

The Language Barrier Addressed: A Major Problem Among Eritrean and Syrian Refugees

*Examining the role of the language barrier in the integration policies in the
Netherlands according to Eritrean and Syrian refugees*

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Preface

During my gap year, I wanted to explore my interests and do something for society. However, in my environment, ‘doing something for society’ is quite a common expression for people who do not really know what they want to do. And to be honest, that’s really how I felt after I finished my bachelor’s degree. After four years of hard work, I finally got my degree in psychology. However, I knew that I didn’t want to become a psychologist. So, I had to ask myself what I really wanted to do. One day, I came in contact with someone who was a volunteer at ‘Vluchtelingenwerk’. She told me that they were looking for volunteers and she thought the work would suit me well. And so, it happened. I did this volunteer work for a year with great pleasure, and this is exactly where my interest started for the integration process of refugees and, in particular, the role of the Dutch society in their integration.

Before you lies my thesis “*The language barrier addresses: A major problem among Eritrean and Syrian refugees*’. It was written to fulfill the graduation requirements of the master ‘Victimology and Criminal Justice’ at Tilburg University. For my research, I interviewed 5 Eritreans and 4 Syrian refugees about their experiences with the integration process in the Netherlands and the role of the language barrier in it. Although (the lack of) these interviews have left me with sleepless nights, I can say that they really added value to my research.

Of course, I would like to thank a number of people who played an important role during the writing process. First, I would like to thank my supervisor Maria Shaidrova. She provided me with the right amount of feedback, support and understanding that I needed during this process. Thank you for putting up with me and my stressful thoughts. In addition, I would like to thank all participants, without them this thesis wouldn’t have been a full-fledged thesis. They have given me many new and interesting insights. However, it was difficult to find Eritrean and Syrian refugees who were willing to cooperate in my research due to the Coronavirus. So, I would like to thank my colleague Jolanda and my friends Jill, Juliet and Manon for bringing me in contact with Eritrean and Syrian refugees who were willing to participate. A special thanks to Astrid, for introducing me to two of her closest Syrian friends. Furthermore, she provided me with a lot of (background) information about the integration process in the Netherlands. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, boyfriend and friends for their never-ending support and their believe in me, even when I didn’t have the belief myself.

It was a long ride, but I finally made it!

Maxime Korsten, June 2020

Abstract

This thesis investigates to what extent social integration policies in the Netherlands successfully address the language barrier faced by Eritrean and Syrian refugees. In order to answer this question, existing literature regarding integration, the language barrier and factors influencing second language learning is examined. In addition, the Civic Integration Act 2013 (hereafter Wi2013) has been analyzed and it has been examined how this Act is applied in practice. Subsequently, qualitative research was conducted, in which 5 Eritrean and 4 Syrian refugees were interviewed. Existing literature suggests that age, motivation, personality and interaction with the language environment play an important role in second language learning. The qualitative research is consistent with the existing literature and shows that all four factors play a role in learning a second language. However, interaction with the language environment is mentioned as the most important factor by all Eritrean and Syrian refugees. In addition, the qualitative data shows that Eritrean and Syrian refugees are struggling with the language barrier. The main issues here is that the information provision is in Dutch, too formal, and inadequate. Due to the language barrier, they cannot participate in society, while that was precisely one of the aims of Wi2013; to participate in society as soon as possible. So, both Eritrean and Syrian refugees believe that the current Dutch integration policies leave much to be desired regarding the language barrier.

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List of abbreviations

ARK	Algemene Rekenkamer (<i>Court of Audit</i>)
AZC	Azielzoekerscentrum (<i>asylum seekers' centre</i>)
CBS	Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek (<i>Statistics Netherlands</i>)
COA	Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (<i>Central Agency for the reception of Asylum Seekers</i>)
CPB	Centraal Planbureau (<i>Central Planning Office</i>)
DUO	Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs (<i>Education Implementation Service</i>)
IND	Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (<i>Immigration and Naturalisation Service</i>)
KIS	Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving (<i>Knowledge platform Integration & Society</i>)
SCP	Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (<i>Social and Cultural Planning Agency</i>)
SER	Sociaal-Economische Raad (<i>Social and Economic Council</i>)
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context of the research

The last decennia, no one failed to notice that the influx of refugees has experienced a tremendous growth across the world. This growth started after the end of the Cold War and, since the Second World War, reached its peak in 2015 and 2016 (European Commission, 2019). Castles, de Haas and Miller (2014) state that we live in the *age of migration*. People are always moving. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 70.8 million people were forced to flee worldwide, whereof 25.9 million refugees (UNHCR, 2019). During its peak in 2015 and 2016, 1.2 million people did ask for asylum in Europe (Vluchtelingenwerk, 2018). Compared to 350.000 in 2012, the number has increased substantially in just a few years (Bakker, Dagevos & Engbersen, 2017). The Netherlands is no exception in this matter. There has been an enormous increase in the number of asylum applications here as well, from 13.170 in 2012 to its peak of 58.880 in 2015 (Vluchtelingenwerk, 2019). In the Netherlands, the two largest groups behind this increase are Eritreans and Syrians. According to Vluchtelingenwerk (2019), Syrians accounted for 35% of all asylum applications in 2017, meanwhile Eritreans represented 17%. Given the circumstances, it is no surprise that they form the two largest groups. Since 2011, Syria has been the center of an unending war, which led many people to fear for their safety. More than 5 million Syrians have fled the country and another 6 million have been displaced within the country (UNHCR, 2020). Eritrea, on the other hand, has one of the most oppressive regimes and has received much international criticism regarding human rights since its independence in 1993. There is widespread torture, forced labor is applied and people who criticize the government are imprisoned under bad conditions (Nidos, 2018). According to UNHCR (2018), half a million Eritreans have fled their country already to seek protection somewhere else.

All refugees who end up in the Netherlands apply for asylum here. According to Vluchtelingenwerk (2019), 93% of all asylum applications of Eritrean and Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are honored. Once an asylum application has been approved, a refugee is expected to integrate. In the Netherlands, refugees are officially integrated when they have successfully completed an integration exam at A2 level¹ or a state exam at B1 or B2 level²

¹ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) made an international guide for describing language ability. They have made a scale from A1 (basic) to C2 (proficient). A2 level implies that someone is a basic user.

² B1 and B2 level indicate that someone is an independent user.

within 3 years. Since 2013, refugees have to deal with the amended Civic Integration Act. In this Act, refugees and other groups of migrants who have to integrate, are included under the same integration and its policy. The Dutch government sees it as a norm to become self-reliant and to participate in society as quickly as possible (Rijksoverheid, 2018). As a result of this Act, refugees are responsible for their own integration. For example, they have to find a language school themselves. So, refugees must learn Dutch and understand how the Dutch society works. However, they do not speak the language. This obstacle makes it difficult for them to arrange important practical matters without the help of others, like actually finding a language school or getting a loan for it. So, language is seen as an important key to fulfill the integration process successfully. However, refugees often face the problem of the language barrier. This is an obstacle in communication caused by the difference in language. The language barrier is a common problem and has been cited as a major stumbling block in integration in many studies (Siu, O., & Philips, D. 2002; MacFarlane, et al. 2008; Watkins, et al. 2012). As they do not speak the Dutch language, refugees often do not (properly) understand cultural and social norms, which could lead to social isolation (Ramos & Karl, 2016). Research shows that eventually, as a result of this social isolation, refugees can become depressed as well (Furler et al. 2010). In addition, the language barrier often ensures postponement of the necessary health care through miscommunication (Morris et al. 2009). It can, therefore, be concluded that the language is a central factor in social interaction and full participation (Ager & Strang, 2008; Tran, 2010). Furthermore, research has shown that language plays a key role in their position on the labor market as well (van Tubergen, 2010). According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS, 2020), 32% of have not passed their integration exam, despite the fact that their term has expired. Therefore, it is important that refugees learn the language as soon as possible to overcome the language barrier and to be able to participate in society.

1.2 Aim of the thesis

Since the Civic Integration Act of 2013, refugees are responsible for their own integration. As explained earlier, there are several reasons as of why it is important for refugees to learn the language as quickly as possible. However, this is not always possible given the current policy. Because of this, this thesis aims to investigate how Eritrean and Syrian refugees experience their (social) integration in the Netherlands and to what extent the language barrier plays a role in their integration. Furthermore, it will be investigated what

kind of role the policies of the Dutch government play. So, in this study, the following research question will be sought to answer:

‘To what extent do social integration policies in the Netherlands successfully address the language barrier faced by Eritrean and Syrian refugees?’

In order to answer this research question as concretely and clearly as possible, a division of three sub-questions has been made:

- What role does language play in the integration process in general?
 - Which factors play a role in learning a second language?
- What does the integration policy look like in the Netherlands (Civic Integration Act 2013)?
 - What are the stated aims of this policy?
 - What role does language play in this policy?
 - What are the effects of the policy on the basis of existing evaluations?
- To what extent do Eritrean and Syrian refugees perceive the language barrier as a problem in their integration process?
 - Is there a difference in learning the Dutch language between Eritrean and Syrian refugees?

1.3 Societal relevance

Integration has been a widely discussed topic for decades now and it still is a high priority on the political agenda of different states. Just like other European countries, the Netherlands has received thousands of refugees in recent years. Furthermore, many of these refugees come from countries where the problems are still at bay, which makes it likely that many of these recognized refugees may remain in the Netherlands. As a result, the focus will shift to integration and participation of these refugees. At the moment, the integration policies in the Netherlands are focused on learning the language and integrating as soon as possible (Rijksoverheid, 2018). These policies show the importance of learning the language, but the question is whether this is the right policy and to what extent the problems encountered by the approach of the policy are acknowledged. In practice, for example, it still leaves much to be desired as refugees are not allowed to work until they have completed the integration exam. As a result, refugees are less likely to come into contact with Dutch people, even though this

contact would ensure that they master the Dutch language faster (Odé & Dagevos, 2017). Furthermore, Dutch contacts could help refugees find their way in the Dutch society (Dagevos & Odé, 2016). Failing this, it makes it difficult for refugees to get into contact with the language, culture and social norms, which actually slows down the integration process (Odé & Dagevos, 2017). As a result, the problem of the language barrier arises. It is, therefore, important to ensure that there is a clear policy regarding language which will work in practice as well. Results from this research could actually highlight both strengths and areas for improvement, which would be beneficial for both the policies and the social aspect of integration.

1.4 Academic relevance

The academic relevance of this thesis can be seen in the fact that there has not been much research done in the Netherlands regarding the language barrier refugees face, especially in combination with the Civic Integration Act. Research of the Social and Economic Council (SER, 2018) shows that many refugees think it is difficult to switch from a period of passive acting regarding their asylum, to an active period of integration, because of the long period of passivity³. However, it is unclear what role the language barrier plays in this matter. In the Netherlands, research regarding the language barrier mainly focuses on its consequences in health care (Bot, 2010; Jacobs, et al. 2018; Pot, et al. 2018). They show that the language barrier often causes a delay in getting the right health care, as doctors and refugees often misunderstand each other. Furthermore, on the basis of these studies, it can be concluded that the language barrier prevents the refugee from expressing him-/herself properly (Bot, 2010; Jacobs, et al. 2018; Pot, et al. 2018). This hinders refugees from making social contacts, which in turn can delay their integration (Odé & Dagevos, 2017). However, they do not investigate directly what the consequences of the language barrier are on the integration process. This study will try to seek an answer to this question.

³ During their time in an AZC, refugees are waiting to obtain a residence permit. They are not allowed to do (voluntary) work and cannot participate in society. All they can do is wait and see. As they cannot do anything regarding their integration process, this is a period of passivity. As soon as refugees have obtained a residence permit, they will start their integration process. From this moment on, refugees have to take action themselves. One of the most important aims of Wi2013 is to strengthen the newcomer's own responsibility. This implies that refugees have to arrange everything themselves, from their language lessons to health insurance, and electricity to taxes. So, they have to be actively involved in their integration.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

This chapter will explain some important concepts that form the foundation for this thesis. First, a brief explanation of the definition of a refugee will be given. In addition, some important integration theories and policies will be mapped out. Subsequently, the phenomenon of the language barrier will be investigated, including its definition, its role in the integration process and which factors might play a role in learning a second language. Then, the current Dutch integration procedure and policies will be discussed in more detail, based on the Civic Integration Act 2013 (hereafter Wi2013). The implementation of this Act in practice will be examined. Furthermore, there will be looked at the adjustments that have been made regarding a new civic integration act, which will be applied from July 2021. Lastly, the current situation in Eritrea and Syria will be clarified briefly.

2.1 Refugees

Nowadays, many words are used to indicate that someone has fled their country, as words like asylum seekers and refugees are used interchangeably. However, this has led to some misconceptions, as these words have a different meaning in the process. So, it is important to distinguish the differences between those terms, as there clearly is a difference. An asylum seeker is someone who seeks protection of another country and has applied for asylum in that country but has not been legally recognized as a refugee yet (UNHCR, n.d.). To be recognized as a refugee, it has to be determined whether a person is considered a refugee under international or national laws. Most of the time, the legal definition of the Refugee Convention of the United Nations (1951) is used to determine whether someone is a refugee, as over 150 countries have ratified this convention (Amnesty, 2019). So, following the refugee definition of the ‘Convention relating to the Status of Refugees’ from the United Nations, a refugee is someone who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (United Nations, 1951, pp.14). This definition explains clearly who a refugee is, and the kind of assistance and rights they should receive from the countries who have signed this document. However, research has shown that there are some critical comments to this definition (Chimni, 1998; Nyers, 2013). According to

research, a distinction is made between political and economic refugees. Nyers (2013), for example, argues that in the current definition, market economies are assumed as natural and nonpolitical, while collectivized, command economies (of communist nations) are unnatural and therefore political. As a result, economic refugees will not be able to apply for asylum under this law. Furthermore, Cooper (1998) explains in her article that environmental refugees are excluded by the UN definition as well. They flee not through persecution that falls into one of the five exlaimed categories, but through environmental deterioration (Cooper, 1998). In the end, however, this definition is used worldwide and includes the refugees related to the research question of this study, so it will apply to this study as well. It is important though to keep these critical notes in mind.

2.2 Integration

Integration refers to a multidimensional process in which migrants are expected to settle down, interact with and adapt to the host society (Pennix & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Migrants become a part of the host society, while retaining their own background. A person or group is integrated into the host society when there is an equal legal status, equal participation in the socio-economic field, knowledge of the language, and when common values, norms and behavioral patterns are respected (Macionis, 2010). An important feature of integration is that it is a two-way process. On the one hand, newcomers are expected to be willing to integrate and accepting the basic values of the host society. On the other hand, the host society must make this integration possible and should help newcomers with facilities to meet their political, social and cultural needs (Macionis, 2010). Subsequently, both groups must recognize the right that each group lives according to its own culture with adjustment where necessary. This way, migrants and the native population grow and participate in the society together. The following definition of integration will be used in this thesis “The process of becoming an accepted part of society” (Pennix & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016, pp. 14). According to Pennix & Garcés-Mascareñas (2016), integration can be divided into three analytical dimensions:

- *The legal-political dimension*
- *The socio-economic dimension*
- *The cultural-religious dimension*

The legal-political dimension concerns the security of the newcomer's legal position and their access to political decision-making. In addition, the socio-economic dimension can be measured by equal opportunities and participation in sectors of work and income, housing, education and healthcare. Lastly, the cultural-religious dimension concerns the equal acceptance of religion, culture and ethnic-cultural identity. However, it is important to understand that these dimensions do influence each other and, therefore, are not entirely self-contained (Penninx & Garcés-Masareñas, 2016). In practice, it is seen that the legal-political dimension in particular influences the other two.

Research has shown that language does play an important role in at least two of these dimensions. Zorlu & Hartog (2018) investigated the role of language proficiency on socio-economic dimension. They declared that language proficiency increased the possibilities on the labor market with 30%. In addition, newcomers who do speak the language, feel more included in the host society by 50%. Other research (Penninx, et al., 2006) indicated that language, along with religion and culture, symbolizes the national identity. So, in order to properly understand the national identity including its cultural and religious norms and values, it is important to overcome the language barrier.

2.3 The language barrier

Language is the most common means of communication and, therefore, plays an important role in communication. An important condition for a clear communication is that communication partners speak each other's language. However, research has shown that many refugees struggle with the Dutch language (SCP, 2020). So, it is often not possible for them to speak Dutch, which limits them in their communication. This creates the well-known language barrier. As explained earlier, a language barrier arises as soon as communication partners do not speak each other's language. This ensures that the exchange of (important) information could be difficult. The language barrier is one of the major stumbling blocks for refugees when arriving in the Netherlands. Not being able to speak the language, differences in expression of emotions, differences in verbal and non-verbal communication and differences in dealing with norms and values often cause incomprehension and results in miscommunication. These struggles often result in isolation and feelings of despondency, as refugees experience little interaction with natives (Ramos & Karl, 2016). They do not participate in society and, therefore, cannot practice their language skills. This often leads to a lack of confidence, especially during the time that they actually do try and speak the language (Zhang, 2009). There are, of course, several ways to bridge this language barrier. Many

agencies and institutions use professional interpreters in real life or by phone (Fransen, Harris & Essink-Bot, 2013). In addition, the social network, such as family or friends, are used to interpret as well (Morris et al., 2009). Moreover, nowadays, a lot could be solved with Google Translate as well. However, these solutions are not always available and are often seen as a burden (Simon et al., 2006). Regardless of these possibilities, many refugees indicate they still have trouble bridging the language barrier (van Tubergen, 2010; SCP, 2018). It is, therefore, important that refugees learn the Dutch language as quickly as possible in order to participate in the Dutch society.

2.3.1 Factors affecting second language learning

Research shows many factors that influence second language learning, such as age, aptitude, motivation and personality (Ellis, 1985). Later on, Ellis (in Lightbrown, 1992) states that interaction with the language environment plays a role in second language acquisition as well. By examining the positive and negative factors regarding second language learning, a broader picture can be drawn of the problems refugees might face while learning a second language. This way, it can be investigated whether these factors (indirectly) influence how refugees perceive the language barrier.

2.3.1.1 Age

Age plays an important role in learning a second language. It is commonly known that children learn a new language more easily compared to adults. An important theory supporting this statement is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) by Penfield & Roberts (1959) and Lenneberg (1967). This theory states that humans have a certain ‘critical period’ in their lives in which they are more efficient at learning a second language (Pallier, 2007). According to the CPH, this ‘critical period’ contains the first few years (aged 2 till 12) of someone’s life. They blame this on the plasticity of the brain; this decreases after puberty. Many researchers agree with the statements of this theory. Lindgren & Muñoz (2012), for example, declare that children benefit more by participating in the society and exposure in a natural environment rather than learning in a classroom. This way, the language is getting more acquired than learned. Furthermore, children are more likely to learn and speak the language like native proficiency because they start at a young age (Pallier, 2017; Sang, 2017). In addition, van Tubergen (2010) has examined which factors play a role in the second language proficiency of refugees in the Netherlands. In his research, he shows that refugees,

who have arrived in the Netherlands at a young age, have a higher second language proficiency compared to those who settle in the Netherlands at a later age.

2.3.1.2 Motivation

Motivation is often seen as one of the most important factors regarding second language learning, as it largely determines how much effort someone makes to learn the language (Lamb, 2004; Dörnyei, Henry & Muir, 2015). It can be defined as the desire to achieve a goal, the effort that is needed for it and the satisfaction that someone gets because of it. One of the most well-known theories about motivation in second language learning has been introduced by Gardner & Lambert (1972). With their social-educational model of language learning, they have distinguished two types of motivation:

- *Integrative motivation*

This motivation is based on an interest in the second language and its culture. It refers to the desire and intention of becoming a part of the society of the second language.

- *Instrumental motivation*

This motivation is based on the pragmatic benefits of learning a second language.

These benefits include passing exams, getting a better job or a higher salary, etc.

Furthermore, Gardner & Lambert (1972) assumed that integrative motivation provided greater second language motivation and skills than instrumental motivation. However, motivation is often a dynamic concept, and someone can be influenced by both types of motivation. Subsequently, both types of motivation are positively related to language learning and one is no more effective than the other (Clément, et al. 1994).

Another approach which has received some attention is the self-determination theory. Ryan & Deci (1985; 2000) make a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. They explain that extrinsic motivation stems from external sources, such as (material) rewards or avoiding a punishment. So, a refugee who is extrinsically motivated is someone who has to learn the language at school, only to pass their integration exam. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, arises from inherent and personal interests and needs, resulting in a personal reward like positive feedback. An intrinsically motivated individual is someone who is eager to learn the language because they like it, find it interesting and enjoys doing it. In addition, intrinsic motivation, has a positive influence on speaking and reading aptitude (Ehrman, 1996). Furthermore, research shows that refugees who have experienced traumatic events

prior to their migration are less motivated to learn a second language (Chiswick & Miller, 2001).

2.3.1.3 Personality

Personality is seen as a set of qualities that form an individual's character. Some characteristics might help in learning a second language, while others could cause some obstruction (Khasina, 2014). Some factors influencing second language learning are extroversion, self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking and anxiety. Research has shown that (the degree of) extroversion plays an important role in second language learning. They state that extraverts (outgoing people) are better at acquiring a second language than introverts (Zhang, 2009). Extroverts are more open to try and start a conversation to learn the language. Furthermore, they are often not afraid to make mistakes. This way, extroverts are more likely to come into contact with the language, which will speed up their process (Ramos & Karl, 2016). Introverts (shy people), on the other hand, are afraid to embarrass themselves or make mistakes and are, therefore, more likely to keep quiet or avoid opportunities that might help their language acquisition (Zhang, 2008). Another character trait that could influence learning a second language is self-esteem. A certain amount of self-esteem is important to succeed in any activity. However, adults are often aware of their own abilities. Because of this, they do notice their mistakes, which can sometimes be very hindering. If someone does not dare to speak and is afraid of making mistakes, it can negatively affect their ability to learn a language. In addition, research has shown that traumas often have a negative impact on self-esteem, as the level of self-esteem is often lower among people who have suffered from traumas (Reiland & Lauterbach, 2008). As Hassan et al. (2016) and Steele (2017) explained in their research, refugees often suffer from traumas and other problems from their past, which have a huge impact on their (mental) condition and, therefore, on the level of their self-esteem. Because of these traumas, it could be difficult for them to learn a new language as mental health problems can hinder this process (McDonald, 2000; Chiswick & Miller, 2001). Furthermore, van Tubergen (2010) has shown that there is a negative correlation between mental health problems and the acquisition of a new language. On the other hand, the higher the self-esteem, the lower the inhibition of language production and the greater the success in learning a second language (Khasinah, 2014). Furthermore, it is important to make mistakes in order to learn a new language. This is why inhibition could be seen as a more negative character trait regarding second language acquisition. As Khasinah (2014) explains in her research, inhibition discourages risk-taking, which is an important segment in the learning

process. Lastly, anxiety is seen as an important factor in learning a second language as well. Unfortunately, it is often an obstacle in learning a second language. This stems from the well-known phenomenon of performance anxiety. As Pae (2012), explains in his research, public speaking in a classroom and taking a test could increase anxiety, partly because it is skill-based. Furthermore, many refugees have suffered from trauma resulting in anxiety and a low self-confidence (Gordon, 2011).

2.3.1.4 Interaction with language environment

Several studies show that interaction with naturalistic second language learning environments promote the learning of a second language. Ellis (in Lightbrown 1992) and Bossers et al. (2015) state that the success of second language learning depends on the interaction with people who speak the language you want to learn. Van Tubergen (2010) explains in his research that refugees who participate in society are more likely to show an increase in their language acquisition. In addition, he states that refugees who have been in an AZC for a long time and, therefore, more isolated from society, show lower language learning skills. Through interaction, someone can ask questions and negotiate when they do not understand something immediately and thereby promote the learning process.

In the end, however, it is often a combination of the factors above that will lead to a good second language acquisition, as they all affect each other. So, when learning a second language, it is important to take into account these various factors, as well as the differences per individual.

2.4 The Dutch integration procedure

When you come to the Netherlands, it would benefit you to learn the language as quickly as possible. Discover the customs, the written and unwritten rules and immerse yourself in the culture. This way, you will find your way and you become a part of the Dutch society.

2.4.1 Civic Integration Act 2013 (Wi2013)

In the Netherlands, newcomers are expected to integrate. They are required to learn the Dutch language and understand how the Dutch society and labor market work. According to Wi2013, newcomers are obliged to integrate if they meet the following conditions:

- You are coming to the Netherlands for a longer period of time;
- You are from a country outside the European Union, European Economic Area, Turkey or Switzerland;
- You are over the age of 18 and younger than the required age of retirement;
- You have a residence permit.

(Boom NT2, n.d.)

An exception is made for people who have Dutch diplomas, certificates or proof of attending an education in the Dutch language (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). In addition, when someone comes to the Netherlands to study or to work here temporarily and has a special residence permit for it, they are exempted for integration as well (Rijksoverheid, n.d.).

2.4.1.1 Main principles

Before the new Civic Integration act came into effect on January 1, 2013, municipalities were responsible for implementing and enforcing the integration process of newcomers. However, one of the aims of this new act was to strengthen the newcomer's own responsibility (CPB, 2020). Because of this, municipalities are no longer responsible. The main principle of Wi2013 implies that the person integrating is responsible for his/her integration. The integration policy aims to ensure that newcomers learn the Dutch language, get acquainted with the Dutch society and participate in the society (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). It is expected to contribute to society and to be self-reliant in this. The person integrating decides how he/she fulfills this obligation and how he/she bears the costs. In order to pay for the integration, they can receive a loan of up to 10.000 euros from the Education Implementation Service (DUO, n.d.-b). However, to be eligible for this loan, the institution needs to meet the quality requirements of the 'Blik op Werk' quality mark (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.-b). The range of language schools is enormous and this way, a consumer market for integration courses arises, which is a pillar of Wi2013 as well (CPB, 2020). If someone successfully integrates within the term of 3 years, the loan will be converted into a gift. However, sanctions can be imposed if the person integrating is not able to pass the civic integration exam within three years. These sanctions range from fines of up to 1250 euros to the loss of their residence permit (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.-b). As there have been some adjustments to Wi2013 in 2017, municipalities have a guiding role in (social) guidance at the moment. They

ensure that refugees receive a declaration of participation, which is needed to fulfill their integration. So, the policy of Wi2013 is mainly based on the responsibility of the person integrating, the consumer market for integration courses and an obligation to achieve a result supported by sanctions (CPB, 2020).

2.4.1.2 The integration procedure

As refugees do not have a residence permit when they arrive in the Netherlands, they cannot integrate immediately. In general, they have to wait a maximum of 6 months for their residence permit (IND, n.d.-a). Until then, they reside in an asylum seekers' center (AZC), which will be arranged by the Central Agency for the reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). According to the Wi2013, refugees can already start with a (voluntary) 'pre-integration' while they are in an AZC. This implies that they have the opportunity to take some lessons about the (basic) rules of the Dutch language and Dutch society, which should lead to language level A1 and basic knowledge about the Dutch society (COA, n.d.-b). COA offers these programs that prepare refugees for their civic integration process (CPB, 2020). In various AZCs, so-called language cafes have been set up for this. In addition, as long as refugees do not have a residence permit, they cannot participate in society as they are not allowed to work. However, as soon as refugees receive a residence permit, they can start with their integration. As the Wi2013 indicates that it is their own responsibility to fulfill their integration, refugees are expected to collect information about the integration process. Furthermore, they need to determine which way they want to meet the integration obligation, at what language level and how they prepare themselves for the exam: taking classes or studying at home (Significant, 2018).

Since January 1, 2013, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment is responsible for the civic integration policies. However, as municipalities were no longer responsible, public authorities were made responsible for the integration process. COA is the responsible agency for preparing the integration of refugees (COA, n.d.-a). Furthermore, DUO is responsible for the implementation and enforcement of the Civic Integration Act (IND, n.d.-b). If refugees meet the conditions and are, therefore, expected to integrate, they will receive a letter from DUO to inform them about their integration. From then on, refugees have three years to complete their integration. This is called the integration term. So, after receiving this letter, it is up to the refugee to arrange their own integration. They must choose an institution for their integration lessons. There are many institutions that could prepare them for the integration exam (A2 level) or the state exam (B1 or B2 level). Later on, more will be

elaborated about these two options. In addition, there are literacy lessons as well for refugees who need to alphabetize first (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.-b). Learning the language is the main purpose of these lessons (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). However, you will learn about the Dutch way of living and working as well (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.-b). To finance these lessons and their civic integration exam, they have the ability to apply for a loan from DUO. In addition, they can make use of civil society organizations such as Vluchtelingenwerk and Humanitas, who are able to help them arranging their integration, translating important letters or answering questions.

For some refugees, however, it is not achievable to pass their integration exam within the term of 3 years (CBS, 2020). This may be due to special individual circumstances. In addition, as explained earlier in paragraph 2.3.1, there are several general factors that could influence the learning of a second language as well. In these cases, an exception can be made. However, these exceptions are only granted if they have a valid reason and they meet all the required conditions. Some refugees, for example, could get an additional 2 years to complete their integration. To be eligible for this, refugees must have followed lessons for at least 300 hours (DUO, n.d.-a). In addition, their institution must have the quality mark of ‘Blik op Werk’, and they must have made two attempts to pass all examination components that they did not pass yet (DUO, n.d.-a). Another option is to apply for exemption for demonstrably made efforts. To be eligible for this, a refugee must be able to demonstrate that they have followed 600 hours of lessons at an institution that is on the list of ‘Blik op Werk’, and they have tried to pass all examination components at least four times (DUO, n.d.-a). In addition, if a refugee has followed at least 300 hours of literacy lessons and 300 hours of integration lessons, or 600 hours of literacy lessons, exemption can be requested as well (DUO, n.d.-a). However, if refugees do not pass their integration within the required time without a valid reason, a sanction will follow.

2.4.1.3 Exams

There are two ways to comply with the integration obligation: the integration exam or a NT2 state exam. The difference between these two is the language level at which the refugee takes the exam. Most refugees opt for the integration exam, which is A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This level means that someone is a basic user and familiar with commonly used expressions. Furthermore, someone is able to discuss everyday matters (Council of Europe, n.d.). The NT2 (Dutch as a second language) state exam, on the other hand, can be divided into two different exam programs. Refugees can

opt for program I, which is B1 level of the CEFR, or program II, which will result in a diploma on B2 level of the CEFR. Both B levels indicate that someone is an independent user. B1 shows that someone can formulate his own opinion and can describe experiences, events and expectations, while B2 indicates that someone can understand the main points of complex texts, can produce clear, detailed essays and can spontaneously participate in a conversation (Council of Europe, n.d). With a NT2 state exam diploma, refugees can show that they have a sufficient command of the Dutch language to work or study in the Netherlands. This way, they will get better opportunities on the labor market (CTE, n.d.)

Since the implementation of the Act in 2013, the exam has been amended several times. From 2013 to 2015, the exam consisted of the following components:

- Reading skills;
- Writing skills;
- Speaking skills;
- Listening skills;
- Knowledge of the Dutch society.

(DUO, n.d.-c)

In 2015, a new component was added, namely ‘orientation on the Dutch labor market’ (ONA). This component consists of two parts: hand in a portfolio with assignments and make sure you have had 64 hours of lessons about ONA (DUO, n.d.-c). In addition, since 2017, refugees must also submit a declaration of participation (DUO, n.d.-c). By signing this declaration, refugees indicate that they understand important standards and values in the Netherlands. Furthermore, they declare that they want to participate actively in the Dutch society.

2.4.1.4 International transition class (ISK)

The integration process explained before applies to refugees from 18 years till the retirement age of 67. However, all newcomers are entitled to education. An international transition class provides education to students aged 12 to 18, who have been in the Netherlands for less than one year and who have little to no knowledge of the Dutch language (StartCollege, n.d.). The aim of this program is to teach students the Dutch language and, eventually, transfer them to regular Dutch education programs in a maximum of two years.

During this program, they learn the Dutch language and follow classes on regular subjects like English, mathematics and gymnastics (StartCollege, n.d.). After finishing this program, they can transfer to a high school (secondary education) or a professional education (secondary vocational education/MBO), depending on their age. At the moment, the majority of ISK students who transfer to a professional education (>16 years), start with an entrance program of one year (MBO1). This entrance program prepares them for the labor market or a more advanced program (MBO2). It allows students to develop main skills they will need for a job (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). In addition to their education, they also receive some practical lessons through an internship.

2.4.2 Wi2013 in practice

Due to the massive influx of refugees in 2015, the implementation of Wi2013 was soon put to the test. COA was faced with the major task to provide shelter for the high amount of refugees, which meant looking for the possibility of opening more AZCs. In addition, more locations had to be made available for classes and facilities to ensure that pre-integration would be available at every AZC (Significant, 2018). As a result, fewer refugees reached the expected A1 level during pre-integration in 2015 compared to 2013 and 2014 (ARK, 2017). Furthermore, DUO experienced a serious shortage regarding exam capacities, like exam locations and examiners. This shortage caused a long waiting time for refugees to be able to take the exam. Subsequently, they had to wait for the results for a long time as well (Significant, 2018).

In 2017, 76% of the newcomers have fulfilled their obligations under Wi2013 (Significant, 2018). However, this does not only include the people who have passed their exam, but the people who have been granted an exemption as well. Nevertheless, several studies (ARK, 2017; CPB, 2020) have shown that the success rate for integration exams has increased with 11% after the implementation of Wi2013. CPB (2020) indicates in their research that refugees often start slowly with their integration, but, ultimately, pass their exam more often compared to refugees who did it under the Civic Integration Act of 2007. This slow start can be explained by the fact that refugees are no longer supported by municipalities. Wi2013 is mainly focused on self-reliance, so refugees can only depend on themselves and their network. As a result, finding a suitable language school and applying for a loan could take some time. In addition, there are many refugees who would like to reach B1 level because they want to participate independently in the Dutch society and realize that such participation is not possible with A2 (Significant, 2018). However, for many of them it is not

feasible to achieve B1 level within the three-year term, so they often switch to a lower language level halfway through their integration process. As a result, they often take their exam on a lower level to be able to meet the integration obligation in time (Significant, 2018). Therefore, the current Act ensures refugees to perform below their capabilities, only to meet the requirements of Wi2013 and to avoid a fine (CPB, 2020). This clearly shows that the current Act is focusing more on punishment rather than stimulation and motivation. Illiterates and refugees with a mother tongue far from the Dutch language are affected by this as well. Often, they are not able to comply with the integration requirements, and it is mainly emphasized what they cannot do, especially every time they fail an exam (Significant, 2018). Research has shown that teachers would like to use the skills of these refugees and focus on what is feasible for them (Significant, 2018). In addition, this often concerns the age group from 50 years and older. It is important to make a distinction here, since differences in level and knowledge in the classes are criticized (ARK, 2017; CPB, 2020). This difference in language levels ensures that not everyone is able to reach his or her own level (Significant, 2018).

Research has shown that it is not realistic to expect that refugees are able to take full responsibility for their integration process from day one (Significant, 2018). It is, therefore, important for refugees to get access to useful information provisions about courses, institutions and their rights and obligations regarding integration. Although good information provision is seen as crucial to be able to take your own responsibility, the current Act leaves much to be desired. Research by the Court of Audit (ARK, 2017) demonstrates that there is a lack of information from DUO about the entire integration process. In addition, the letter refugees receive from DUO to inform them about the process is often too complicated and unclear, and, quite important, is completely in Dutch. It is, therefore, assumed that refugees do speak Dutch already, or have an extensive network around him/her for help (ARK, 2017). In practice, it appears that refugees often turn to institutions like Vluchtelingenwerk for these kinds of problems, as their social circle is often quite small (Significant, 2018). Furthermore, during the first few months, refugees are often quite busy arranging all kinds of practical matters, like their home (including furniture), financial matters, perhaps family reunification, a school for their children, etc. (Significant, 2018). As a result, they often postpone their integration. Many refugees start their integration process after an average of six months (Significant, 2018). In order to prevent procrastination and start integrating as soon as possible, (social) guidance is seen as an important factor. Without some guidance, refugees are left to fend for themselves and, with a jumble of letters and possibilities, they often

become overwhelmed (CPB, 2020). So, refugees are often not self-sufficient enough, especially at the beginning of their integration process (Significant, 2018). In addition, research by Significant (2018) explains that the offer in language schools is quite wide, but due to lack of clarity and insufficient insight into this amount of offers, refugees regularly choose a school that does not (fully) meet their needs and abilities. So, the help refugees receive from institutions regarding the reading and understanding of those important letters is considered very positive and helpful (ARK, 2017).

An important aim of the Wi2013 is to promote participation in society and the labor market. Unfortunately, little attention is being paid to this participation during the preparation for the integration exam (ARK, 2017). This lack of attention has been the subject of much criticism, which resulted in an adjustment of the Act. Since January 1, 2015, the exam component ‘orientation on the Dutch labor market’ has been implemented. This course should contribute to an easier start on the labor market by introducing refugees to the Dutch labor market. Unfortunately, during the implementation, too little thought was given to the link with practice (Significant, 2018). Research by Significant (2018) has shown that refugees acknowledge the added value of this course, but they explain that the current form is too theoretical. In addition, Significant (2018) declares that municipalities and language schools indicate they want to make the course more practical by connecting it to the reality of the local labor market through (volunteer)work or internships (ARK, 2017). However, this requires a good coordination between municipalities and language schools, since municipalities are responsible for helping refugees participate in society. This way, refugees are able to apply the language lessons in practice, as this usually speeds up the learning process (CPB, 2020). According to Significant (2018), however, this coordination takes place in just a handful of municipalities in the Netherlands, causing a large difference nationwide. In addition, many municipalities outsource (social) guidance to a third organization, such as Vluchtelingenwerk, which makes it even more difficult to coordinate properly (Significant, 2018).

Although refugees pass their exams more often nowadays, it does not have an effect on their labor participation after five years. Subsequently, research by CPB (2020) demonstrates that the percentage of refugees with a job or education has not increased compared to the previous Act. This result suggests that passing the exam does not guarantee labor market participation of refugees. In addition, CPB (2020) indicates that a higher success rate does not guarantee a better command of the Dutch language, so they make the connection between better language proficiency and labor participation. Moreover, research demonstrates

that a lack of participation leads to a decrease in language skills. In addition, A2 language level appears to be somewhat on the lower side to be able to participate in society independently (ARK, 2017).

Ultimately, it remains a challenge to implement a well-functioning Act, as each individual has different needs and expectations.

2.4.3 New Civic Integration Act 2021

As of July 1, 2021, the current integration policy will be changed, and a new procedure will be introduced. From then on, municipalities are responsible for the civic integration of their newcomers. The aim is that newcomers learn the language as quickly as possible and participate in the Dutch society as soon as they are able to (Rijksoverheid, 2019). Municipalities will conduct an intake with each newcomer and, based on this intake, a personal Plan Integration Participation (PIP) will be drawn up (Stimulansz, 2020). This plan establishes how (which learning route) the newcomer must fulfill his civic integration obligation. The intention is to purchase the PIP within 6 weeks of arrival. As soon as the PIP has been established, a newcomer can start their personal integration. This means that there is high chance a newcomer can integrate already while he/she still lives in an AZC (Rijksoverheid, 2019a). In the act, integration means a combination of language lessons and (voluntary) work or an internship. By participating in the Dutch society, newcomers come into contact with the language and the norms and values of the Netherlands easier. In addition, the newcomer has the option of three different learning routes:

- *Education route*

This route is aimed at young newcomers up to and including the age of 28. After a language transition program, these young newcomers are transferred to a Dutch education as soon as possible. Investments are being made in obtaining a Dutch diploma, which will result in a good starting position on the labor market.

- *B1 route*

This will probably be the most common route. Civic integration will be combined with participation in the Dutch society. Furthermore, the language requirement has been increased from level A2 to B1, to increase their position on the labor market.

- *Self-reliance route (Z-route)*

This route is aimed at newcomers for whom the other two routes are not feasible. It will focus on the ability to participate independently in the Dutch society. In contrast to the Wi2013, this act will no longer grant any exemptions based on demonstrably delivered efforts.

(Rijksoverheid, 2019b)

2.5 Eritrea

Eritrea is located in the east of Africa and borders Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Worldwide there are approximately 507.300 refugees from Eritrea (UNHCR, 2019). It is estimated that around 15.000 registered Eritreans are currently living in the Netherlands (Vluchtelingenwerk, 2019).

2.5.1 *The current situation*

After being part of Italy and later on Ethiopia, Eritrea has officially been an independent country since 1993. Since this independence, president Afewerki has governed the country with his party People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) (Amnesty, 2019). However, his regime is one of the most oppressive ones in the world. Afewerki does not tolerate any criticism regarding his policies and, therefore, there is no freedom of press (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.-a). Opponents of the government get arrested, tortured and some even get prosecuted. So, because of this oppressive regime, many Eritreans seek protection in other countries. However, it is illegal to leave the country without permission from the Eritrean authorities, so many Eritreans risk their lives in search for protection. Another reason to flee the country is because of the military duties, that apply to both men and women. Officially, it lasts 18 months, but unfortunately in practice this is often way longer and takes years of hard work under miserable conditions (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.-a). Critics even call it forced labour (Redeker Hepner & Tecele, 2013).

2.5.2 *The language*

According to the national constitution, Eritrea does not have an official native language. However, there are 9 different languages spoken in the country. According to Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving (KIS, 2017a), most Eritreans learn and speak Tigrinya. Furthermore, the English language is taught as well. Unfortunately, this is quite an illusion, as Eritreans often speak only a few words English (KIS, 2017a). As Tigrinya is far

removed from the Germanic languages, it is difficult for them to learn such languages (KIS, 2017b). According to the World Development Report of the UN (2019), the years an Eritrean should receive education is 5 years, compared to 8.9 years in Syria and 18 years in the Netherlands. In practice, however, this is not feasible for everyone. Many young Eritreans must help their family in rural areas, and, therefore, cannot go to school (Nidos, 2018). This often results in a learning delay, which does not benefit the learning of a new language. Furthermore, for Eritreans, learning the Dutch language is even more difficult, because Tigrinya is digitally not available. So, using translation machines, like Google translate, is not possible for them (Travis Foundation, 2020). However, the Travis Foundation (2020), is doing everything they can to change that and make the language digitally available, but it will take a long time. This fact makes it interesting for this study to investigate the problems this group of refugees faces during their integration regarding the language barrier, as it may be more difficult for them than any other group.

2.6 Syria

Syria is a country in Asia and borders Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel. As mentioned earlier, Syrians are the largest group of refugees worldwide. Almost 91.000 registered Syrians are currently living in the Netherlands (Vluchtelingenwerk, 2019).

2.6.1 The current situation

What started in March 2011 as a demonstration against the dictatorship of Assad, quickly unraveled into a full-scale war between the Syrian government and anti-government rebellions. This war has lasted for 9 years and the end is certainly not in sight, as new bombardments continue to occur. As a result of this war, approximately 12 million Syrians are on the run, of which 6.1 million stayed in Syria, while others sought protection in other countries (UNHCR, 2020). The impact on Syrian civilians is devastating: many people are injured or get killed. It is very difficult to let everyday life go on, as bombardments are always lurking (Vluchtelingenwerk, n.d.-c). In addition, many men left Syria because they did not want to fulfill their military duties as they did not want to risk their lives for this war, or they were against Assad's regime. These men probably cannot go back ever again, as they have a high risk of being forced to fulfill their military duties after all if they do go back. They may be deployed to the front line in Idlib to fight for Assad, as the bombardments are still going back and forth. So, it is still not safe for refugees to go back to Syria, even if they wanted to.

2.6.2 *The language*

In Syria, Arabic is seen as the official language and most people speak Syrian-Arabic. Highly educated Syrians do speak English as well, as some studies do offer English courses (Nuffic, 2015). As a result of statements by Lodewijk Asscher (at the time minister of Social Affairs and Employment) about ‘the pharmacists from Aleppo’, many Dutch people assume that Syrian refugees are highly educated and, therefore, speak English very well. For this reason, it is assumed that it is often easier for Syrians to learn the Dutch language, as they already know a Germanic language (van der Slik, 2009). However, reality has shown that this is definitely not the case and that Syrians struggle with the Dutch language as well, as their English is often quite limited (SCP, 2018). The prejudice regarding Syrians makes it even more interesting to involve them in this study, because this problem has to be addressed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This thesis aims to investigate the social integration policies in the Netherlands and how they address the language barrier faced by refugees, especially aimed at Eritrean and Syrian refugees. In order to answer the research question, qualitative research has been done through literature review and semi-structured interviews with Eritrean and Syrian refugees. In this chapter, the research methods are elaborated, and the choices made in this research are explained.

3.1 Data collection

Empirical research was done through semi-structured interviews with refugees from Eritrea and Syria. Furthermore, it will make this research more original. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because it will give more insight in the experiences of Eritrean and Syrian refugees. This way, the focus will be on the research question(s) and the answers will be obtained in a structured way, but at the same time it will give the participants the space to elaborate, in order to collect even more information. Eritrean and Syrian refugees were chosen because these two groups are the largest groups of refugees in the Netherlands. According to statistics (Vluchtelingenwerk, 2019), these two are the largest groups of later entries into the Netherlands by family members of the main asylum seeker as well. In addition, there is a big difference between the two groups in terms of prejudice about them in the Netherlands. As explained earlier in *chapter 2.6.2*, Dutch people do assume that all Syrians speak English very well because of statements Lodewijk Asscher has made in the past (Rijksoverheid, 2015). These statements were reported in the news as well (NOS, 2015; Volkskrant, 2015). At the time, he was minister of social Affairs and Employment in the Netherlands, and he said that the ‘pharmacists from Aleppo’ were more than welcome in the Netherlands and that these highly educated refugees could contribute to the Dutch society. Eritrean refugees, on the other hand, often make negative headlines (AD, 2018; NOS, 2017; Trouw, 2018). According to those news articles, Eritrean refugees are very withdrawn and do not want to learn the Dutch language. However, after delving into the Eritrean culture, this turns out to be a misconception. In the Eritrean culture, modesty is extremely important. While Dutch people are self-confident during a conversation with their employer, Eritreans bow their heads and they do not look their employer in the eye (SCP, 2018). In addition, in the Netherlands you are expected to arrange and undertake many things yourself, while this is absolutely not the case in Eritrea. There, you will be told exactly what you can and cannot do

(SCP, 2018). These differences make it interesting to see whether the prejudices are well-founded and whether there is a difference in the perceived language barrier.

During the interviews, qualitative data was collected. Neutral, open-ended questions were asked during the interviews. Various important topics, like the integration process in the Netherlands, learning the language and the language barrier, were discussed to get somewhat specific answers to our research question. However, the participants were free to speak about their own experiences with the language barrier in the Netherlands as well. These interviews took place throughout May 2020.

3.1.1 Participants

Several organizations were contacted whether they were in the position to help recruit refugees from Eritrea and Syria, who would possibly want to help with this research. The organizations who were willing to help with this research are Vluchtelingenwerk and the municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch, and agreements were made. The municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch is doing a pilot study regarding the new Civic Integration Act of 2021. As of July 2021, municipalities will be responsible for the integration of refugees. They will have to ensure that refugees quickly learn the Dutch language and start working. The participants of this pilot have passed their integration exam (language level A2) and do speak Dutch already, which makes it easier for the interviews. This pilot could be very beneficial for this study, because it could provide a (somewhat) realistic picture of how the procedure is going to look like next year. Unfortunately, due to the Coronavirus and its consequences, both organizations cancelled their involvement in this study.

In the end, a message was posted in Dutch on various social media (Facebook and Instagram). The message, translated to English, read as follows:

Can anyone help me graduate?

For my thesis, I am looking for refugees from Syria/Eritrea who have been living in the Netherlands for quite some time now. I would like to ask them some questions via skype (or another video call program).

Unfortunately, the Coronavirus makes everything more difficult and I have not been able to find participants so far, so now I am trying it through this message on Facebook and Instagram. Thanks in advance!

This message resulted in various messages from friends, colleagues and acquaintances who either knew someone personally or provided me with contact details of someone who could possibly help with recruiting more participants. Eventually, 5 refugees from Eritrea and 4 refugees from Syria were interviewed, ranging in age from 18 to 42 years. All participants have successfully completed their integration and, therefore, speak Dutch. Tables 1 and 2 in appendix 1 provide an anonymized overview of the participants' personal data. Before the interview, the participants were asked whether they would want to do the interview in (basic) Dutch or English. The intention was to arrange an interpreter if the participant did not speak either of these two languages or if the participant was not at ease with one of these two languages. It is important that the participant feels at ease during the interview (Heldens & Reyssoo, 2005). If he/she feels it is in their best interest to do the interview in their native language, it would be worth it to look at the possibilities. Unfortunately, this could not be arranged due to the Coronavirus and its consequences. So, all interviews were done without the help of a professional interpreter. In the end, this was not a problem, as all participants could speak Dutch well enough. Two participants did not feel at ease to do the interview by themselves, so a Dutch native was present to help the participant with the right words (see appendix 1). Unfortunately, this may cause some limitations on the research, as it cannot be assured that the participant did express him-/herself well in the Dutch language. Furthermore, two participants did feel more at ease to do the interview together, as they went through everything together (see appendix 1). Unfortunately, this could cause some limitations as well, as they could base their answers on each other.

In addition, the original intention was to interview some actors in the field as well to get a clearer view of the social integration process. For this part of the research, the municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch was emailed to ask if there were some officials who would want to help with this research and whether they wanted to be interviewed about the matter. Unfortunately, due to the Coronavirus and its consequences, the municipality cancelled their involvement in this study.

3.1.2 Interviews

Beforehand, the participants were informed about the research through an information letter (see appendix 2) and permission was requested to record the interview. Furthermore, it was assured that all recordings are confidential and will be used for this research only. At the beginning of the interview, they were asked to sign an informed consent form (see appendix 3), which was signed by the interviewer as well. This form is used to inform them about the

research itself, the fact that their participation is completely voluntary, the possibility to quit when they want to and the possibility to not answer a question if they do not want to. By signing this, the participants and the interviewer state that they comply with the established norms. Furthermore, it was assured that all answers will be anonymous and therefore cannot be traced back to any of the participants, as the description of the participants only includes age, gender, country of origin, place of residence and the number of years they have been in the Netherlands. Originally, it was intended to let the participants choose where the interview would take place, as it is important that the participants feel at ease during the interview (Heldens & Reyssoo, 2005). However, the interviews were conducted during the lockdown that took place because of the Coronavirus, so this was not possible. As a solution for this, all interviews took place at home via Skype (or another video call program). An interview guide was made with 12 questions and a few sub-questions to steer the interview in the right direction (see appendix 4). However, there was enough room for personal input from the participants as well. These questions were based on the literature found in chapter 2. Each interview lasted about 30 - 60 minutes, which was exactly the estimated time needed beforehand. In the end, the participants were asked whether they wanted to be informed about the outcome of the research or not. If this was the case, they had the possibility to leave their contact information. After the interviews were done, they were transcribed to assure no information got lost. Lastly, all participants received a small thank you gift for their participation, which was sent by post.

3.3 Data analysis

To be able to answer the (sub-)questions regarding the social integration policies in the Netherlands, the language barrier and how Eritrean and Syrian refugees perceive this barrier, the retrieved data has been analyzed. To analyze the raw data from the interviews, all transcripts of the interviews were printed. Subsequently, a process of coding took place.

During this coding process, overarching terms were found and categories were created on the basis of these terms. The outcomes of these interviews were coded by the inductive approach. This approach uses interpretations of raw data to derive different concepts and themes (Thomas, 2006). Furthermore, thematic analysis was used. It aims to create insight into the meaning that people give to experiences. The answers were put next to the literature, which resulted in a clear analysis. To refer to the interviews, each participant was given a number and a letter. For example, the first Eritrean participant is referred to as 'E01' and the second Syrian participant is referred to as 'S02'.

Chapter 4: Findings

The aim of this chapter is to get a clear overview of the collected data. The results of the interviews, conducted with five Eritrean refugees and four Syrian refugees, will be discussed. The data obtained from these interviews will be analyzed on the basis of the gathered knowledge from the theoretical framework and will address the last sub-question of this thesis by investigating the experiences of Eritrean and Syrian refugees regarding the language barrier in their integration process. In addition, the data of Eritrean and Syrian refugees will be discussed separately for each topic. This way, it is possible to determine if there is a clear difference between Eritrean and Syrian refugees.

4.1 Background

Eritrean participants

All Eritrean participants are male, and their age ranges 18 and 29. They all live in a city in the Netherlands (Tilburg and Utrecht). All participants have the same native language, namely Tigrinya. They all indicate that they are alphabetized in Tigrinya and that they have learned to read and write this in primary school. Three participants indicate that they spoke and wrote only Tigrinya when they came to the Netherlands. Only one participant could speak English when he arrived in the Netherlands. In addition, he spoke Amharic as well. One participant has completed the civic integration exam at A2 level, while one has successfully taken the state exam B2. However, three out of five Eritrean participants have completed ISK and, therefore, did not have to do an official civic integration exam. They all transferred to the entrance program of one year (MBO1).

Syrian participants

Two out of four Syrian participants are male and two are female. Their age varies between 22 and 42. Three out of four participants live in a large city⁴ (Den Bosch and Utrecht); one lives in a small city⁴ (Veghel). All participants speak Arabic, the official language of Syria. They all indicate that they are alphabetized in this language. Only two participants did speak fluent English when they came to the Netherlands. One of them did speak Turkish as well. Out of the four Syrian participants, three have completed the civic integration exam at A2 level and one has successfully taken the state exam B2.

⁴ According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (n.d.), a large city has at least 100.000 inhabitants. A small city contains 25.000 to 50.000 inhabitants.

4.2 Language barrier

Language gives refugees the tools to become self-reliant and to participate in the Dutch society. As these two matters are the main aims for integration according to the government, it is important for refugees to learn the language as soon as possible. However, all participants indicate that learning the Dutch language is a ‘tough task’ and that it is easier said than done. In addition, they indicate that motivation and interaction with Dutch people are the most important factors regarding learning the Dutch language.

Eritrean participants

All Eritrean participants indicated that they think Dutch is a very difficult language to learn. Three out of five participants agreed that the Dutch language sounds very different and they all said that Dutch is far from their native language. They faced the greatest difficulties in learning the alphabet, the right pronunciation and the grammatical structure of the Dutch language. Even though they all agreed that Dutch is a difficult language to learn, two Eritrean participants mentioned that they think the Dutch language is beautiful. The one participant who could speak English already, explained that speaking English really was an advantage:

“I had no problems with the language barrier because I could speak English already. It makes everything easier in the Netherlands, because almost everyone does speak it. [...] It is a bit easier to learn Dutch because you already understand the letters, and the construction of the language is similar. In Tigrinya, we do not have articles. But English does have that and Dutch as well. But that does not mean I did not struggle with the language, because I did, with all the exceptions and stuff. [...] However, I do see a lot of Eritreans who have great difficulty with the language and the language barrier because I work as an experience expert.

So, I help many Eritreans with translations and stuff.” – E02

All five participants agreed that motivation is a very important factor while learning the Dutch language. As the language is difficult to learn, it takes a long time to master it. One participant said that you have to be really motivated to learn the language, because it goes with many ups and downs and without motivation you will quit more easily. In addition, two out of five participants indicated that it is important to have a goal. They explained that having a goal in mind makes it easier to keep your motivation:

“And the people who do not know what they want to study or what they want to do, or what kind of work. So, you have no motivation to learn the language as quickly as possible. But the longer it takes, the harder it is to pass your integration, because you are not motivated anymore.” – E01

The most important factor, however, is the interaction with Dutch people, according to all Eritrean participants. This way, you have no choice but to try and talk Dutch. In addition, they indicated that this way, you are surrounded by the language, which makes it easier to pick up the language.

“The most difficult thing for everyone is that there is too little contact with Dutch people. You learn the most from contact with Dutch people and work in practice. Actually, I think all refugees should be linked to Dutch people who are willing to help a refugee with all the problems they face when they come here.” – E04/E05

Furthermore, all five participants indicated that contact with Dutch people was the main reason for them to ask for a language coach. However, only two participants actually got help from a language coach. The other three were told that there was no language coach available.

Syrian participants

All four participants indicated that they think the Dutch language is difficult to learn. Two participants explained that the grammar is very complicated with all its exceptions. One participant mentioned that the Dutch language has many words with multiple meanings. Because of this, she used multiple words in the wrong context, and she felt stupid for it. Afterwards she can laugh about it, but she has come a long way:

“Yes, I had a lot of trouble learning the language, but I am a go-getter. I really struggled in the beginning, but eventually I learned a lot by watching Dutch television shows, contact with Dutch people and when my oldest child went to school.” – S02

All Syrian participants indicated that motivation is an important factor in learning the Dutch language. Motivation is mentioned in all interviews. One participant explained that she has experienced terrible things, which made her so persistent to build a great life here in the Netherlands for her family. This ensured that she kept extremely motivated even when some

grammatical things too difficult to learn. Another participant suggested that motivation and age are related. His mother is 62, does not work and, therefore, does not have the motivation to learn the language:

“And my mother is taking illiteracy classes, but she has not made any progress in three years. [...] I went shopping with her and there she found out that many people speak Arabic in this neighborhood. So, then she was like, it is not necessary for me to learn Dutch. And if something needs to be translated, we do it for her. We just do not get it taught to her anymore.” – S01

In addition, one participant indicated that speaking English could make people less motivated to learn Dutch. She has seen this problem with several acquaintances:

“Yes, or the people who do speak English already. It is more difficult for them to speak Dutch, as they come here and speak English very well. They can talk to Dutch people and get in contact with them. So, then you just talk English and you are less motivated to speak Dutch, because people will understand you anyway.” – S04

All Syrian participants indicated that interacting with Dutch people is the most important factor in learning the language. In addition, they all state that the government should offer more options to get in touch with Dutch people more easily. One participant explained that he struggled to get the hang of the language, but he learned a lot during his work:

“I struggled with learning the Dutch language because I am a bit old. But my Dutch language has become stronger because of my work, because there, I speak more Dutch. By working for a Dutch company, you come into contact with Dutch people much more and you learn the Dutch language faster.” – S03

Another participant explained that she came in contact with ‘Welcome in Utrecht’ through her contact person at her AZC. ‘Welcome in Utrecht’ is a foundation that organizes activities for refugees to get them in contact with other refugees and Dutch people living in Utrecht. These activities did help her a lot to apply the theory in practice:

“And I had many activities of “Welcome to Utrecht”. [...] Yes, and they organized a lot of activities. These activities were not paid, but you meet a lot of Dutch people and then you can speak the words and sentences that you learned at school.” – S04

One participant told me that when he was in the Netherlands for five months, he met his current Dutch girlfriend. Since he spoke to her in Dutch, he was able to learn the language quickly. He indicated that he is the living proof that contact with Dutch people ensures a faster language proficiency.

4.3 Civic Integration Act (Wi2013)

4.3.1 Pre-integration

According to Wi2013, refugees are able to start their pre-integration in their AZC, even before they have received their residence permit. They have the opportunity to take pre-integration language lessons organized by COA. The aim of this pre-integration is that refugees learn the basic rules of the Dutch language and switch from language level A0 to A1. This way, refugees have the required basic knowledge of the Dutch language to start with the integration lessons.

Eritrean participants

All five Eritrean refugees have lived in an AZC and have come in contact with the pre-integration lessons of COA. Two out of five participants said they were pleasantly surprised by this pre-integration, since they did not know about this possibility. One participant explained that this pre-integration immediately confirmed his ideas about the Netherlands, as he had heard that the integration procedure in the Netherlands is well organized. However, one participant was unable to take the pre-integration lessons due to an overload of all COA services. So, at the time, many AZCs were not able to offer pre-integration lessons:

“As I came to the Netherland during the refugee-peak, many AZCs were overloaded. I even transferred to different AZCs. Due to this overload there was no pre-integration. There were no language lessons or any other activities. We had nothing to do in our AZC. I was very bored, and I had psychological problems. Everyone who stayed there had psychological problems. The long wait, while doing nothing, does not help with those psychological problems or learning the language.” – E03

Furthermore, one participant decided to take language lessons somewhere else. He thought that the pre-integration lessons from COA were too slow and he wanted to learn the language faster. At the time, he already got his residence permit but was still waiting for a house, so he was eligible for the loan from DUO.

Syrian participants

Three out of four Syrian participants have lived in an AZC and have participated in the pre-integration lessons. However, one male participant was transferred to different AZCs six times and he indicated that the pre-integration was quite different at those different locations. Many locations did have quite extensive lessons and you could go to a language café, which is a good way to practice your Dutch according to him. However, some locations did not offer much. One female participant did not live in an AZC and, therefore, has not followed pre-integration. After one year, she came to the Netherlands through family reunification. As her husband did live in his own house already, she was able to move in with him immediately. The other female participant came to the Netherlands through family reunification as well. After just a few months, she was, along with her mother, brother and sister, reunited with her stepfather. However, he was still living in an AZC, so she had to live there as well. She indicated that she did learn a lot during pre-integration:

“First I learned some basic things in the AZC. The basics, the letters, a bit of the pronunciation. The grammar, for example the differences in articles. Much attention has been paid to the Dutch language there already. [...] Yes, but when I was in the AZC and knew my municipality, I could get DUO. [...] Yes, a loan. Then I could start my lessons.” – S04

Although the three Syrian participants who have lived in an AZC are quite positive about the pre-integration lessons, they are less satisfied with the conditions in AZCs. The one participant who did not live in an AZC told me she has heard many stories about AZCs as her husband and some Syrian friends did live there. She indicates that the long wait in an AZC was quite depressing and prevented many of them from taking initiative to do anything. This statement is confirmed by all other Syrian participants, as they claim boredom was their biggest enemy.

4.3.2 Information and guidance

As the Wi2013 indicates that self-reliance is an important aim of the Act, the guidance is quite limited. As soon as refugees have received their residence permit, DUO will send them an information letter about their integration process. It explains that they are able to get a loan from DUO to start their integration lessons, but they have to arrange these lessons themselves. However, this letter is in Dutch. This is a frequently cited example and, according to many participants, clearly demonstrates how some institutions deal with refugees.

Eritrean participants

Three out of five Eritrean participants mentioned that there is a problem in the communication of institutions. Municipalities and other authorities often require that the communication is in Dutch. The participants explain that they are not able to express themselves properly or start a discussion. This often creates misunderstandings. In addition, a lot of information gets lost because Eritrean refugees could not understand it. One participant even got some financial problems because of a misunderstanding. He got several letters he did not understand as they were in Dutch and way too formal. Fortunately, in the end, it could be solved with the help of an interpreter. Another participant indicated that Dutch authorities cannot expect them to speak Dutch immediately, or have the resources for an interpreter. Despite the fact that all Eritrean participants indicated that they had a lot of trouble arranging everything on their own, from their language lessons to their furniture or health insurance, they are very positive about the help they actually did receive. In addition, all participants indicated that they got a lot of help from ‘Vluchtelingenwerk’. One participant explained that he is in touch with his contact person from ‘Vluchtelingenwerk’; they have become friends. However, two of them explained that it often takes a long time before something is arranged by Vluchtelingenwerk. Because of this, one participant decided to search for help himself:

“Certainly, I have had help. From my friends and my language coach. My language coach was like a partner for me. [...] I approached this language coach myself, through an acquaintance, because it takes longer when you ask ‘Vluchtelingenwerk’ to arrange this. I have had enough help, but I must say, not everyone has the chance here. You have to ask around and you need to have the motivation to do so. I did a lot of research myself, without any help, because a lot of information was available in English. But for many Eritreans it is very difficult, as they do not speak English or Dutch and all communication is in one of these two languages.” – E02

In addition, two participants mentioned a cultural difference between Eritrean and Syrian refugees. They both explained that Syrian refugees are more assertive compared to Eritreans. They stand up for their rights and, therefore, are better heard and understood. Eritreans, however, are more reserved, so Dutch authorities often think they are not motivated to learn the language. One participant feels that these prejudices make authorities less likely to make an effort with Eritrean refugees.

Syrian participants

All Syrian participants indicated that most information services are in Dutch. One participant explained that, in the beginning, he did not understand any of the letters he got, so they ended up on one big pile. After five months he got himself a Dutch girlfriend and after she saw the big pile of letters, she sorted them out and arranged everything for him. He told me that he is very lucky with his Dutch girlfriend and that he would not be where he is now without her. He declared that, without her help, he probably would have gotten into trouble with authorities, because he did not answer to any of those letters.

Since two out of four participants came to the Netherlands through family reunification, they had connections here already. Because of these connections, there was always an acquaintance or family member available to translate important letters.

“The enormous jumble of letters and official forms is terrible as they are in Dutch and you cannot read any of it. Even after five years, it is still a problem for me. Many letters or official forms, from childcare or tax authorities for example, are unclear. The language is way too formal and there is no translation available.” – S02

One participant stated that she did receive a lot of help from ‘Vluchtelingenwerk’:

“Yes, if something broke down and it was difficult for us to call about it and explain the problem. That is why we have a contact person at VWN, ‘Vluchtelingenwerk’. [...] After we got our house, he was our contact person for two years. He did help us with guidance, and we had to learn how to do all simple tasks ourselves, like when we needed something or had to go to the doctor. [...] He was really easy to talk to and we could contact him via WhatsApp or email. And he would always respond quickly. But if we do have questions or trouble with something now, we can always go to the VWN office and ask for help.” – S04

4.3.3 Integration courses

According to the Wi2013, refugees have to find a language school themselves. So, in the jungle of language schools, they have to find a language school that suits their needs and possibilities. In addition, they have to choose a school with a ‘Blik op Werk’ quality mark in order to receive a loan from DUO for these lessons.

Eritrean participants

When the Eritrean participants were asked about their language school, they were quite positive. Since three out of five participants have learned Dutch at ISK, they could not really answer the questions about a language school. However, all three said that they liked ISK, because it provided structure in their lives and their teacher told them exactly what to do and which assignments were important. The other two participants indicated that it was difficult to find a good language school as the offers are endless. One of them explained that he found a language school through an acquaintance. However, this language school did not meet his needs and, eventually, he got help from his language coach to transfer to another school. However, it was quite complicated to arrange this transfer, because all communication was in Dutch. In addition, both participants did struggle with the Dutch way of learning. They were expected to go to their classes 3 half-day sessions a week, but they needed to practice and finish assignments at home as well. They were not used to this form of self-discipline.

“During my lessons, I only learned the language and theory. [...] In the Netherlands, you are expected to do and learn many things yourself, but we have not learned that. We were told what to do and then we did exactly that. This is not taken into account here. We are also very modest and often, we do not want to ask for help.” – E03

In addition, they complained that the lessons were too much theoretical based. The both agree that there should be more contact hours, with language lessons on the one hand, and practical lessons on the other. This gives you practical experience, which ensures that you can practice the theory:

“Look, when it comes to the system, more needs to be done. For example, many refugees go to their language school 2 or 3 half-day sessions a week. In addition to those three days, they need to learn practical things as well, so more things should be part of the integration process. For example, visiting companies or doing some kind of internship, or a work

experience place to gain practical experience. This way, you can practice your language skills. They should offer more lessons, not only theory lessons but practical lessons as well, for at least 4 or 5 days. [...] Because for some people, that does not work. Some people will learn more easily at a workplace.” – E02

Syrian participants

Of the four participants, three had found a language school through a friend. The fourth participant explained she went looking for a language school herself. She wanted a good language school in order to follow a Dutch education afterwards. Two out of four Syrian participants were positive about their language school. One of them explained that the teachers were very strict, which made her obediently do everything she was asked to do. The lessons were intensive and if they failed a test, they had to leave the school and transfer to another one. However, it is important to mention that this participant took B2 lessons to prepare her for a Dutch education. In these lessons, the pressure is higher compared to A2 level. However, she mentioned that her mother struggled a lot with finding the right language school:

“You do not get any help for this; you have to figure everything out without any help. For example, my mother wants to learn Dutch, but she does not want a school where you learn at a slow pace. But the pace at my school was too fast for her. My mom is 41 and she is a hairdresser, and she just wants to work. And yeah, there are actually no schools that offer some kind of middle level. [...] Yes, some people are fine with that, because they are not able to learn at a faster pace, but some people do not like that.” – S04

Furthermore, two Syrian participants indicated that they were not (completely) satisfied with their language school. One of them explained that he was not satisfied with the amount of lessons. He wanted to learn the language as quickly as possible and that is quite hard with only three half-day lessons a week. The other one indicated that the level difference was quite wide. This way, not everyone is able to learn the language in his or her own way:

“The lessons themselves were not bad, but you have all kinds of people with different learning levels in the classroom. The attention is often focused on the student that does speak Dutch already. Often, these students are asked to help and translate for those who do not understand the teacher. So, their learning process suffers from that.” – S02

Chapter 5: Conclusion and discussion

5.1 Conclusion

This section will give an answer to the research question set up at the beginning of this thesis. The research questions read as follows: *To what extent do social integration policies in the Netherlands successfully address the language barrier faced by Eritrean and Syrian refugees?* First, a theoretical framework was established to obtain a clear overview of several important concepts. It is investigated what role language plays in the integration process in general. This has shown that language does play an important role in the socio-economic and cultural-religious dimensions. Newcomers who speak the language feel more involved in society and they understand cultural norms and values better. Subsequently, it is examined which factors play a role in learning a second language. Existing literature suggests that age, motivation, personality and interaction with the language environment play an important role in second language learning. Thereafter, the integration policy in the Netherlands was scrutinized. The stated aims of the policy, the role of the language in this policy and the effects of the policy on the basis of existing evaluations were examined. The policy of Wi2013 is mainly based on the responsibility of the person integrating, the consumer market for integration courses and an obligation to achieve a result supported by sanctions. In addition, the policy analysis has shown that the Dutch language has the largest and most important role in the integration process. However, existing evaluations of Wi2013 show that the language is exactly where the problem lies, and little account is taken regarding the language barrier. As the integration is the refugee's own responsibility, clear information provision in the mother tongue is crucial. However, this is not the case, since all information letters they receive from authorities are in Dutch. As the theoretical framework shows, one of the aims of Wi2013 is self-responsibility. However, that is not feasible if the information provision cannot be understood by refugees. Lastly, qualitative research has been conducted to examine to what extent Eritrean and Syrian refugees perceive the language barrier as a problem in their integration process. The qualitative research has shown that the language barrier plays a role in, in particular, regulating integration. They are expected to arrange the integration themselves, while they do not speak Dutch. Yet all information provision is in Dutch. Although all Eritrean and Syrian participants endorse the principle of their own responsibility, they see it as an objective rather than an appropriate means. Particularly due to the lack of a social network, this responsibility is a difficult task. This, of course, adds to the poor language skills that are barely taken into account.

In conclusion, this research displays that the Wi02013 does not address the language barrier successfully. The main problem is that the information provision is in Dutch, too formal and inadequate. This is probably due to the fact that the responsibility of the integration lies with the refugee. As refugees receive less guidance and help, it is difficult for them to comprehend all information written in Dutch. However, this will change, if all goes well, with the new Civic Integration Act 2021. From then on, refugees will be guided through a personal integration program.

5.2 Discussion

The findings of this thesis correspond with the existing literature set out in the theoretical framework. Age, motivation, personality and interaction with the language environment were all mentioned in the qualitative data as factors influencing second language learning. However, most of the participants mainly experienced the benefits of these factors. Eight out of nine participants are young and were, therefore, very motivated to learn the language so they could study and build a new life for themselves in the Netherlands. All participants indicated that interaction with the language environment ensures that the language is learned faster. One of the most interesting findings regarding these factors was that many participants mentioned that older refugees (probably 50 years and older) are likely to have more problems learning the Dutch language. They are less motivated, and, therefore, often get an exemption. However, due to this exemption, they are unable to maintain themselves in the Dutch society. This goes against the aim of Wi2013 to ensure that everyone participates in society as soon as possible.

Existing evaluations of Wi2013 has shown that the communication and information provision of authorities leave much to be desired. Seven out of nine participants mentioned the communication problems of authorities as well. All information letters are in Dutch, while the participants could not speak or read Dutch when receiving these letters. This inadequate start is the major stumbling block of Wi2013 regarding the language barrier according to seven participants. They say that if more guidance would be available for this problem, the policy would have been way better.

In addition, both existing evaluation and the qualitative data show that refugees who have problems with the language are (somewhat) disadvantaged. This often concerns older and/or illiterate refugees. They (often) have no goals for the future and no motivation to learn the language. However, hardly any attention is paid to this problem in Wi2013. This group of

refugees is granted an exemption, but they are still unable to speak the language and, therefore, cannot maintain themselves to participate in the Dutch society.

Lastly, several participants agreed with existing evaluations regarding the participation in the Dutch society. One participant explained it quite clearly. He explained that more practical lessons, such as internships and work experience places, should be introduced in order to get to know the society and make refugees feel like they belong there.

5.3 Limitations and recommendations

This research has several limitations that should be mentioned. First, it should be taken into account that this research provides an indication rather than comprehensive research. Only five Eritrean and four Syrian refugees were interviewed, so their responses may not be representative of all Eritrean and Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. For example, no refugees attending literacy classes or over the age of 50 have been interviewed. The approach was to select participants with different ages, different motivations to learn the language and different language levels (A2/B1/B2) in order to get a wide range of participants. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to practical constraints.

Secondly, all interviews were conducted in Dutch. Although all participants have completed their integration exam, they may still have problems with expressing themselves correctly in Dutch. For example, two participants wanted their Dutch friend to be present during the interview. This way, they felt more at ease while talking Dutch and they could get help if they could not express themselves correctly.

Thirdly, the quality of qualitative research often depends on the interview skills of the researcher. However, it is important to realize that a researcher cannot be completely objective when conducting a study. The researcher is often influenced (consciously or unconsciously) by his or her cultural, educational or socio-economic background and his or her experiences. In addition, participants may have given socially desirable answers that they think the researcher wants to hear. For example, two participants preferred to do the interview together, because they felt more at ease that way. They went through everything together, so they could complement each other. However, they often looked at each other before answering, which could have influenced their answers.

Although this research has its limitations, it does show that the Wi2013 does not pay enough attention to Eritrean and Syrian refugees who have great difficulties with the language barrier and, therefore, would need more guidance than they are getting now. The results of this research indicate that this mainly concerns refugees of 50 years and older. Therefore, it

would be interesting for further research to look specifically at this group. What do they need and how can the government help and stimulate them to ensure that they will participate in society actively?

A recommendation regarding the policy is, above all, that the information provision must be available in the native language of the refugee, and it should be informal and adequate. Furthermore, this research suggests increasing the amount of contact hours and to add practical lessons. This way, refugees come in contact with the Dutch society as soon as they start their integration and that will make them feel more connected with the Dutch society. This is an important lesson that should be considered when implementing the new Civic Integration Act in 2021.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Personal data participants

Table 1. Overview of Eritrean participants

	1	2	3	4*	5*
Age	18	29	23	19	18
Gender	Man	Man	Man	Man	Man
Living in NL	2 years	3,5 years	4 years	2,5 years	2,5 years
Place of residence	Tilburg	Utrecht	Tilburg	Tilburg	Tilburg

Table 2. Overview of Syrian participants

	1**	2**	3	4
Age	30	25	42	22
Gender	Man	Woman	Man	Woman
Living in NL	6 years	5 years	4 years	3 years
Place of residence	Den Bosch	Den Bosch	Veghel	Utrecht

* These two participants were interviewed simultaneously.

** A Dutch native, who helped them during their integration, was present during these interviews.

Appendix 2 Information letter

Appendix 2.1 Information letter Dutch

Informatiebrief en toestemmingsverklaring onderzoek Taalbarrière aangepakt: een belangrijk probleem onder vluchtelingen

's-Hertogenbosch, April/Mei 2020

Beste deelnemer,

Voor mijn masterthesis ben ik bezig met een onderzoek naar de aanpak in het Nederlandse integratiebeleid met betrekking tot de taalbarrière waar vluchtelingen mee geconfronteerd worden, speciaal gericht op Eritrese en Syrische vluchtelingen. Op welke manier wordt er gehoor gegeven aan dit probleem en hoe ervaren vluchtelingen dit? Wat zijn de vooruitzichten met betrekking tot het nieuwe integratiebeleid en hoe beïnvloedt dit de hulp voor vluchtelingen?

Doel van het onderzoek

Het doel van het onderzoek is om goed in kaart te brengen in hoeverre het Nederlandse integratiebeleid aandacht besteedt aan de taalbarrière die vluchtelingen ervaren zodra zij in Nederland komen. Het is hiervoor dus erg belangrijk dat we ook naar de praktijk kijken en niet alleen naar literatuur. En hierbij bent u van belang. We willen graag uw verhaal horen en hoe u het ervaart, om op die manier een duidelijk beeld te krijgen van de situatie. Het onderzoek loopt tot juni 2020.

Wat uw deelname inhoudt

Tijdens uw deelname zal er sprake zijn van een semigestructureerd interview. Dit houdt in dat er neutrale, open vragen aan u gesteld worden over verschillende onderwerpen gerelateerd aan het inburgeringsbeleid en de taalbarrière. Daarnaast bent u vrij om te vertellen wat u wilt en waarvan u denkt dat dit van belang is. Dit interview zal ongeveer 30 – 60 minuten duren en gedaan worden via Skype. Om het voor u zo aangenaam mogelijk te maken mag u zelf bepalen in welke taal het interview plaats zal vinden. Door uw praktijkervaringen in kaart te brengen krijgt het probleem een gezicht en zorgt dit voor stof tot nadenken en verandering.

Wanneer u besluit niet meer deel te nemen

Het is belangrijk dat u weet dat deelname aan dit onderzoek vrijwillig is. U heeft het recht om te beslissen om af te zien van deelname aan het onderzoek of om tijdens het onderzoek te stoppen. U hoeft hiervoor geen reden op te geven.

Gebruik en bewaren van uw gegevens

De interviews zullen niet terug te herleiden zijn naar u als persoon. De geluidsopnames van het interview (en alle documenten gelinkt aan het interview) zullen geanonimiseerd worden door middel van codes. Op deze manier wordt de data anoniem bewaard, zodat uw privacy gewaarborgd blijft. Hierdoor kunnen deze interviews eventueel gebruikt worden voor onderzoeken in de toekomst mocht dit nodig zijn. De geluidsopnames en alle documenten van het interview zullen 10 jaar bewaard worden.

U krijgt deze brief een week voor het interview, zodat u tijd heeft om over uw deelname te beslissen. Mocht u na het lezen van deze brief en de bedenkingstijd nog steeds deel willen nemen aan het onderzoek, is er voor u een toestemmingsformulier bijgevoegd. Uw toestemming voor deelname geldt tot het einde van dit onderzoek.

Voor eventuele opmerkingen of klachten over dit onderzoek kunt u ook contact opnemen met de “Ethics Review Board” van Tilburg Law School. Zij hebben tevens toestemming verleend voor het uitvoeren van dit onderzoek.

Heeft u nog vragen?

Als u nog verdere informatie over het onderzoek zou willen krijgen, nu of in de toekomst, kunt u contact opnemen met Maxime Korsten via de contactgegevens in de e-mail.

Met vriendelijke groet,

Maxime Korsten

Appendix 2.2 Information letter English

Information letter and consent form

Language barrier addressed: a major problem among refugees

's-Hertogenbosch, April/May 2020

Dear participant,

For my master's thesis, I am doing a research regarding the social integration policies in the Netherlands and how they address the language barrier faced by refugees, especially aimed at Eritrean and Syrian refugees. How is this problem addressed and how do refugees experience and perceive it? What are the prospects regarding the new integration policy and how does it affect the possibilities for refugees?

Purpose of the research

The aim of the research is to set into perspective to what extent Dutch integration policies pay attention to the language barrier refugees face as soon as they enter the Netherlands. Therefore, it is very important that we collect and look at empirical data, not just literature. And for that, we need you. We would like to hear your story and how you experience it in order to get a clear picture of the situation. The study will run until June 2020.

What your participation entails

Your participation consists of a semi-structured interview. This means that you are asked neutral, open-ended questions about various topics regarding the integration policy and language barrier. However, you are also free to tell us anything you want of what you think might be important for the research. The interview will take approximately 30 – 60 minutes and will be done via Skype. To make it as pleasant as possible for you, you can decide in which language the interview will take place. By analyzing your experiences, the problem is given a face, and this provides food for thought and change.

If you decide not to participate

It is important for you to know that participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to decide not to participate or to stop during the process. You do not have to give a reason for this.

Use and storage of your data

The interviews cannot be traced back to you as a person. The audio recordings of the interview (and all documents linked to the interview) will be anonymized by means of codes. In this way, the data is stored anonymously, so that your privacy is guaranteed. This allows these interviews to be used for future research should this be necessary. The audio recordings and all documents of the interview will be saved for 10 years.

You will receive this letter a week before the interview, so you have time to decide whether you want to participate or not. If you still want to participate in the research after reading this letter and the deliberation time, a consent form has been attached for you to fill in. Your consent to participate is valid until the end of this research.

If you have any remarks or complaints regarding this research, you may also contact the Ethics Review Board of Tilburg Law School. They have given permission for this research.

Do you have any questions?

If you would like to receive further information about the survey, now or in the future, please contact Maxime Korsten through the contact information in the e-mail.

Kind regards,

Maxime Korsten

Appendix 3 Consent form

Appendix 3.1 Consent form Dutch

Toestemmingsverklaring voor deelname onderzoek Taalbarrière aangepakt: een belangrijk probleem onder vluchtelingen

Ik verklaar hierbij dat

- Ik de informatiebrief heb gelezen. Ik voldoende vragen kon stellen en deze zijn voldoende beantwoord. Daarnaast had ik genoeg tijd om te beslissen over mijn deelname.
- Ik weet dat de deelname vrijwillig is. Ik weet dat ik op ieder moment kan beslissen om af te zien van deelname aan het onderzoek of om te stoppen met het onderzoek. Ik hoef daarvoor geen reden te geven.
- Ik toestemming geef dat mijn gegevens anoniem gebruikt mogen worden zoals vermeld in de informatiebrief.
- Ik toestemming geef om mijn gegevens (anoniem) nog 10 jaar te bewaren.

Hierbij geef ik

Naam deelnemer

WEL/GEEN toestemming voor medewerking aan het onderzoek.

(Doorstrepen wat niet van toepassing is)

Datum:

Handtekening deelnemer

Ik verklaar hierbij dat ik deze deelnemer volledig heb geïnformeerd over het genoemde onderzoek.

Naam onderzoeker

Datum:

Handtekening onderzoeker

Informed consent

Addressing the language barrier: a major problem among refugees.

I hereby declare that

- I have read the information letter. There was enough room for questions and all my questions have been answered. Furthermore, I had enough time to think about my participation.
- I know that my participation is voluntary. I know that I have the right to decline to participate and withdraw from the research once participation has begun. This would be without any negative consequences and without providing any explanation.
- I give permission to use the anonymous data as mentioned in the information letter.
- I give permission to store the research data for a period of 10 years.

I,

Name participant

DO/DO NOT give permission to participate in this research.

(cross out what does not apply)

Date:

Signature participant

I hereby declare that I have informed this participant on all important matters of the research.

Name researcher

Date:

Signature researcher

Appendix 4 Interview guide

Appendix 4.1.1 Interview guide Dutch

Introductie

Enorm bedankt dat u mee wilt werken aan dit onderzoek. Ik ben Maxime Korsten en dit interview is voor mijn scriptie voor de master Victimology and Criminal Justice aan de universiteit van Tilburg. Mijn onderzoek gaat over de taalbarrière die Syrische en Eritrese vluchtelingen ervaren bij hun integratie. Heeft u de informatiebrief doorgenomen en het toestemmingsformulier al ondertekend of wilt u deze nu nog doornemen? Het belangrijkste punt is dat uw deelname geheel vrijwillig is en dat u uw deelname op ieder gewenst moment kunt stoppen. Uw informatie is voor mijn scriptie van groot belang, daarom zou ik dit interview graag op willen nemen. Alle data wordt volledig anoniem verwerkt en is niet terug te herleiden naar u. Heeft u bezwaar tegen opname van dit gesprek? Het interview zal bestaan uit 12 vragen. Mocht u zelf tussendoor toevoegingen of opmerkingen hebben dan hoor ik dat graag. Heeft u vooraf nog vragen?

Vragen

1. Kunt u me in het kort iets over uzelf vertellen
 - a. Wat is uw geslacht?
 - b. Wat is uw leeftijd?
 - c. Wat is uw land van herkomst?
 - d. Hoe lang bent u al in Nederland?
2. Welke talen spreekt u?
3. Waarom heeft u gekozen voor Nederland en wat waren uw verwachtingen?
 - a. Kwamen deze verwachtingen uit?
4. Wat vindt u van de inburgeringsprocedure in Nederland?
 - a. Heeft u voorbeelden wat er goed gaat en wat minder goed?
5. Heeft u hulp gehad bij uw inburgering? Zo ja;
 - a. Hoe bent u aan die hulp gekomen?
 - b. Door wie bent u geholpen? (Bijvoorbeeld Vluchtelingenwerk, GGD, gemeente of bij een buurtcentrum)
 - c. Bent u tevreden met de hulp/begeleiding die u heeft gekregen met betrekking tot uw inburgering?
 - d. Hoe heeft u uw inburgering ervaren?
6. Is het leren van de Nederlandse taal van belang voor het inburgeren?
 - a. Heeft u problemen ondervonden door de taalbarrière? Zo ja;
 - Tegen welke problemen liep u aan?

- Hoe heeft u deze problemen opgelost?
7. Op welk niveau heeft u uw inburgeringsexamen gedaan?
 - a. Waarom heeft u gekozen voor dat niveau?
 8. Vond u dat er genoeg aandacht besteed werd aan het leren van de Nederlandse taal tijdens uw inburgering?
 - a. Zo ja; wat gaat er zo goed?
 - b. Zo nee; wat kan/moet er beter?
 9. Had u moeite met het leren van de taal? Zo ja;
 - a. Tegen welke problemen liep u aan?
 - b. Heeft u hier hulp bij gekregen?
 - Zo ja;
 - Door wie bent u geholpen?
 - Hoe werd dit opgelost/hoe bent u geholpen?
 - Zo nee;
 - Wat moet er gebeuren om dit te verbeteren?
 10. In hoeverre vindt u dat het huidige inburgeringssysteem aandacht besteedt aan de taalbarrière waar vluchtelingen mee geconfronteerd worden?
 - a. Heeft u voorbeelden waarbij dit juist wel of juist niet zo was?
 11. Bent u op de hoogte van de nieuwe wet die in 2021 in werking gaat?
 - a. Zo ja; wat vindt u van deze verandering?
 - b. Zo nee; “vanaf 2021 zullen gemeenten verantwoordelijk worden voor het regelen van de inburgering. Daarnaast gaan vluchtelingen de taal leren op een zo hoog mogelijk, maar voor hen haalbaar niveau. Iedere vluchteling zal dan een eigenlijk inburgeringsplan krijgen waarin onder andere dit niveau wordt vastgelegd. Ook zal er meer ruimte komen voor het opdoen van ervaring in de praktijk.” Wat vindt u hiervan?
 12. Bent u van plan om in Nederland te blijven?

Wilt u zelf nog wat kwijt of heeft u nog vragen of opmerkingen?

Dan wil ik u nogmaals bedanken voor uw deelname aan dit onderzoek en de tijd die u hiervoor vrijgemaakt heeft.

Introduction

First of all, thank you very much for participating in this research. My name is Maxime Korsten and this interview is for my thesis for the master ‘Victimology and Criminal Justice’ at Tilburg University. My research is about the language barrier Eritrean and Syrian refugees face during their integration. Have you read the information letter, and did you sign the consent form, or do you want to go through it now? The most important point is that your participation is completely voluntary, and you can stop your participation at any time. Your information is of great importance to my thesis, so I would like to record this interview. All data will be processed completely anonymously and cannot be traced back to you. Do you object to recording this interview? The interview will consist of 12 questions with a number of sub questions, but I am interested in your own experience. If you have any additions or comments in between, I would like to hear them. Do you have any questions in advance?

Questions

1. Could you briefly tell me some things about yourself?
 - a. What is your gender?
 - b. What is your age?
 - c. What is your country of origin?
 - d. How long have you been living in the Netherlands?
 - e. What is your place of residence?
2. Which languages do you speak?
3. Why did you choose the Netherlands and what were your expectations?
 - a. Did these expectations come true?
4. What do you think of the integration procedure in the Netherlands?
 - a. Do you have examples of what is going well and what is not going well?
5. Have you had help with your integration? If so;
 - a. How did you get this help?
 - b. Who has helped you? (For example, Vluchtelingenwerk, GGD, the municipality or a neighborhood center).
 - c. Are you satisfied with the help/guidance you have received regarding your integration?
 - d. How did you experience your integration?

6. Is learning the Dutch language important for the integration?
 - a. Have you encountered problems due to the language barrier? If so;
 - i. What problems did you encounter?
 - ii. How did you solve these problems?
7. At what level did you take your integration exam?
 - a. Why did you choose that level?
8. Do you think enough attention is paid to the possibility of learning the Dutch language during your integration?
 - a. If yes; what went well?
 - b. If not; what can/should be improved?
9. Did you have trouble learning the language? If so;
 - a. What problems did you encounter?
 - b. Did you get help with this?
 - i. If yes;
 1. Who helped you?
 2. How was this solved?
 - ii. If not;
 1. What needs to be done to improve this problem?
10. To what extent do you think that social integration policies successfully address the language barrier that refugees face?
 - a. Do you have examples where this was or was not the case?
11. Are you aware of the new law that will enter into force in 2021?
 - a. If yes; what do you think of this change?
 - b. If not; ‘from 2021, municipalities will be responsible for arranging the integration. In addition, refugees will learn the language at the highest possible level they are capable of. Each refugee will then receive an actual integration program, which will include this language level. There will also be more room for gaining practical experience’. What do you think of this?
12. Do you plan on staying in the Netherlands?

Conclusion

Would you like to add something, or do you have any questions or comments?

Then I would like to thank you again for your participation in this study and the time you have made available for this.