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**Assessing the impact of Erasmus+
in Adult Education: empirical evidence,
transformative processes, and comparative
perspectives within the RIA-AE Framework**

Guest editor Vanna Boffo

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Table of contents

5 Editorial

by Vanna Boffo

RESEARCHES WITHIN THE RIA-AE NETWORK

17 Mainstreaming intellectual outputs of cooperation partnerships (KA2) within Erasmus+: lessons learned from the Adult Education Sector

Bert-Jan Buiskool, Victor Verlaan

25 Erasmus+ as a policy measure to promote access to transnational mobility

Francesca Torlone, Marco Ceccarelli

39 “Non-obvious” narratives: mobility adult participants’ experiences from the perspective of reflexivity theory

Julita Pieńkosz

48 The value of a co-creational community approach for adult education and participation in a changing world

Willeke van der Werf

56 The Erasmus+ and adult education local organisations in Portugal: discussion based on an impact study

Paula Guimarães, Carolina Pereira, Ana Nascimento David

67 Rethinking the impact of Erasmus+ on Adult Education: lessons from Slovenia

Borut Mikulec

75 Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes (RIA-AE) as an Evaluative Architecture for Lifelong Learning: Erasmus+, Adult Education and the Role of the National Agency in the Italian Context

Daniela Ermini

84 Formation of the self and KA1 mobility among adult learners in Italy: initial evidence from the second survey round within the RIA-AE Network

Vanna Boffo, Christel Schachter

RESEARCHES WITHIN THE RIA-AE FRAMEWORK

96 Beyond the journey: Erasmus+ mobility as a catalyst for transformative learning

Antonio Sacristano

- 102** Beyond language boundaries: an Italy–Spain comparative Erasmus+ study on L2 assessment and certification for adult migrants

Piera De Gironimo

- 109** From the Canary Islands to Finland: a comparative perspective on adult learner well-being through Erasmus+

Ángel Navarro Rodríguez

- 117** Bridging formal and non-formal adult language education: Erasmus+ job shadowing at VHS Frankfurt within RIA-AE

M. Amparo Aymerich Bort

EXPERIENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS WITHIN THE RIA-AE FRAMEWORK

- 124** “Tu duca, tu signore, tu maestro”: an abductive competence model for E+ trainings on sustainability

Angelo Fanelli

- 133** L’impatto di Erasmus+ nell’educazione degli adulti su organizzazioni e partecipanti: una lettura comparativa tra Paesi

Maria Teresa Caccavale

- 138** EVLE: functional literacy, inclusion and European citizenship in adult education

Juan Cristóbal Ruiz González

- 146** Erasmus+ as a framework for professional development of second chance school teachers: the case of KA1 mobility project

Ivan B. Šarčević

- 151** The Erasmus+ TOP project: job shadowing at school

Cristina Meneguzzo

- 160** EOI de Collado Villalba and Extensión de San Lorenzo de El Escorial’s Erasmus+ experience

María Álvarez Álvarez

- 168** Individualised teaching in adult schools. Innovation project based on the finnish model for adult students with learning difficulties

Rocío Romero Aguilera, Santiago Clúa Nieto

- 176** The NEAR project as a model and a method: assessing the impact of Erasmus+ through proximity and narration on adult education in the Naples area

Marianna Capo

Beyond language boundaries: an Italy–Spain comparative Erasmus+ study on L2 assessment and certification for adult migrants

Piera De Gironimo¹

Keywords

Adult education, Language assessment, Migrant integration, Affective filter, Erasmus+ job shadowing.

Abstract

This comparative study analyses the assessment procedures of L2 language certifications for adult migrants, which act as high-stakes legal prerequisites for civic integration. Through an Erasmus+ mobility comparing the CPIA system in the Italian region of Lazio and the Spanish Andalusian model (provided by EOIs), a systemic dichotomy emerges. Spain guarantees formal equity through standardised testing. Conversely, Italy presents territorial fragmentation but leverages andragogical flexibility and institutional proximity, which are crucial for lowering the migrants' "affective filter" and reducing performance anxiety. The research advocates for an integrated European assessment model that merges Spanish measurement rigour with the Italian learner-centred approach. Balancing evaluation transparency with the mitigation of psychological vulnerabilities is essential to transform language testing from a bureaucratic obstacle into an equitable pathway for active citizenship.

1. Introduction

Teaching a second language (L2) to adult learners with a migrant background represents one of the most complex challenges for European educational systems today. Indeed, linguistic-communicative competence has progressively taken on a role that goes far beyond the mere relational and subsistence dimension, becoming a true legal "border": achieving specific levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020) constitutes an unavoidable regulatory requirement for obtaining a residence permit and citizenship in various Member States. In this scenario, Adult Education is called upon to perform a crucial and delicate task, operating with a user base often characterised by social vulnerabilities, past traumas, and heterogeneous educational needs.

To analyse how language policies and transnational mobility can impact daily educational practices, this paper takes the context of the South Pontino area (Lazio, Italy) as a privileged vantage point. Specifically, the research focuses on the Provincial Centre for Adult Education (*Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti*, CPIA) 10 of Formia, which currently operates over a vast interprovincial area including the learning centres of Formia, Minturno, Terracina, and Fondi. According to the Report (De Gironimo, 2020) relating to the school year in which the Erasmus+ project under study was launched, the socio-economic context of reference features a very high incidence of foreign citizens. Mostly from South Asia and North Africa, the learners are predominantly employed in the agricultural sector and the tourism-tertiary industry. To cope with such a diverse student body, which in the 2019/2020 school year approached one thousand individuals, the CPIA 10 adopted a flexible educational structure: teaching abandons the rigidity of traditional classes to be organised into level groups, teaching periods, and individualised "learning agreements" (*patti formativi*), aimed at validating prior informal and non-formal learning.

In order to respond to this complex multicultural challenge, the institution undertook its first Erasmus+ KA1 project (2019-1-IT02-KA104-061881), entitled *Competences for the CPIA*, aimed at staff training and the exchange of good practices within a European context. The implementation of the project collided with the COVID-19 emergency; hindered by global health restrictions, the teachers had to postpone the physical mobility, resorting, between March and April 2021, to an online course on the concepts of Interculturalism and Global Citizenship Education, delivered by the European Territorial Centre (Calabria region). This virtual phase proved strategically useful, supplying the CPIA with the international contacts necessary to organise subsequent on-site visits.

Thanks to this network, the physical job shadowing mobility in Spain finally materialised in the autumn of 2021. In Estepona (Andalusia), the Italian delegation explored an entire ecosystem dedicated to adult education, interfacing with the IES Mar de Alborán, the CEPA Los Reales, and the Official Language School (*Escuela Oficial de Idiomas*, EOI). It was precisely the direct observation of Andalusian practices that triggered a reflective process on the procedures used in Italy for language certifications. The gap between the rigorous standardisation of the Spanish system and the marked organisational flexibility of the Italian Prefecture tests generated a clear desire to investigate the phenomenon, later elaborated academically by the research of Rizzo (2022).

Methodologically, this qualitative comparative case study draws on empirical data gathered during the Erasmus+ mobility at the EOI of Estepona. Data collection involved analysing certification exams (*Pruebas Específicas de Certificación*) and evaluation rubrics, integrated with unstructured interviews with Spanish examiners. Concurrently, a documentary cross-analysis examined national policy frameworks: the Andalusian *Guía de las personas candidatas* (Junta de Andalucía, 2025) versus the Italian ministerial *Vademecum* (MIUR, 2010) and decentralised Prefecture guidelines. Data were thematically coded into three categories: procedural standardisation, formal equity and the impact of the testing environment on the learners' "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982). Relying on this framework, the following sections demonstrate how transnational exchanges can actively transform organisational cultures, contributing to a fairer and interconnected European Education Area (European Commission, 2019).

2. Language certification as a threshold function in inclusion pathways

Over the last two decades, language testing policy has shifted from an educational diagnostic tool to a high-stakes mechanism of migration control (Shohamy, 2001). Originally conceived as a descriptive tool to harmonise the teaching and assessment of language skills at the European level, the CEFR itself has undergone a functional metamorphosis, progressively assuming a selective and normative value. International literature also highlights the ethical implications of this paradigm, questioning the fairness of subjecting vulnerable adult migrants to standardised high-stakes testing without accounting for their social and emotional fragilities (McNamara, Knoch, & Fan, 2019). Consequently, scholars emphasise that assessment for migrants must balance psychometric validity with social justice, warning against the uncritical use of CEFR levels for immigration purposes (Deygers, Zeidler, Vilcu & Carlsen, 2018). Governing this crucial transition, the Association of Language Testers in Europe defines the rigorous ethical and qualitative standards for high-stakes language testing (ALTE, 2016). Through these protocols, achieving specific proficiency levels (particularly A2 and B1) now serves as a prerequisite for the civic and political integration of third-country nationals.

This paradigm shift institutionalises language assessment, transforming L2 teachers and institutions in charge of Adult Education (such as CPIAs in Italy and EOIs in Spain) into gatekeepers and guarantors of civil rights (Novello, 2009). A comparative analysis of the Italian and Spanish regulatory contexts (Rizzo, 2022) presents the picture of two nations that, despite sharing the same European roots, adopt different assessment architectures.

In Italy, the legislature has structured a step-by-step integration pathway, wherein language proficiency takes on increasing weight. Starting with the Consolidated Immigration Act (*Testo Unico sull'Immigrazione*, Legislative Decree 286/1998) and, subsequently, with Presidential Decree 179/2011, the State introduced the Integration Agreement (*Accordo di Integrazione*), a pact stipulated between the migrant and the institutions, based on a rigid credit system where the acquisition of Italian language certification plays a leading role in preventing point deduction and residence permit revocation. More specifically, as established by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) in 2010, the June 4 Decree binds the issuance of the EU long-term residence permit to the passing of an A2-level language test, the management and administration of which are delegated at the provincial level precisely to the internal commissions of the CPIAs.

Subsequently, Law 132/2018 (known as the “Security Decree”) raised the bar for legal integration, making the possession of a formal B1-level certification mandatory for the granting of Italian citizenship. Unlike the A2 test, this assessment is not entrusted to the CPIAs, but is the exclusive prerogative of the university certifying bodies gathered in the CLIQ2 consortium (established in 2012 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, MAECI). Thus, a “dual-track” system takes shape in the Italian context, alternating between provincial school management and academic consortium management; a setup that sector literature criticises for its fragmentation in guaranteeing a fair and uniform threshold of linguistic integration across the entire national territory (Deiana, 2021; Rocca & Scerra, 2019).

In a mirroring but procedurally more cohesive manner, the Spanish legal system subordinates regularisation processes (the so-called *arraigo*) and the acquisition of nationality to the passing of rigorous linguistic-cultural proficiency exams governed by strong institutional centralisation. To obtain citizenship, Spanish legislation requires passing the *Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera* (DELE) exam at the A2 level or higher. Unlike the fragmented Italian mosaic, the DELE is delivered globally by a single major institution, the Instituto Cervantes (2020), guaranteeing a strict standardisation. This language diploma must be accompanied by the passing of the Constitutional and Socio-Cultural Knowledge of Spain test (*Conocimientos Constitucionales y Socioculturales de España*, CCSE), aimed at certifying the assimilation of Spanish civic values.

Parallel to this global certification architecture, a crucial educational and assessment role at the territorial level is played by the EOIs. These state public institutions are not limited to providing courses, but they issue the *Pruebas Específicas de Certificación* (PEC): high-profile official language certifications, standardised at the regional level and preparatory for academic and professional integration. This outlines a governance model that, as will be seen in the following section, contrasts with the fragmented flexibility of the Italian system.

3. The Andalusian ecosystem and the assessment paradigm

The job shadowing at the EOI of Estepona (October 20–22, 2021) revealed a dichotomy in the governance of language testing, which can be summarised by “centralisation versus fragmentation”. This divergence is not merely an administrative detail, but it directly impacts the treatment of learners and the validity of the evaluation. The two systems strike a different balance between procedural standardisation and institutional proximity, affecting both comparability and learner experience.

In the Spanish context, adult learner assessment adheres to institutional centralisation, as evidenced by the *Guía de las personas candidatas* (Junta de Andalucía, 2025³). The PECs are not developed autonomously by individual schools; rather, they are designed centrally by the *Dirección General de Ordenación y Evaluación Educativa*. The Andalusian policy outlines a standardised architecture

(which also includes the evaluation of “Mediation”, in line with the CEFR Companion Volume). Tests are administered simultaneously, on the same day and time, across all EOIs within the Autonomous Community. To ensure objectivity, oral exams require the presence of two examiners (an interviewer and a silent co-assessor equipped with strict observation rubrics, or *hojas de observación*), while written exams undergo double-blind grading.

Conversely, the architecture of the Italian Prefecture Tests (used for A2 level proficiency) rests on territorial fragmentation. An analysis of the regulatory framework, specifically the Decree of June 4 (Ministry of the Interior & MIUR, 2010), confirms the bureaucratic nature of the system. While the digital convocation process is regulated via the Prefectures, the regulatory framework delegates the physical drafting of the test, the administration criteria, and the final assessment to the discretion of individual CPIA commissions. These commissions, composed of teachers appointed by the School Principal, are responsible for designing and preparing the exam materials. Although the ministerial *Vademecum* provides national guidelines –such as an 80% passing threshold and a weighted distribution across listening (30%), reading (35%), and written interaction (35%) (MIUR, 2010) – operational implementation is at the provincial level. Provinces may issue local informational documents, such as the guidelines drafted by the Prefecture of Latina (2024), which evidence a decentralised workflow. As noted in literature, delegating test design to individual CPIAs creates operational variations across territories (Deiana, 2021), potentially causing difficulty levels to fluctuate geographically. Consequently, a migrant’s probability of success may depend on the province where the exam is taken. Thus, while the Andalusian centralised model ensures regional uniformity, the Italian decentralised setup introduces localised adaptations that, while flexible, present inherent challenges for national assessment standardisation.

This dynamic replicates itself on an international scale when analysing the Spanish language certifications. As highlighted by Rizzo (2022), the Spanish system reiterates its centralisation by relying on the standardised certifications (DELE and SIELE) provided by the *Instituto Cervantes*: a single institutional pivot offering a cohesive framework that is uniformly valid worldwide.

By contrast, while the multifaceted offerings of the Italian CLIQ consortium allow adult migrants to choose exams suited to their cognitive styles, they accentuate assessment differences. Certifying bodies like CELI and CILS (issued by the Universities for Foreigners of Perugia and Siena, respectively), despite CEFR alignment, present different syllabi, durations, item types, and grading weights. They even diverge on the rules of “skill capitalisation” (the ability to retain passing scores): for instance, while CILS allows candidates to save successful modules (corresponding to specific language skills) and retake only the failed ones, CELI generally requires the entire macro-section (written or oral) to be repeated if a single skill is not passed.

4. The affective filter: reflections from bidirectional job shadowing

The KA1 job shadowing mobility experience in Estepona did not solely represent a moment of educational observation, but rather acted as a genuine trigger for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) within the teaching staff involved. A critical review of the systemic divergences between Italy and Spain demands, at this point, a deep pedagogical reflection on the emotional factors of learning. Data gathered from the job shadowing and interviews with EOI instructors suggest that highly standardised, simultaneous testing environments may inadvertently increase performance anxiety among vulnerable migrants. As observed, while the centralised Andalusian model is notable for its assessment rigour and formal equity, placing it within the complex reality of Adult Education reveals a critical issue regarding the emotional and psychological factors of learning. Subjecting learners – often carrying past traumas, characterised by low levels of schooling, or marked by severe socio-economic vulnerability – to a state exam perceived as hyper-structured risks drastically raising their “affective filter” (Krashen, 1982). This

performance anxiety can inhibit the real communicative skills acquired by the individual, precluding their access to civil rights and European citizenship. However, field observations indicate that the Italian approach leverages institutional proximity to mitigate learner vulnerability, serving as an andragogical facilitator (Knowles, 1975).

In Italy, this assessment-related tension is evident in the CPIAs, where the user base is effectively divided into two categories. On one hand, internal learners benefit from a bond of trust with the teacher, which mitigates performance anxiety. These learners regularly attend literacy courses to achieve the A2 level – a binding requirement for obtaining the EU long-term residence permit – and the final exam represents the culmination of an inclusive educational journey. On the other hand, external candidates approach the institution just for the Prefecture Test. This second category, whose digital booking process is managed by administrative intermediaries such as CAFs (Tax Assistance Centres) or welfare institutes (*patronati*), is disproportionately affected. It is precisely for these external users, placed into an unfamiliar exam setting experienced as a mere bureaucratic formality, that the “affective filter” may rise to critical levels, compromising the validity of the linguistic measurement.

At this critical juncture, the Italian CPIA system, despite its procedural fragmentation, reveals a pedagogical strength: its relational flexibility. The andragogical and reassuring environment of the CPIA – where the learner often knows the examiners, operates in classrooms structured for small level-based groups – acts as an emotional facilitator (Knowles, 1975). This learner-centredness in the assessment and educational process was widely recognised by the Andalusian colleagues during their return mobility to Italy (April 2022). In terms of transferability, this pedagogical osmosis suggests the thoughtful integration of Andalusia’s elements of formal guarantee (such as objective assessment rubrics and double-blind grading) within the traditional Italian framework of inclusion. This combination confirms that effective evaluation must necessarily balance measurement rigour with careful attention to the cognitive and affective processes of the learner (Serragiotto, 2016).

5. Conclusions

The transnational mobility experience of CPIA 10 of Formia demonstrates how an Erasmus+ project can transcend the boundaries of methodological updating for teachers to transform into a policy-relevant comparative European framework. By comparing the Andalusian educational ecosystem with the Italian territorial reality, this study decoded a crucial nexus: the assessment framework of L2 language certifications is no longer perceived as simple certificates of proficiency, but high-stakes legal “borders” for accessing citizenship rights (Council of Europe, 2020). A dichotomy emerges between the two operational paradigms, which are seemingly antithetical but actually complementary. The Andalusian model guarantees a procedural uniformity and formal equity that the Italian decentralisation struggles to maintain. However, the institutional proximity and flexibility of the CPIAs serve as andragogical resources (Knowles, 1975) for protecting the emotional stability of migrants and lowering their “affective filter”. This mitigates the risk that the rigour of highly standardised exams might exacerbate performance anxiety and translate into an insurmountable barrier.

The ultimate value of this transnational exchange does not lie in the uncritical adoption of a foreign model, but rather in the construction of a virtuous assessment synthesis. The challenge for relevant institutions is to integrate Andalusia’s standardised assessment protocols within the learner-centred and relational framework that characterises the Italian approach. Only by guaranteeing assessment transparency across the national territory while protecting the psychological vulnerabilities of the migrant learner can educational systems be considered truly equitable. In this perspective, the Erasmus+ experience has acted as a catalyst for academic research and classroom innovation, confirming that a genuine European Education Area (European Commission, 2019) takes shape precisely where institutional rigour meets human inclusion, transforming language from a bureaucratic obstacle into an equitable pathway for civic integration and active citizenship.

Notes

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² Quality Italian Language Certification, issuing the CELI, CILS, PLIDA, and CERT.IT exams.

³ The 2025 Andalusian guidelines are used as the most up-to-date regulatory reference.

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