

Non-formal education and the political dimension: The perspective of volunteers who teach Portuguese to adult migrants and refugees in Portugal

Educação não formal e a dimensão política: A perspetiva de voluntários/as que ensinam português a migrantes e refugiados/as adultos/as em Portugal

L'éducation non formelle et la dimension politique: Le point de vue des bénévoles qui enseignent le portugais aux migrants et réfugiés adultes au Portugal

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Abstract

For migrants from countries where Portuguese is not an official language, attending Portuguese as host language classes is required to obtain permanent residence permit, long-term residence status and Portuguese nationality. Certified courses of Portuguese as a host language are offered in some public schools, while non-certified courses have emerged in social and community organisations involved in the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees. These courses go beyond linguistic instruction, encompassing social, cultural and political dimensions (Arendt et al., 2021). They aim to empower learners and support their self-confidence and autonomy in the new society (Cabete, 2010). This study analyses one such non-certified course, examining how host language learning can operate as a political and emancipatory practice, rather than a purely instrumental process, through semi-directed interviews with volunteers teaching Portuguese as a host language in these organisations. It explores their perspectives on the role of language learning in the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees. Findings suggest a relationship between the themes of pedagogy, integration and politics as learning the host language is also understood as being about rights and civic awareness and political awareness, contributing to the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees into the host society.

Keywords: migrants, integration and inclusion, non-formal education, host language, political education

Resumo

Migrantes cujo português não é língua oficial necessitam de frequentar cursos de português como língua de acolhimento para aceder à autorização de residência permanente, estatuto de residente de longa duração ou nacionalidade portuguesa. Para isso, existem cursos certificados de português como língua de acolhimento nas escolas da rede pública. Paralelamente, surgiram cursos não certificados, promovidos por organizações sociais e comunitárias envolvidas na integração e inclusão de pessoas migrantes e refugiadas. Este ensino ultrapassa o plano estritamente linguístico, envolvendo dimensões sociais,

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culturais e políticas (Arendt et al., 2021); deve centrar-se no empoderamento e emancipação dos/as alunos/as, favorecendo o desenvolvimento de autoconfiança e autonomia (Cabete, 2010). Este artigo olha para um desses contextos educativos não formais, examinando como a aprendizagem da língua pode operar como uma prática política e emancipatória, em vez de um mero processo instrumental, através de entrevistas semiestruturadas a voluntários/as que lecionam português como língua de acolhimento nestas organizações. Assim, analisou-se um destes cursos não certificados com o objetivo de compreender a sua perspetiva sobre o papel da língua de acolhimento na integração e inclusão de pessoas migrantes e refugiadas. Os resultados sugerem uma relação entre pedagogia, integração e política, mostrando que a aprendizagem da língua de acolhimento é, também, concetualizada como sendo sobre direitos e consciência cívica e política, contribuindo para a integração e inclusão de migrantes e refugiados/as.

Palavras-chave: migrantes, integração e inclusão, educação não-formal, língua de acolhimento, educação política

Résumé

Pour les migrants originaires de pays où le portugais n'est pas langue officielle, des cours de portugais langue d'accueil sont requis pour l'obtention du permis de séjour permanent, du statut de résident de longue durée ou de la nationalité portugaise. Ces cours certifiés sont proposés dans certaines écoles publiques. Parallèlement, des cours non certifiés ont émergé dans les organisations sociales et communautaires engagées dans l'intégration des migrants et des réfugiés. L'enseignement de la langue d'accueil ne peut pas être uniquement linguistique : il doit englober les dimensions sociales, culturelles et politiques (Arendt et al., 2021), visant l'émancipation des apprenants et le développement de leur confiance et autonomie dans la nouvelle société (Cabete, 2010). Cette étude analyse l'un de ces cours non certifiés, en examinant comment l'apprentissage de la langue d'accueil peut fonctionner comme une pratique politique et émancipatrice, plutôt que comme un processus purement instrumental, à partir d'entretiens semi-directifs menés auprès de bénévoles enseignant le portugais comme langue d'accueil dans ces structures. Les résultats révèlent une articulation entre pédagogie, intégration et politique, soulignant que l'apprentissage du portugais est aussi perçu comme un vecteur d'accès aux droits, à la conscience civique et politique. Ainsi, ces espaces d'apprentissage contribuent activement à l'intégration des migrants et des réfugiés.

Mots-clés: migrants, intégration et inclusion, éducation non formelle, langue d'accueil, éducation politique

Introduction

Migration and linguistic diversity are at the heart of current European debates on social inclusion and citizenship. It all started with the revised European Social Charter (Council of Europe, 1996), which declared the right to learn the official language of the country one is migrating to. In recent years, the link between language proficiency and integration has been reinforced by the European Union through different plans and agendas, such as the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Protecting the Rights of Migrant, Refugee and Asylum-seeking Women and Girls (Council of Europe, 2022) or the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (European Commission, 2021–2027). These policies have been promoting the learning and acquisition of the host language as a prerequisite for employment, access to residence, or citizenship. However, language plays a central role in the power dynamics of society, influencing one's ability to access rights, navigate institutions and actively participate in society (Bourdieu, 1991). As such, learning the host language is not only a personal endeavour but also a political and social act, shaping migrants' integration and inclusion trajectories and potentially fostering a sense of belonging.

In this context, this article examines how host language learning can operate as a political and emancipatory practice, rather than a purely instrumental process. Specifically, it explores the potential of non-formal education spaces to foster migrants' and refugees' autonomy, agency and participation in the

host society. We draw on an empirical study conducted in northern Portugal with a political organisation that offers free Portuguese language courses for immigrants, linking language education to the exercise of rights. This article is organised in different sections, starting with a theoretical and conceptual contextualisation of the major themes explored here, followed by a theoretical description of a non-formal educational context of host language teaching and learning, and an outline of a specific community organisation; then, we describe the data collection methods and we explore the results; finally, we discuss the key topics that emerged in the results sections and we finish with the conclusion.

Theoretical and conceptual contextualisation

Migrant, immigrant, and refugee are different concepts that have evolved and now describe different types of people who, for some reason, have left their countries of origin. According to the *Glossary on Migration*, provided by the International Organization for Migration (Sironi et al., 2019), a migrant is someone who moves across an (inter)national border voluntarily, for a variety of reasons; an immigrant is the one entering a different country than that of his/her origin, from the perspective of the country of arrival; lastly, a refugee is the one forced to flee their country of origin due to persecution, conflict, or violence.

The host language involves the connection not only with the linguistic reality of that country, but also with social, political, economic and cultural realities, different from the ones once known (Grosso, 2007; Kuhlmann, 2016; Martins, 2022; Mendes, 2020). Consequently, its proficiency can be a tool that changes social and professional conditions and allows for the identity redefinition (Grosso, 2010), and to the symbolic act of choosing an identity in a new place (Mogli & Papadopoulou, 2018). In this context, the need to communicate with others, which is inherent to human beings (A. L. Oliveira et al., 2007), is also at the root of the desire and motivation to learn the host language, ultimately promoting not only individual autonomy in the host society, but also social interaction and social cohesion between all (Ançã, 2008).

During the settlement of newcomers in the host community, the host language is present in both integration and inclusion processes, connecting the host society and newcomers. Access to the host language is important to the development of migrants and refugees' autonomy and agency (Martins, 2022) and contributes to empowering the individual who learns (Kuhlmann, 2016; Miranda & Fernandes, 2022), unlocking access to further integration and inclusion dimensions. Although different, these two bidirectional processes – integration and inclusion – complement each other (Decmann, 2021; Narli & Özaşçılar, 2020): the integration process responds to the immediate needs migrants and refugees (might) have, such as housing, healthcare, or employment (Ager & Strang, 2008); while inclusion entails a sense of belonging development, participation, self-confidence and autonomy in the host society (Narli & Özaşçılar, 2020; O'Reilly, 2005; Silver, 2015). So, the host language is important for both, not only facilitating access to immediate integration needs, but also functioning as a precondition for further participation in the host society (Krumm & Plutzar, 2008; Piliásova, 2007). Learning the host language, therefore, should go beyond strictly linguistic aspects and promote the expansion of sub-skills related to individual rights in the personal,

professional, social and cultural spheres (Grosso, 2007).

In Portugal, host language learning happens in different ways and in different places. In formal educational contexts, classes for foreign adults are offered in public schools, by the Institute for Employment and Professional Training (IEFP) and by vocational training centres (Centros Qualifica) and follow the Portuguese Host Language (Português Língua de Acolhimento – PLA) defined reference framework. This curriculum certifies level A and level B, according to the National Qualifications Catalogue, which corresponds to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) language levels. Attending Portuguese language classes is not mandatory, unless one wishes to apply for a permanent residence permit, long-term residence status, or Portuguese nationality. The Portuguese Law No. 37/81, from October 3rd, defines the need to know the Portuguese language in these circumstances. There have been several programs related to teaching Portuguese to foreigners in Portugal, and, more recently, the introduction of the PLA program was a step in the right direction in terms of teaching a language that is also a host language.

The informal educational contexts can arise in daily interactions and activities during migrants' and refugees' stay in Portugal, socialising them to the host language and its use, and turning the learning process particularly interactive (Callanan et al., 2011). The social contacts, present in every educational context, but particularly relevant in informal contexts, are also a way of learning the language through a socialisation process (Lima et al., 2019). Lastly, the non-formal educational contexts are not certified, yet they are intentionally educational efforts, and can take place in social organisations that support migrants and refugees. The following section explores these educational contexts in further detail.

The non-formal educational context of host language teaching and learning

The non-formal educational contexts, particularly when facilitated by social community and activist organisations, play a unique role in language learning, as they often involve personal and daily experiences as well as socio-political awareness of society and its institutions, aiming at collective identity construction (Lima et al., 2019). This dimension is particularly relevant since migrants and refugees often face systemic barriers to integration and inclusion.

A guide to teaching Portuguese as a host language in a non-formal educational context has been available since 2016 to “propose technical guidelines for the organisation of non-formal educational actions aimed at third-country nationals” (Caels, 2016, p. 5). This guide is divided into two parts: first, there are general considerations about this context, and then, there is a description of three aspects of non-formal educational contexts that can be carried out in relation to the Portuguese host language teaching, which are literacy actions, Portuguese initiation courses and Portuguese language courses aimed at final certification.

The guide places non-formal educational contexts within a transformation that is not only personal but also collective, aligning with Paulo Freire's (1968/2018) idea that education should be a liberating practice rather than a mere transmission of content. Thus, rather than focusing only on language proficiency,

Portuguese as a host language teaching should be adapted to the learners' individual situations, fostering inclusion and encouraging critical engagement with their new social environment. This should also be the case in formal education contexts, but our own research shows that teachers often rely on traditional school-based practices in their host language classes, replicating pedagogical models typically used with children and young people. Furthermore, their approach tends to follow an assimilationist model of acculturation, which hinders the development of a shared space for dialogue, mutual exchange, integration and inclusion (Queirós et al., 2025). In this perspective, a pedagogical approach centred on the learner's needs, interests and goals becomes an essential emancipatory tool, allowing learners to actively shape their journey (Freire, 1968/2018; Kane, 2001).

Moreover, as hooks (1994) emphasises in her description of *engaged pedagogy*, educational spaces must be inclusive and affirmative, recognising learners' cultural and linguistic identities. This aligns with the need for a holistic, multicultural and plurilingual approach that enhances interaction and participation while valuing the learner's unique heritage and experience (Pinho & Ançã, 2022). By incorporating such perspectives, these educational contexts become a site of empowerment, where language learning goes beyond communication and becomes a means of self-expression and agency (Esser, 2006; Kuhlmann, 2016). This perspective aligns with critical educational approaches that view language learning as an emancipatory practice rather than a mere skill. In this sense, non-formal education can draw from the principles of popular education, which emphasise collective knowledge-building, dialogue, and social transformation (Freire, 1968/2018).

This study focuses on a political organisation that recently started to offer non-certified free Portuguese language courses for immigrants working and living in a city in the north of Portugal. These aspects will be further explored in the analysis of the organisation's work and its impact on participants' agency and integration.

The organisation

This organisation is dedicated to defending the right to housing and decided to start a project of Portuguese classes for immigrants, also to help these groups in their struggle to find adequate housing, addressing situations of possible abuse of their vulnerable situation as migrants, especially associated with the lack of understanding and mastery of the Portuguese language. These classes – organised and taught by members of the organisation – take place once a week, for two hours, and do not require pre-registration nor demand a regularised status in the host country. All teaching materials are created from scratch by the volunteers, with three volunteers from the organisation always present in the classes: two who teach and one who will be teaching the following class. These groups' purpose is to help the volunteers know what was discussed and how much of the material was covered in the previous class. The number of students participating in these classes varies, as they aren't compulsory; also, there are always new students attending classes for the first time. Besides the classes, there aren't many activities organised by the organisation dedicated especially to migrants and refugees.

The initiative began with actions to approach the immigrant community, particularly non-Portuguese-

speaking immigrants, by leaving leaflets in public spaces, such as mosques or convenience stores. During classes, the volunteers gave the students a small booklet containing information and basic notions about the Portuguese language (e.g., numbers, occupations, some verbs, rules on gender, and the singular and plural of words) as well as the organisation's own action in its fight for the right to housing and the right to the city.

This initiative is particularly significant as it merges language education with political education and engagement, aiming not only to teach Portuguese but also to empower migrants in their struggle for housing rights and social inclusion. By analysing this initiative, we will explore the intersections between language learning, political agency, and the construction of inclusion networks.

Methods

In this study, we used a qualitative method of data collection through semi-structured interviews with three volunteers of the organisation who were involved in teaching Portuguese host language classes (two men and one woman), from November 2024 to January 2025. The volunteers we talked to were the ones responsible for teaching the Portuguese language to foreigners. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, and this data collection method allowed us to get to know and understand the experience of the subjects we were talking to (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and, through this interaction, to give meaning and make sense of their individual experiences (King & Horrocks, 2010). We guaranteed the ethical care of anonymity and confidentiality of participants and of the information they shared with us, and we also read an informed consent to all participants so they would be aware of the research and its goals, and the uses of the collected data. Two of the interviews occurred on-site, and the third occurred online. They were audio-recorded for later transcription and content analysis. The collected data is part of broader research.

Our aim was to understand the volunteers' perspective about the role of the host language, of learning it and commanding it, on migrants and refugees' integration and inclusion processes in the host society. We also talked about their own experience as volunteers teaching Portuguese to foreigners, the difficulties they may have felt or still feel, host language classes, sense of belonging and human rights. Throughout the excerpts, the participants mentioned *migrants*, referring to migrants, refugees, or immigrants, regardless of their legal status, in order to highlight shared experiences of displacement and belonging.

The analysis was carried out inductively, through the careful search of emerging categories and possible relationships between them. We drew on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, combining insights from migration studies, sociolinguistics, critical pedagogy, and political theory. All the data underwent a careful and thorough analytical process that went through different steps: first, we began by transcribing the interviews, and then we cautiously read all the interviews and started to think about what the meanings we could find there; after that, we codified them and categorised them using NVivo, and this interpretation produced six categories formed by thirteen subcategories, describing the volunteers' experience: *hosting* (which describes the relationship between the students, the community organisation and the host society),

classes (addresses the pedagogical orientation and learning relevance), *integration and inclusion* (focuses on community engagement and social networks), *host language* (examines the participants' perspective on students' engagement with the host language, the learning process, challenges and achievements, and its role in supporting social participation and inclusion), and *relationship with difference* (refers to the dialogue and attitude towards diversity).

The following section presents the results, drawing on all the previously identified categories. Section 1 (*Purpose*) focuses primarily on data related to the category *Classes*. Section 2 (*Difficulties*) addresses both *the Classes and the Volunteers' Experience*. Section 3 (*Classes' Impact and Focus*) examines *Classes* alongside the *Host Language*. Section 4 (*Relationship with the host community*) centres on *Integration and Inclusion*, while Section 5 (*Sense of Belonging, Integration and Inclusion*) brings together data from *Integration and Inclusion* and *Host Language*. Finally, Section 6 (*Human Rights*) discusses the category *Relationship with Difference*.

Results

The interviews provided us with data to explain and contextualise the singularity of this non-formal educational context. Its focus on challenging and reinterpreting the everyday experiences of migrants in the host society situated their educational action in the promotion and development of the political involvement of language learners (Lima et al., 2019; Sorgen, 2015), while having language proficiency as a starting point. Our results point to an intersection between host language learning, participation and recognition of rights. The volunteers demonstrated a strong commitment to the inclusion process for their students, particularly in terms of their empowerment. It is also possible to acknowledge a tension between pedagogical and political dimensions in the volunteers' work, as teaching Portuguese was perceived not only as a developing communicative competence but also as an enabler to access services, to claim rights, and engage in civic and political life. Thus, this section is divided into six parts, each connected to a different element within the categories of analysis.

1) Purpose

The three members highlighted similar main objectives of these language classes: to develop communication through boosting self-confidence.

We want to make sure (...) Portuguese is not a problem in communication. (V1)

In addition to being a space for learning, this is a space for practising communication. (V2)

This communicative goal is, in turn, connected to supporting the students' autonomy development. The course is, above all else, a tool for social and political integration and inclusion, which helps migrants and refugees to understand what their resettlement in Portugal is built on and to overcome problems that can arise from not mastering the Portuguese language and their social and political position as migrants.

This is a useful space because people can come and, in addition to linguistic aspects, they can ask us questions

about other things (...), and that is something we want from this space: that it contributes to solving problems that immigrants find difficult to overcome, also because they can't communicate in Portuguese. (V2)

2) Difficulties

Regarding difficulties, the participants referred to their lack of experience and training in language teaching as the cause of the problems they encountered when teaching the Portuguese language.

The most significant difficulties are reduced due to the fact that no one here is a language teacher nor a Portuguese language teacher. So, the biggest difficulty was understanding the approach we could use, having that in mind. I think the biggest difficulty is learning how to do it. (V2)

They mention struggling in preparing the classes (also due to the lack of materials and references), the dynamics of the class itself and in overcoming linguistic barriers, as not all the students have sufficient command of English, French or Spanish.

There are a lot of difficulties. There are difficulties in preparing the classes, in the class itself; for instance, one of the main aspects that was more difficult than I thought was the dynamics of the class itself. (V1)

The biggest collective and individual difficulty is the lack of references. References, experiences, training in non-school environments. (V3)

The participants also mentioned another challenging aspect, which in their view carries advantages and disadvantages: free course attendance. As there aren't any course admission rules or limits on the number of students, this facilitates access. At the same time, it also poses some challenges for organising classes, as V3 recognised: "The number of participants is sometimes higher or lower; sometimes, the people in the next class are not the same as those who were in the previous class..." (V3)

3) Classes' impact and focus

The participants believe the classes and the learning space positively impact these students' lives, as the classes are also a space to better understand and deal with bureaucratic issues and provide social and political support, going beyond linguistic aspects. These classes cover topics such as housing, work and the regularisation of immigrants, and they always connect to the rights of each person.

People always need to clarify something, whether to get an identification number for the Portuguese public health system or a residence permit. (V2)

We teach tools to access specific contexts like to understand job or housing contracts, we talk about what it means to be an immigrant in Portugal, we talk about the difficulties, the access to regularisation and the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum. (V3)

4) Relationship with the host community

When asked about the relationship between the students and the host community, the participants described students as having limited interaction with the native population. Their perception is that students tend to stay close to their own community or group due to socioeconomic barriers that arise, and to the

lack of active inclusion policies. This leads to social segregation and marginalisation.

We know from talking with students that the exchange is meagre, poor. So, if outside the workplace and the home (...) people rarely have opportunities to speak in Portuguese with other people (...), people are left apart because of the kind of situation they find themselves in – quite excluded, therefore closed off from their own community, when there is a community. This has to do not only with some concept of exclusion but also with social segregation. So, there are not, necessarily, spaces for exchange between the native and immigrant populations. A real effort at integration and inclusion depends on the socio-economic structure, and on a real commitment to do so. More than economic, this commitment is also political, and it is impossible to say the onus is on the other side. (V2)

The course and now our organisation's assemblies – not as a space for learning, but as an open space, precisely for participation and integration – are important spaces because they will probably also be the only people with whom the students speak Portuguese. (V3)

5) Sense of belonging, integration and inclusion

The participants explained how host language proficiency is essential for the development of migrants' sense of belonging, as it facilitates fundamental interactions, understanding the local culture, and gaining access to essential public services.

Any activity involving more than one person can develop a sense of belonging. (...) From the moment the students see that they are not the only ones learning the language, that other people have migrated and now want to learn the language, they want to move around and learn more about how things work here in their host country, and that's where I think this idea of belonging is created. I mean, the community is created when there are shared feelings and common values. (V1)

Without speaking the language or, at least, understanding it, the ability to daily interact with people diminishes, disappears. (...) Suppose someone doesn't understand what is being said to them. In that case, they cannot integrate nor feel included and, here in Portugal, we know that public services are not ready to speak another language besides Portuguese. Many of these migrants and refugees don't speak English, nor do they have to. (...) So, for me, at the first level of basic survival, language is essential. (V3)

However, one of the participants mentioned how other aspects were connected to the linguistic dimension in the development of the sense of belonging, those being equally fundamental.

Without any doubt, to be able to communicate in the native language of the country where you are an immigrant in and develop a sense of belonging is something important. You need to have some ability to speak and have a simple conversation. But you must recognise that integration and sense of belonging go far beyond language and linguistic aspects. It's no use to know how to speak perfectly if you don't have access to the labour market or housing; so, integration is something bigger to which language is particularly relevant. (V2)

6) Human rights

When asked about whether there is a connection between host language learning and human rights, the participants described the host language not as something that should be a human right, but as an essential layer that can facilitate access to other fundamental rights, such as access to housing and access to work.

As we are an organisation for the right to housing, that fights for access to housing and is completely linked to

many other issues, recognising itself as a right that is only possible when all the other rights are associated, (...) for us, it is inseparable from talking about the Portuguese language without talking about all this. (V3)

It is a human right to be integrated and to be well integrated if we decided to work in a country different from our own country of origin, right? To speak the language and having someone who can teach us has implications. I wouldn't say that it is a human right, but it is, definitely, related to human rights. Because if we don't know how to speak the language, maybe we can't access to many other rights that are human rights, such as the right to housing. (V1)

In this regard, what should be considered a right is their free access to host language classes. The participants explained that one shouldn't have to pay for host language classes to ensure integration and inclusion in the host country. Also, the inflexibility of the labour market prevents many immigrants from accessing language courses.

I think it should be a human right to have access to the language and not need to be able to pay for a course to ensure integration and inclusion in the host country. To the extent that this is a determining factor and having flexible working hours to access a language course, I think it conflicts with a conception of access to language as a human right. That's why it's not really a human right. Do I think it should be? Yes, I think it should. (V2)

Discussion

In this section, we will explore the results presented above to further comprehend the volunteers' perspective about the role of the host language, of learning and commanding it in migrants' and refugees' integration and inclusion processes in the host society. The results show a clear interconnection between the themes of pedagogy, integration and inclusion and politics, suggesting that there is an intersection between host language (its learning and teaching) and learners' empowerment through the development of not only civic but also political awareness and action.

Our participants began by outlining the main goal of the classes: to develop communication skills in the host language, in a way that the participants can fully engage with the host society. Despite their recognised difficulties and challenges, these classes embrace a broader pedagogical vision, one that fosters autonomy, self-confidence and critical awareness among students. As demonstrated earlier, language is a public and political tool that plays a crucial role in promoting the establishment of migrants and refugees in the society hosting them (Arendt et al., 2021). Learning the host language isn't about mastering grammar rules or linguistic structures; rather, it is about equipping learners to navigate in the host society and to be full members of it (Esser, 2006; Kuhlmann, 2016).

Building on this perspective, language learning cannot be a passive process, it needs to become an act of empowerment (Cabete, 2010; Kuhlmann, 2016). By acquiring the host language, learners do not simply gain access to communication; they reclaim agency over their own narratives and participation in the host society (Norton, 2013). As Freire (1968/2018) emphasises, education should be a practice of freedom – one that enables individuals to critically engage with their environment, rather than merely adapt to it. This

empowerment became evident in the way learning experiences were actively shaped by students who often brought their own pressing concerns – such as bureaucratic procedures, labour rights and housing policies – into the classroom. Beacco et al. (2014) explain how important it is to have the classes tailored to the students and their real needs; A. M. Oliveira (2010) notes the social pressure surrounding this learning process, making it essential to address real communicative situations in the classroom. In these classes, there is an environment of critical dialogue and co-construction of meaning and knowledge, and Freire (1968/2018) mentions precisely this idea of dialogue as a fundamental element of education in his counterargument to the traditional *banking model of education*.

Furthermore, as some classes discussed personal rights and housing or working contracts, the interactions between volunteers and learners were deeply connected to civic and political awareness. By addressing these personal issues and real-life challenges, host language classes are also equipping students with diverse knowledge that enables access to citizenship, developing sense of belonging (Bloemraad, 2006; Munz, 2017) and awareness of social rights (Jurado, 2008), which are deeply intertwined with identity processes of reconstruction (Gilmartin, 2008). Therefore, effective learning environments must recognise students' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, and more than instructive, these environments must be transformative and inclusive (hooks, 1994).

As we can see, host language learning plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to connect with other people, to access essential dimensions and to navigate in everyday life. However, the findings also suggest a pattern of social segregation that hinders genuine exchange between native and immigrant populations: volunteers mentioned that interactions outside the workplace and home are limited, leaving migrants and refugees with few opportunities to use and practice the host language in natural social settings. This reinforces a cycle of exclusion, where these groups remain confined to their own communities. Nawyn et al. (2012) explain how the lack of competence in the host language fosters isolation, but beyond that, the absence of meaningful spaces for contact and social interactions exacerbates segregation and maintains divisions between migrants and refugees and native populations. Rather than being an issue of individual effort, integration and inclusion are deeply tied not only to structural factors but also to social interactions and inclusive public spaces and policies that actively foster these interactions (Berry, 2012; Castles et al., 2002; Hannah, 2008; Narli & Özaşçılar, 2020; Pesquero, 1995; Silver, 2015).

Social interactions are at the heart of the relationship between host language and belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008; Lambert et al., 2013; Strang & Quinn, 2019). Therefore, they influence the depth of integration and inclusion by shaping how migrants and refugees perceive their place in society. The participants mentioned this issue by referring to the closeness and development of the sense of belonging they observed in the students through the students' recognition of shared experiences, common values and the same aspirations and challenges they share. Yuval-Davis (2006) describes this when explaining that belonging is also about social relations and collective identification, and Bloemraad (2006) emphasises that belonging is cultivated through participation in social networks, civic engagement and access to institutional spaces. Without language proficiency, daily interactions become limited, reducing opportunities for meaningful

engagement (Hannah, 2008; Sorgen, 2015) and, unfortunately, in Portugal, as one participant noted, the public services are often not equipped to communicate in other languages, so not understanding the host language further limits integration and inclusion in this case.

In this context, as an attempt to make up for this lack of interactions, and as the participants mentioned, social and community organisations emerge as crucial spaces for interactions to happen and for integration, inclusion and participation to develop. Beyond language classes, these assemblies and other collective spaces within this organisation provide some rare and valuable opportunities for students to engage in Portuguese, even though they aren't on equal terms with the native speakers. Thus, these spaces function not merely as linguistic environments but as platforms of social interaction, solidarity and civic engagement (C. Oliveira & Gomes, 2014). They counteract the isolation many migrants and refugees may experience by creating networks of mutual support and fostering the role of social connections in successful integration and inclusion, cultivating a sense of belonging (Bloemraad, 2006; Jardim & Silva, 2019; Rocha-Trindade, 2010). In this sense, the host language classes, offered by this organisation, in addition to making room for participation and transformation through education, function as a counter-hegemonic space that resists exclusionary policies.

As affirmed by one of the participants, to develop a sense of belonging also requires access to key resources such as the labour market or housing. Public policies are therefore central in assuring equitable access to fundamental rights. This is also at the root of the sense of belonging. As Vink (2017) argues, integration and inclusion also entail the provision of necessary resources and opportunities for any person to fully participate in the host society. For this organisation, it is clear that this includes ensuring access to the labour market, housing and social services, but also countering segregation and discrimination, and providing a shared civic and political space they see as crucial for building a sense of belonging and for fostering well-being.

The host language is, in this equation, a determining factor. Watts and Halkovic (2022) explain how education should be a space of social and political transformation, emancipation, and active participation, challenging exclusionary structures and promoting social justice. So, in this context, host language learning is a political process of reclaiming rights and exercising citizenship. The concept of *public pedagogy* (2004), developed by Henry Giroux, similarly resonates with this idea by affirming that education should empower learners to challenge structural inequalities, since learning is not a neutral act but a profoundly political one (Freire, 1968/2018). In this sense, host language education extends beyond linguistic acquisition by cultivating social transformation, fostering critical awareness and enabling individuals to navigate and contest the power structures that shape their lives (Arendt et al., 2021; Esser, 2006; Grosso, 2010; Kuhlmann, 2016). The host language education this organisation seeks to provide clearly aligns with these pedagogical views, enacting them, even in the struggles they recognise.

This echoes the principles of popular education, which emphasise the collective and transformative nature of learning. Popular education can be understood as a pedagogical approach that poses education as a process of consciousness-raising and collective empowerment, based on the experiences of those

participating in the learning process (Freire, 1968/2018; Kane, 2001). As articulated by Freire, this pedagogical approach challenges traditional hierarchical models by fostering a participatory and dialogical approach where there is a political commitment to overcome injustice and oppression (Kane, 2001). Furthermore, Bourdieu's (1991) notion of language as symbolic power, influencing access to resources, opportunities and social mobility, is important here. As such, language education is not just about linguistic acquisition but about democratising access to knowledge and fostering social participation. In the context of host language learning and teaching, this means recognising migrants and refugees as active agents in their own learning process, encouraged to reflect on their social realities, question power structures and use language as a tool for social and political transformation. This approach ensures that education is not merely a means of adaptation but a vehicle for emancipation, reinforcing the idea that linguistic competence is linked to broader struggles for social justice and equal rights (Watts & Halkovic, 2022). When inaccessible, due to economic barriers, rigid institutional policies or lack of state investment, it reproduces exclusion rather than fostering integration and inclusion, as results illustrate. Ensuring a culture of linguistic agency and participation cannot be a privilege; instead, it must be recognised as a (fundamental) right, linked to a broader process of inclusion and social justice.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the experiences of three volunteers working in a political organisation focused on the right to housing, which also provided Portuguese language classes to adult migrants and refugees in a city in northern Portugal. Host language teaching, in this non-formal educational context, functioned not merely as a tool for linguistic acquisition but as a multidimensional process intertwining pedagogy, inclusion, and political empowerment. The participants' engagement with the host language fostered communicative competence, self-confidence, autonomy, and a heightened awareness of social and political rights, illustrating the transformative potential of language education beyond conventional classroom objectives. These findings support theoretical perspectives that conceive language as a social and political resource (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton, 2013) and align with Freire's (1968/2018) view of education as a liberatory practice. By connecting language learning with broader social issues – such as housing rights or civic participation – the studied initiative exemplifies how non-formal education can operate as a site of empowerment, enabling migrants and refugees to navigate structural inequalities and claim their rights. In this sense, host language education becomes both a practice of agency and a form of resistance against exclusionary structures, demonstrating its relevance for the democratisation of access to citizenship. This study, therefore, extends the existing literature on host language education by unfolding its potential as a form of popular education and civic and political practice. While previous research has primarily looked at host language learning as a step of the integration process, mentioning employability (Bache, 2020; Lochmann et al, 2019; Mogli & Papadopoulou, 2018) or linguistic competence (Arendt et al., 2021; Esser,

2006) – which are undeniable –, this research highlights its political and relational dimensions, showing how non-formal educational contexts are crucial spaces that mediate institutional expectations and the learners' lived experience that place host language learning as a dialogic, situated and transformative social practice. Conceptually, it links host language education and popular education, proposing a framework that shifts the focus from language as a competence to language as a co-constructed practice.

Other educational challenges remain, as results also illustrate. These spaces are hard to organise, to facilitate and to make work. The challenge lies in integrating pedagogical approaches with knowledge specific to language teaching, without falling into the reproduction of traditional school models. The tension between fostering meaningful language learning and resisting the pressures of schoolification often makes it difficult to build truly transformative educational spaces. The inability to conceive language education as autonomous but politically engaged constrains its potential for critical and emancipatory action. These tensions underscore the complexity of designing educational spaces that are both linguistically effective and politically meaningful. The findings also carry broader implications for research and policy, as they suggest that language learning policies should recognise linguistic competence as a civic right, not merely a technical skill, and that fostering inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive pedagogical approaches is crucial for promoting social cohesion. Overall, this study theorises that non-formal host language education constitutes a nexus of linguistic, social, and political dimensions, emphasising that language learning is inseparable from processes of empowerment, inclusion, and citizenship – an approach that is essential for building more equitable societies that assure full participation and agency.

Regarding limitations, this study presents several aspects. The research relied on a small number of interviews, focusing solely on the volunteers' perspectives, which limits the findings. The focus on a single organisational context is also limiting, as it may not capture the diversity of non-formal language education practices across different regions or types of organisations. However, these limitations point to several ways of future research, such as the hypotheses of expanding the sample to include more volunteers from different community organisations or the learners themselves. By doing so, it would be possible to look not only at the existence of structural factors influencing the effectiveness of non-formal host language education, but also to describe a more comprehensive understanding of the educational and social impact of host language teaching and learning.

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