due to differing cultural and educational background) are not even highly proficient in the Dutch language themselves<sup>2</sup>. Experts stress the need for skilled teachers. They claim that teaching the host country's language to immigrants is an especially complex task because of the former traumatic experiences of many immigrants and the cultural differences between immigrants

and the teacher (Bossers, Kuiken, & Vermeer, 2010). Volunteers may not be prepared to avoid the related tensions, stress or irritations during the language lessons, which may then have a negative impact on the learning process of immigrants.

Given the differences with official lessons in terms of methods and teachers, it is important to get more insight into the effects of second language lessons given by volunteers. Are concerns justified that language lessons taught by volunteers may not foster second language proficiency and integration, or could these lessons even be detrimental?

To our knowledge, to date no scientific studies have been done on the actual use of second language lessons given by volunteers. The current explorative study is a first step in filling this gap. In a small sample of immigrants who reside in the Netherlands ( $N=85$ ), we longitudinally (time lag about 6 months) studied the outcomes of voluntary Dutch language lessons that were funded by the Dutch foundation 'Oranje Fonds' (van Niejenhuis, Naayer, & Verkade, 2012). The lessons were given in the context of a program called 'Language encounters.' In line with the goals of the program, we examined whether in the course of the program, participating immigrants made significant progress in terms of (a) Dutch language proficiency, (b) cultural integration as indicated by positive attitudes towards the host culture and identification with the host society (Hagendoorn et al., 2003), and (c) a greater ease of participating independently in the Dutch society.

### **5.1.1 The program**

In 2009, the Dutch foundation 'Oranje Fonds' started a second edition of the program 'Language encounters' (in Dutch: *Taalontmoetingen*). This program funded 22 Dutch non-governmental organizations who offered voluntary Dutch language lessons to immigrants. Volunteers either gave individual language lessons at the homes of immigrants or lessons in small groups of immigrants at community centers. The target group of the program comprised immigrants who did not speak or hardly spoke the Dutch language and lived in a socially isolated position, that is, who hardly participated in the Dutch society. The aim of the Dutch language lessons was not only enhancing the second language proficiency, but also enhancing the integration and ease of the independent participation of the immigrants.

The participating local organizations differed strongly in the way they executed the program. For example, some organizations gave only individual- or only group lessons, while other gave both. Some focused on immigrants who moved to the Netherlands many years ago, while others focused more on newly arrived immigrants with no access (yet) to formal language lessons. Moreover, organizations differed in their teaching methods. Whereas some organizations chose a formal approach in which volunteers worked through books based on

specific language learning methods, others chose a more informal approach in which the volunteer was more of a buddy/coach who tried to meet the specific needs of the concerning immigrant. However, despite these differences in the program at the local level, the organizations uniformly strived for the enhancement of immigrants' second language proficiency, their integration and ease of participation in the host country. The program was seen as a temporary intervention, offering a foundation which should empower immigrants and enable them to take the next, more independent, steps in taking part in the Dutch society.

### **5.1.2 Dutch language proficiency**

All lessons offered by the volunteers were directed at increasing the Dutch language proficiency of the participating immigrants. Whether it concerned structured book learning lessons or more unstructured lessons like going through a Dutch newspaper while sitting at the kitchen table, or walking through the neighborhood trying to talk in Dutch about the things that came along; in all lessons that the immigrants received during the 6 months' time lag in the present study, they were exposed to the Dutch language and exercising the Dutch language. In this setting, the presents study explores to which degree the Dutch language proficiency of the participating immigrants increases in the course of the program.

### **5.1.3 Cultural integration**

In the literature, it is assumed that immigrants, who are more culturally integrated, will orient themselves more towards the host society (Hagendoorn et al., 2003). Such orientation towards the host society can be reflected in (a) the attitudes immigrants have towards the host society and (b) their sense of belonging to and the extent to which they identify themselves with the host society (see de Vroome, Verkuyten, & Martinovic, 2014; Hagendoorn et al., 2003). Accordingly, in the current research attitudes towards the Dutch culture and identification with the Dutch host society are used as indicators of cultural integration.

For a number of reasons it can be expected that, in the course of the 'Language Encounters'-program, participants will become more culturally integrated in the Netherlands. Firstly, a reason to assume progress in terms of cultural integration among participating immigrants is that the Dutch culture and its practices are discussed in lessons on Dutch as a second language. This can be done intentionally as part of the language learning method (e.g. discussing the practice of maternity visit in CINOP/ETV.nl, 2016) or

unintentionally because it is brought up by course members during the lessons (Bossers et al., 2010, page 393). Having such knowledge about the Dutch culture is a relevant prerequisite for forming a positive opinion about it (attitudes) and a potential starting point for feeling part of it (identification).

Secondly, an increase in cultural integration can be expected because the second language lessons involve intergroup contact between the volunteer who teaches Dutch and the immigrant. Given that majority of the volunteers were either native Dutch or non-native, but living in the Netherlands for a long time already, it can be assumed that participating immigrants considered the volunteers to be members of the Dutch host society. The literature on intergroup contact suggests that positive contact with a member of another group does not only foster a positive attitude towards the respective person, but also towards the other group (the 'outgroup') as a whole (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Furthermore, contact with members of the host society has been found to be associated with a stronger identification with the host society as a whole (de Vroome et al., 2014; Nesdale, 2002).

Finally, an increase in cultural integration can be expected because the lessons were aimed at enhancing the second language proficiency. Earlier research revealed a positive relation between second language proficiency and cultural integration. Specifically, a high second language proficiency has been found to be associated with more favorable attitudes towards (members of) the host culture (Rubinfeld, Clément, Lussier, Lebrun, & Auger, 2006) and stronger identification with the host society (Rubinfeld et al., 2006; van Niejenhuis, Otten, & Flache, 2016).

Based on these arguments in the present research we explore to which degree in the course of the program the participating immigrants (a) become more positive in their attitudes towards the Dutch culture, and (b) identify more strongly with the Dutch society.

#### **5.1.4 Ease of independent participation in the host society**

The program did not only aim to improve the cognitive (attitudes) and affective (identification) components of integration, but was also intended to improve behavioral correlates of successful integration, namely the actual ability to manage oneself and participate independently in the host society. The assumption was that the stimulating role of the volunteer (whether or not with support of an activating method) together with a higher proficiency in the Dutch language would empower immigrants to take part more independently in the Dutch society. This should become visible in being able to perform simple, but essential actions independently, such as buying food and clothes, going to the doctor and using public transport. In line with this goal of the program, in this study is we

explore whether in the course of the program the involved immigrants experience a greater ease of participating independently in the Dutch society.

## **5.2 Method**

### **5.2.1 Participants**

Nationally, a total of 1.101 immigrants were registered as participants of the program. With help of Dutch volunteers, 624 of them filled in a complete intake form in Dutch with questions about their background, such as country of birth, mother tongue and self-assessed Dutch language proficiency (see also van Niejenhuis, van der Werf, & Otten, 2015). Given respondents' low Dutch language proficiency, the two questionnaires which were relevant for the current study had to be translated. These two questionnaires, together with passive and active lexicon tests were to be administered at two different time points. Due to scarcity in terms of time and money the translation of the questionnaires was done into a limited number of languages, namely Turkish, Arabic, Berber, Somali, English and Polish. Thus, only program participants speaking these languages were able to take part in the research, which were about 500 of the 624. The local project leaders asked them to fill in the questionnaires and lexicon tests, with the exception of very vulnerable (e.g. highly traumatized) individuals. Illiterate participants (20% of the total sample) were supported in the completion by literates speaking the relevant language.

Eventually, at the first time point, a total of 134 respondents completed the first questionnaire and lexicon tests (see below). About 6 months later 85 of them also completed the second questionnaire and/or lexicon tests.<sup>3, 4</sup> The data of these 85 respondents is used in the current study.

### **5.2.2 Measures**

In this study, validated instruments were used as much as possible. All instruments were first piloted and discussed in focus groups. These groups mainly consisted of immigrants who belonged to our target group, supported by interpreters. Only instruments were used that the focus groups experienced as clear and appropriate considering the social environment of the immigrants at the time of measurement, their differing cultural background and privacy issues.

The indicators of second language proficiency applied in the present study are similar to items employed in an earlier study on the relation between background characteristics of

immigrants and the language proficiency at the first time point (van Niejenhuis et al., 2015). Below, these measures are presented in more detail.

*Self-assessed second language proficiency.* In line with earlier research (Beenstock et al, 2001; Carliner, 2000; Chiswick & Miller, 1995; van Tubergen, 2010), the dependent variable used in the first analyses was self-assessed Dutch-language proficiency, based on two items: “How well can you read in your own language?” and “How well can you write in your own language”. The inter-item correlation was 0.79 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore the two items were combined into one scale. The four-point Likert scale ranged from “not/hardly”, “a little”, “considerably”, to “excellent”.

In addition, to also provide more objective indicators of second language proficiency, lexicon tests were used. These tests were based on the only validated Dutch lexicon test that was available at the time when the research was conducted: the ‘*Taaltoets Alle Kinderen*’ [Language test for all children] (TAK, Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2001). As will be outlined below, the TAK includes both a passive and an active lexicon test. Though it is mostly used for children, this test seemed appropriate to also measure the level of language proficiency for the adults in the present sample. In fact, the words from the test (e.g. nose, chair) are used in the daily language of both children and adults. Moreover, a strong advantage of this test is that it is appropriate for people with very low Dutch language proficiency, and that it is easy to administer, even to illiterate people (see van Niejenhuis et al., 2015, for more test details including the scoring of the passive and active lexicon tests).

*Passive lexicon test.* This part of the TAK consists of 96 items. The items are of increasing difficulty and are administered by showing a page with four pictures, saying a certain word and asking the participant to point to the corresponding picture on the page. Immigrants were asked, for example, to “point out the nose” while being shown four pictures depicting an eye, a nose, a mouth and a knee.

*Active lexicon test.* For this test, a total of forty-one pictures from the TAK were selected, which were assumed to be most relevant in immigrants’ daily life (26 concerning concrete subjects and 15 concerning actions). The test was administered by pointing out one item at a time and asking the immigrant a predefined question, like “What is this?” or “What is this woman doing?” For example, a bike was pointed out on a picture, while asking “What is this?” The passive and active lexicon test correlated moderately to highly at the independent points of measurement (time 1:  $r=.54$ ,  $N=83$ ,  $p<.001$ ; time 2:  $r=.48$ ,  $N=74$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The correlation coefficients indicate that the two tests are related to each other but not fully overlapping.

*Attitudes* towards the Dutch culture were measured by asking respondent to what extent they liked various aspects of Dutch culture, namely (a) Dutch food, (b) Dutch clothing, (c) Dutch humor, (d) Dutch (and English) music, (e) traditional Dutch celebrations, and (f) the way Dutch people treat each other ( $\alpha=.80$ ). The five-point Likert scale ranged from “not at all to “very much”; higher scores on this scale indicate more positive attitudes.

*Identification* with the Dutch host society was measured by asking respondents to what extent they agreed to the following four statements: “I feel at home in the Netherlands”, “I like to live in the Netherlands”, “I feel connected with the people who live in my neighborhood”, “I feel a strong tie with the Netherlands” ( $\alpha=.86$ ). The five-point Likert scale ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Higher scores on this scale indicate stronger identification. Attitudes and identification correlate moderately at the independent points of measurement (time 1:  $r=.45$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $N=78$ ; time 2:  $r=.51$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $N=76$ ). The correlation coefficients indicate that attitudes towards the Dutch culture and identification with the Dutch society are related to each other, but not fully overlapping, suggesting that they should best be treated as separate indicators of cultural integration in our further analyses.

*Ease of participating independently* in the Dutch society in the Dutch host society was measured by asking respondents about the ease with which they performed various activities in daily life. The list of 12 activities (e.g., “travelling alone by public transport”, “doing groceries on your own”, “going to the town hall on your own”) was preceded by the question: “According to you, how difficult is it to independently do these things in the Netherlands (if they were necessary)?” The five-point Likert scale ranged from “not difficult” to “difficult”. After reversed coding, higher scores on this scale indicate a greater ease in participating independently in the Dutch society. The internal consistency of the 12-item scale was good (alpha time 1= .86, time 2 = .78).

## 5.3 Results

### 5.3.1 Background respondents

The 85 participants with valid scores on at least one of the dependent variables at both time points were related to 20 different non-governmental organizations. The number of participants per organization varied from 1 to 13. Whereas 73% of the participants followed individual language lessons, 27% followed language lessons in small groups. The number of years that passed since the moment of migration to the Netherlands varied from 1 to 46, with 15 being the mean. The majority of the participants were female. The mean age of the

participants varied from 21 to 23, with a mean of 45. Participants originated from 13 different countries with a majority coming from Turkey and Morocco. Most participants came to the Netherlands because they planned to marry or were already married to a person residing in the Netherlands. The educational level was relatively low with 64% of the participants having finished no education at all or only primary school. Table 5.1 gives a more detailed insight into the background of the participants.

**Table 5.1** Sample characteristics

	N	%
Country of birth:		
- Turkey	31	37
- Morocco	27	32
- Iraq	11	13
- Poland	3	4
- other 9 countries	12	14
Reason of migration:		
- family unification/formation	57	67
- not save in own country	17	20
- economic	7	8
Gender:		
- Male	21	25
- Female	62	73
Educational level:		
- non	30	35
- primary school	22	26
- secondary school	11	13
- middle of higher vocational	12	14
- university	4	5

To explore the validity of our expectations on progress in terms of second language proficiency, attitudes, identification and ease of independent participation, we first looked at the mean differences between the first and second moment of measurement for the entire group of respondents. Secondly, we tried to further interpret our findings by inspecting whether the changes in the mean scores over time differ for immigrants with varying background characteristics. This second step fits earlier studies which indicated that several background characteristics are associated with immigrants' second language proficiency (Chiswick & Miller, 2001; van Tubergen, 2010). For example, there is evidence that a higher educational level is related to a relatively high Dutch language proficiency (e.g., van Niejenhuis et al., 2015). In line with this, immigrants with a high educational level might

learn a second language relatively easily and thus benefit more from the language courses which are subject of the current study. By inspecting changes in the study variables per background category (see Table 5.3), such influences are taken into account.<sup>5</sup>

### 5.3.2 Main analyses

In the course of the program, positive change was expected on all study variables. Table 5.2 shows the descriptives of each study variable at both times of measurement supplemented with the results of the paired sample t-tests investigating whether the changes in the mean scores obtained at the two time points are significant. Table 5.3 shows the differences in means per background characteristic. To also provide insight in the progress on the study variables for immigrants who differ in number of years since migration and in age, these continuous variables were divided into categories.

As expected Table 5.2 shows that for all participating immigrants the mean self-assessed *Dutch language proficiency* is higher at time point 2 than at time point 1. Similarly, there is evidence for an overall increase in the scores on the passive and active lexicon test in the course of the program. Results of the t-tests show that these positive changes are significant. Thus, the analyses on the three indicators of Dutch language proficiency are consistently in line with the expected improvement in language proficiency over time. As can be seen in Table 5.3, this consistent improvement on all indicators of second language proficiency concerns nearly all immigrants, regardless of their background characteristics.

Focusing on the indicators of *cultural integration*, the overall mean score on attitudes toward the Dutch culture increased while the mean score on identification with the Dutch society decreased over time (see Table 5.2). According to the respective t-tests, these small changes are not statistically significant. Thus, the analyses provide no support for our expectation that participants' cultural integration increased in the course of the program.

Interestingly, Table 5.3 shows that the changes in both attitudes and identification differ strongly per background characteristic. For example, the mean score on attitudes towards the Dutch culture decreased for economic immigrants and increased for uneducated immigrants. Also, the mean score on identification with the Netherlands decreased for immigrants between 20 and 30 years of age and increased for (the few) immigrants with an academic degree. These positive as well as negative changes in both attitudes and identification might be the cause for the very small and insignificant overall change in these indicators of cultural integration.

Finally, the overall means on the *ease of participating independently* indicate progress (see Table 5.2). Results of the t-test indicate that this change is significant. This suggests that, as expected, in the course of the program overall the participants experienced a greater ease or at least less difficulty in participating independently in the Dutch society. However, Table 5.3 shows that despite the overall progress, for some immigrants their ease of participation did indeed decrease. The most substantial group that decreased in the ease of participating independently was refugees.

**Table 5.2** Descriptives and t-tests (differences time 1 vs time 2) on study variables ( $N=74-84$ )

	Range	Mean	SD	Results t-test
Self-assessed language proficiency t1	1-4	1.83	0.67	$t(73)=3.00, p<.05,$
Self-assessed language proficiency t2	1-4	2.13	0.63	Cohen's $d=0.40$
Score passive lexicon test t1	3-67	21.72	11.78	$t(73)=6.11, p<.001,$
Score passive lexicon test t2	7-89	30.59	16.31	Cohen's $d= 0.59$
Score active lexicon test t1	15-80	59.14	11.55	$t(72)= 5.72, p<.001,$
Score active lexicon test t2	27-80	64.38	9.21	Cohen's $d= 0.52$
Attitudes t1	1-5	2.98	1.00	$t(69)= -.70 p=.24,$
Attitudes t2	1.5-5	3.02	0.90	Cohen's $d= -0.07$
Identification t1	1-5	3.84	1.02	$t(70)= -1.48 p=.07,$
Identification t2	1-5	3.73	1.03	Cohen's $d= -0.15$
Ease of participating independently t1	2.58-5	4.09	0.68	$t(70)=1.99 p<.05,$
Ease of participating independently t2	2.27-5	4.22	0.60	Cohen's $d= 0.21$

**Table 5.3** Background respondents with mean progress on study variables ( $N=74-84$ )

	%	Mean progress (time 2 –time 1)					
		Self-assessed proficiency	Passive lexicon	Active lexicon	Att. Id.	Ease of part.	
Country of birth:							
- Turkey	37	.29	9.50	4.92	.09	-.08	.12
- Morocco	32	.18	5.52	5.48	-.11	-.31	.26
- Iraq	13	.55	9.00	8.50	-.08	.12	.01
- Poland	4	.83	5.00	10.33	-.44	-.08	-.20
- other 9 countries	14	-.08	14.11	2.67	-.33	-.30	.04
Reason of migration:							
- family unification/formation	67	.27	6.88	5.58	.05	-.23	.16
- not save in own country	20	.24	12.93	2.93	-.22	.08	-.04
- economic <sup>1</sup>	8	.33	13.50	7.00	-.82	-.08	.18
Nr of years since migration: <sup>2</sup>							
- 1 to 5	21	.16	5.71	9.79	-.28	-.09	.11
- 5 to 10	20	.44	6.71	4.67	.01	-.14	.18
- 10 to 15	13	.21	15.27	.27	-.07	-.06	.02
- 15 to 20	5	.13	10.67	7.00	.03	-.11	.35
- 20 to 25	20	.25	4.88	5.19	.08	-.35	.16
- 25 to 30	6	.63	9.60	1.00	.09	-.33	-.44
- 30 to 50	9	-.25	11.83	7.33	-.01	-.03	.13
Gender: <sup>3</sup>							
- Male	25	.21	9.75	7.18	-.09	.04	.16
- Female	73	.26	8.16	5.20	-.06	-.20	.10
Age: <sup>4</sup>							
- 20 to 40	30	.38	10.41	6.22	-.24	-.37	.32
- 40 to 60	60	.14	6.35	3.90	.03	-.05	.02
- 60 to 80	8	.38	16.14	12.14	-.13	-.17	.59
Educational level: <sup>5</sup>							
- non	35	.15	6.92	3.92	.10	-.03	.10
- primary school	26	.33	7.95	3.68	-.12	-.32	.26
- secondary school	13	.64	12.89	10.10	-.10	.07	.34
- middle of higher vocational	14	.13	8.45	6.64	-.24	-.36	-.18
- university	5	.00	10.00	3.25	-.42	.50	.25

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>The 'other 9 countries' all have less than 3 participants.<sup>2</sup>Correlations between number of years since migration and the study variables are all  $r < .12$ ,  $p > .05$ .<sup>3</sup>Correlations between gender and the study variables are all  $r < .12$ ,  $p > .05$ <sup>4</sup>Correlations between age and the study variables are all  $r < .18$ ,  $p > .05$ .<sup>5</sup>Correlations between educational level and the study variables are all  $r_s < .17$ ,  $p > .05$ .

Finally, we explored an implicit assumption of the program, namely that second language proficiency was a key factor in integration. To this end, we investigated whether improvement of the Dutch language proficiency was associated with increasing identification with the Dutch host society, more positive attitudes towards the Dutch culture and more ease of participating independently in the Dutch host society. Bivariate correlations between the changes of these indicators in our sample provide no support for a reliable association of these variables over time (see Table 5.4). Only a weak negative correlation is found between change in passive lexicon and change in attitudes towards the Dutch culture.

**Table 5.4** Correlations ( $N=60-67$ )

	Self-assessed Proficiency t2-t1	Passive lexicon t2-t1	Active lexicon t2-t1
Attitudes t2-t1	-.01	-.26 *	-.14
Identification t2-t1	-.01	.10	-.10
Ease of participating independently t2-t1	-.04	-.02	.04

\* $p < .05$  (one tailed).

## 5.4 Conclusion and discussion

This study was set out to explore whether second language lessons taught by volunteers were related to improved language learning, cultural integration and ease of independent participation in the host society. The study was done with a small sample of immigrants ( $N=85$ ) who resided in the Netherlands and voluntarily participated in Dutch language lessons. The language lessons were thus given by volunteers to volunteers. All lessons were part of a program which was executed by 22 non-governmental organizations throughout the Netherlands. To explore the impact of this intervention, we collected longitudinal data from participating immigrants. The first measurement was shortly after registration for the program, the second about six months later.

We expected progress in second language proficiency in the period of the study. This expectation was confirmed by significant improvements on all three indicators we employed to assess second language proficiency. Not only did self-reported language proficiency increase, but also performance on the two lexicon tasks – which can be considered more objective indicators of language proficiency – improved significantly. This is noteworthy, because the present program did not rely on a formal certification system enforcing and standardizing the quality of the second language lessons as ‘official’ lessons by expert teachers would.

We also expected that in the course of the program respondents would experience a greater ease of participating independently in the Dutch society. Overall, this expectation was confirmed. On average, the participating immigrants made significant progress in their ease of participation. However, further inspection showed that this positive finding did not apply to all participants. Rather, immigrants with specific background characteristics, most notably refugees, did not make progress, but even declined (slightly) in their ease of participation in the course of the language lessons. Possibly, at least some refugees are so traumatized that they need more or longer help in order to increase their ease of participation.

Contrary to our expectations, additional analyses on the whole group of participants showed that the change over time in terms of second language proficiency did not correlate with the change in the ease of participation. This suggests that it was not the improvement of second language proficiency which made the difference, but rather the stimulating role of the Dutch volunteer (whether or not supported by an activating method). Plausibly, this support empowered immigrants in a way that they felt capable of independently performing essential activities in the host society needed to meet their basic personal needs and to participate in a wider sense.

Hence, notwithstanding differing Dutch language- and teaching skills of the volunteers, and the strong differences in the way the lessons were executed, the Dutch language proficiency of participating immigrants as well as their ease of independently participating in the Netherlands reliably increased in the period in which they followed the lessons.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, we did not find evidence that enhanced language proficiency in the course of the language lessons were also associated with an increase in the two indicators of cultural integration that we employed, namely attitudes towards the Dutch culture and identification with the Dutch society. A possible reason for this lack of overall progress in terms of cultural integration is (again) the fact that the participating immigrants differ strongly in terms of background. Our results show positive changes in the cultural integration of immigrants with certain characteristics and negative changes in the cultural integration of others. This might cause the overall absence of change.

An interesting question is whether these positive and negative changes in cultural integration are actually due to the background characteristics of immigrants. For example, is it indeed the reason of migration that causes the negative change in attitudes among the economic immigrants? Possibly they are disappointed by the actual economic opportunities they are offered by the Dutch and adjust their attitudes towards the Dutch culture accordingly. Or are it other (maybe coincidental) factors that cause this relatively high

decrease among the economic immigrants in specific? Given the low amount of immigrants per background characteristic, this could not be examined in the current study.

Previous research has indicated that higher second language proficiency is related to more positive attitudes towards the Dutch culture and stronger identification with the host society (de Vroome et al., 2014; Rubinfeld et al., 2006; van Niejenhuis et al., 2016). This makes it all the more surprising that the progress we found in terms of second language proficiency was *not* correlated with an increase in our indicators of cultural integration. Tentatively, we suggest as possible explanation for this lack of association a process that has been labelled the ‘integration paradox’ (Buijs, Demant, & Hamdy, 2006; Verkuyten, 2016). The integration paradox refers to the finding that immigrants with a high level of education are often relatively critical about the host society. An explanation for this is that education enables immigrants to become more informed social critics (Verkuyten, 2016). For immigrants from the current study level of education at school is probably less relevant, because this level was mostly attained in their home country. A more important type of education which enables an immigrant to become an informed social critic is second language education. Immigrants who learn the Dutch language are better capable of communicating with members of the Dutch society and understanding Dutch media. Doing so, they may become more aware of anti-immigrant sentiments in the Dutch society and therefore become more critical regarding and disassociate themselves from the Dutch society. Thus, a higher Dutch proficiency is not necessarily conducive to more positive attitudes towards the Dutch culture and stronger identification with the Dutch society.

In addition, the lack of a relation between progress in second language proficiency and progress in cultural integration could also be related to research which indicates that increasing second language proficiency only goes together with a positive change in attitudes towards the host culture for (temporary) immigrants with a high degree of social initiative, measured as one of the five traits constituting a multicultural personality (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001; van Niejenhuis et al., 2016). In line with these findings, the possible benefits of the current intervention in terms of cultural integration might have been restricted to participants of our study with relatively high scores on this trait. However, given that the target group of this intervention comprised of immigrants with a relatively high degree of social isolation, presumably only a very small number of participants could be seen as having this characteristic of a multicultural personality.

All in all, our results suggest that it should not too readily be assumed that by improving second language proficiency, other forms of integration are also enhanced. In fact, this link seems to be far from self-evident, but appears to be rather contingent on many other factors.

#### **5.4.1 Limitations and future research**

To our knowledge, the present study is the first to explore the use of second language lessons given by volunteers. A large majority of the participating immigrants have been residing in the Netherlands for more than five years already (see Table 5.3) and were classified as socially isolated. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that immigrants' participation in the program 'Language Encounters' played a decisive role in the positive change we found in the present study. But in order to conclude with certainty that the positive developments we observed were actually due to participation in the program, we would have needed a control group with respondents having similar characteristics as the intervention group, but not actually taking part in the intervention. However, in the present study, such a control group would have implied withholding motivated immigrants from participation in the second language lessons until the data collection was finished. In our view (and also in the view of the organization that implemented the program), this would have been unethical. Future research should explore possibilities to obtain natural variation on participation in voluntary language courses, which was not feasible for our study.

The present study was conducted among a relatively small group of participants. While we translated the questionnaire into the substantial amount of six different languages, the variety in languages spoken among immigrants in the target group is considerably larger and limited the number of immigrants we could include in the study. Moreover, participation was voluntarily. This may have resulted in a selection bias and a possible overestimation of the positive development that occurred during the intervention. It seems plausible that the respondents who decided to take part in research were the ones who gained most from the intervention (due to for example high motivation, self-confidence). Moreover, one could argue that drop out between the two time-points might be especially probable for those who did not experience progress. In the current research, however, we do not have a reason to assume the latter. On the contrary, according to local project leaders, many respondents who dropped out between the first and second point of measurement, actually did so because they successfully finished their individual trajectory within the intervention and started participating in other (subsequent) activities which required more independence.

Thus, presumably the drop out in between time points did not cause an over- but instead an underestimation of the progress in language proficiency that occurred in the course of the intervention, and possibly also in terms of the progress in integration. This makes it all the more encouraging that progress in language proficiency was actually found.

In order to further improve second language lessons given by volunteers, it would be interesting for future research to make a distinction between types of lessons as well as types of immigrants receiving these lessons. Are certain types of lessons more effective for the enhancement of second language proficiency and/or integration of certain immigrants? Elaborating on results from the current study it could for example be questioned whether refugees (who are often traumatized and therefore vulnerable) benefit more from individual second language lessons compared to group-wise language lessons. So far, it is an open question whether it would be wise to enforce specific types of lessons for specific immigrant groups, or whether it is precisely the room for variety offered within the program that makes it successful, because it offers the opportunity to tailor the intervention to the participating local organizations, the volunteers and the participating immigrants.

Furthermore, it would be interesting for future research to not only include self-assessment items on literacy, but also items on speaking and understanding the second language as indicators of second language proficiency. Although earlier research suggests that self-assessed proficiency in reading and writing is closely related to self-assessed proficiency in speaking and understanding ( $r=.88$  between writing and speaking, van Tubergen & Wierenga, 2011), including all dimensions could give more accurate information. An even more complete picture of the second language proficiency is obtained when not only participants own perception of second language proficiency is retrieved, as is common in research on second language proficiency, but also second language test scores. Including these objective indicators as well is exactly what we did in the present study and can, in our view, be considered as one of its major strengths.

#### **5.4.2 Policy implications**

The present research suggests several interesting implications for policies aiming at the successful integration of immigrants. Despite (a) the lack of a governmental certification system safeguarding the quality of the second language lessons, (b) the strong differences in the way the participating local organizations executed the program and its lessons, (c) the varying backgrounds and (thus) language and teaching skills of volunteers, and (d) the small number of respondents in this study, the current study at least tentatively suggests that on the whole second language lessons given by volunteers can be beneficial in the enhancement

of immigrants' second language proficiency and ease of participation. This finding is encouraging, especially given the current era in which countries are faced with many asylum seekers, who often have to wait a very long time for a decision upon whether or not they will be granted a humanitarian status in the host country. Only after asylum seekers are appointed this status, they are entitled to follow official second language lessons by expert teachers. The OECD (2016b) has very recently warned that this time of waiting, which frequently takes months or even years, might be a time in which immigrants' ability and motivation to integrate might suffer long term damage. In this situation, the help of volunteers to provide second language lessons might importantly help to bridge the gap until immigrants' status allows them to follow formal language courses.

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### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> In the case of the Netherlands, the quality of the second language courses is assured by an assessment based on the course members' success rates on the official language tests and their level of satisfaction with the language course (Outlook for work, 2016). Only organizations that are well evaluated get a governmental certificate. Immigrants can borrow money from the Dutch government to follow language lessons at a certified organization. Immigrants with a humanitarian status do not have to reimburse the loan on condition that they passed the state exam within a certain period of time (Service for implementation of education, 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> We have information on the background of 124 volunteers from the overall program. About 80% of them were born in the Netherlands. The 20% that was not born in the Netherlands arrived there between 8 and 58 years ago (mean is 28 years). Only half of them indicated that they had 'excellent' Dutch speaking skills, others were either 'reasonably' or 'good'.
- <sup>3</sup> Several respondents were lost out of sight during the data collection and thus did not participate in the second data wave. According to local project leaders, there are two known reasons for this. Firstly, some immigrants stopped participating in the

program because they started participating in other (subsequent) activities which required more independence. This was actually one of the goals of the program and thus implies that the program was successful for these immigrants. Secondly, some immigrants temporarily stopped participating in the program because they went back to their home country for a certain period of time. Finally, some respondents were lost out of sight for unclear reasons. Unfortunately the number of respondents falling in each of these three categories was not registered.

- 4 Non response analyses were performed to check whether respondents who did- versus did not drop out between the first and second measurement differed from each other in their initial scores on the study variables. The analyses showed no significant bias.
- 5 An alternative would be controlling for demographic variables in our analyses. This was not done because of the low number of participants and the associated relatively low power of our statistical analyses. Also, no links were found between these background variables and progress in terms of second language proficiency, attitudes, identification or ease of participating independently (all  $r_{(s)} < .19$ ,  $p > .05$ ; see notes Table 5.3 for more details).

