Learning and literacy: empowerment as rehabilitation among older immigrant women

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In the recent years there has been a turn towards the Multilingual subject in language learning (Kramsch 2009) and the importance of bringing the subject into the focus when studying different aspects of multilingualism such as literacy in a new language. A useful device for eliciting data is through focus groups where the participants have the possibility to speak about themselves and their own experience; that is to tell their stories and evaluate and comment on stories told by others. As narratives have both a cognitive and social function, they "structure our experience, our knowledge and our thoughts" (Brockmeier & Carbaugh 2001), and "are important in people’s lives because it is through these forms of knowledge that our lives hang together" (Lantolf & Thorne 2006), they are increasingly used when perspectives from multilingual subjects are at the fore.

The conversational segments presented here is between the researcher and two African medical doctors, former refugees. The doctors are talking about their work with their patients, also refugees, and the patients’ language and culture learning together with their own experiences with language is a recurrent topic. Their view of literacy in relation to language learning and participation in Norway as well as a means to help refugees out of a difficult situation is debated in the part presented in this paper. Through the study of various linguistic resources (for example, lexical choice, indirect speech, metaphors) the multilingual subjects’ conceptualization of literacy and language is analyzed as well as their experience with learning in the Norwegian setting. The notions of agency, empowerment, adjustment and autonomy are found to be fruitful in the analysis of this discussion where the medical doctors underscore the importance of language in the rehabilitation process.

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