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Capturing Moments in the Social Space of European Integration Training

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ABSTRACT



This study examines how social space is produced within the context of language education for adult migrants and refugees. Drawing on ethnographic observations of classroom interactions in Finland and Germany, and utilizing Henri Lefebvre's theory of moments (2002/1961) and the production of social space (1991/1974), the study explores markers of social affiliation and atmosphere that are essential for active participation in a new linguistic environment.

Introduction

This study investigates social space and markers of social affiliation in adult migrants' and refugees' language education through Henri Lefebvre's conceptual triad of social space (1991/1974) and theory of moments (2002/1961). Lefebvre's ideas enable the use of spatial imagination when examining human interaction in educational settings involving diverse participants. Through this theoretical lens, the aim is to integrate the individual and the collective, while foregrounding the dimensions of "time" and "space" (see Elden, 2004, p. xvii). The theory of moments implies a conceptualization of temporality, even though it does not directly correspond to conventional understandings of chronological time, and the spatial triad articulates the multifaceted nature of space—together enabling a dialogue between theoretical texts from different historical periods and the contemporary realities they inform. This broad perspective is particularly relevant in our hyperconnected and globalized world (Larsen & Beech, 2014), where technological developments shape everyday interactions.

Despite increasingly remote modes of participation, this study argues that educational spaces should remain social, allowing participants to engage in a mix of interpersonal relationships (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, 2024) and learn from others' trajectories, fostering a sense of togetherness (Brown & Schweisfurth, 2024). The active production of social space—here, through the use of a new language—shows potential for similar participation beyond the classroom. Importantly, in adult migrant language education, where language serves as both the goal and the medium, participation reflects progress in learning (Lynett, 2019).

Migration, however, involves change, which can be challenging. Disruption to everyday routines lies at the heart of Henri Lefebvre's concept of moments (Elden, 2004, p. 170). Moments break through the dull monotony of our "taken-for-granted" everyday life, yet the personal is also part of the social totality; our individual experiences are connected to those of others across different times and places (Shields, 2005, pp. 58–62). In the current educational context, capturing moments means recognizing reflections of human connection amid circumstances of change.

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The concept of atmosphere is relevant here; it is something we sense before we can identify its details or fully comprehend it intellectually (Pallasmaa, 2014). Within the scope of this study, atmosphere matters because it influences participation. Furthermore, rather than viewing adult migrants and refugees as a group associated with risk (Koyama, 2015) or focusing on the harmful ways in which social space is produced (Leander, 2002), this study emphasizes the positive aspects. The research questions are: How is social space produced in adult migrants' and refugees' language education? What reflections of Lefebvrian moments can be observed? And what can be learned from comparing two cases?

Combining this theoretical approach with comparative ethnography offers a fresh perspective on investigating European integration training. Specifically, this study compares two cases of language instruction that align with the target goals of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) and the objective of supporting social participation through language education (e.g., OECD, 2023, p. 70). Problematizing integration training is especially timely in national contexts such as Finland, which is currently reorganizing and financing its integration services (Finnish Reform of the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration, Finlex 681/2023). The local turn in migration services has already been recognized as a complex issue in Germany (Aydar, 2022; Kühn, 2018; Tjaden & Spörlein, 2025).

The rationale for this international comparison (Walford, 2001) lies in Germany's longer history of organizing integration services for large numbers of migrants, compared to Finland. However, both settings now share similar preconditions, shaped by related policy changes (see Phillips & Ochs, 2003), such as the development of integration services under tighter budgets. In both contexts, political debates emphasize migrants' personal responsibility for their integration, alongside the introduction of independent language study using technology. To address the educational challenges posed by these complex integration service contexts, especially in local governments with limited prior experience, qualitative analysis of language education should complement existing registry data on migration (see Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020; Kettunen, 2021).

Adult education in globalizing societies has the potential to bridge hierarchical divides between “the local” and newcomers within shared social spaces (Kinnunen et al., 2017; Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 33). In rural areas, community life often revolves around social gatherings and institutional activities, which serve as key sites of belonging and interaction (Ford, 2015). However, these spaces are not isolated; they are increasingly influenced by broader societal and global developments (Cervone, 2017; Kumpulainen, 2012). This study's empirical data is drawn from two urban settings—European cities where the urban context is subtly revealed through participants' references to their everyday environments. Mentions of local supermarkets and city traffic, for example, serve as everyday markers of urban life and spatial experience. In these urban contexts, social affiliation is frequently strained by the expansion of large metropolitan areas, often to the detriment of smaller cities and rural regions (Sotarauta et al., 2021). Such shifts can erode local social structures and narrow individuals' perceptions of others (Hernes, 2021). Urban space is paradoxical: it can alienate and disconnect individuals from cultural, social, and human contexts, while simultaneously offering grounding, acceptance, and a sense of connection (Pallasmaa, 2021, p. 75).

Whether urban or rural, adult migrants' and refugees' language education and its development are part of both local and global issues of active participation. Through language, we produce social spaces; “every discourse says something about a space [...] and every discourse is emitted from a space” (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 132). This study makes an original contribution to knowledge by analyzing human interaction through a comparative case study approach focused on the production of social space in two settings. More significantly, it offers an empirical application of Lefebvre's lesser-known theory of moments, thereby introducing a novel conceptual lens to educational scholarship—one that has received limited attention in empirical research, particularly within the field of adult education.

The next section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theories of moments and the production of space, followed by a definition of atmospheres. The methodology

details a comparative ethnographic approach grounded in Lefebvrian spatial analysis. The Results section presents two ethnographic episodes that illustrate how social space is produced in the language classroom, how moments emerge, and how these moments shape the atmosphere. Finally, the cases are compared, leading to conclusions and directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Capturing Moments

Henri Lefebvre's theory of moments aligns with this study's focus on everyday life and the value of analyzing human communication (Lefebvre, 1961/2002, pp. 341–342). Moments are manifestations of what might be called everyday utopianism (Gardiner, 2004, p. 243). They introduce something vital that intensifies everyday life, its performance, communication, and enjoyment (Lefebvre, 1961/2002, p. 352). Moments transform the monotony of daily routines into “festivals” by imposing new social forms on spontaneous ambiguity (Lefebvre, 1961/2002, p. 352). From my perspective, this means that moments disrupt the structure of familiar routines by introducing unpredictability (spontaneity), an element that breaks the felt monotony of everyday life through unexpected, and therefore ambiguous, social interaction. A moment is a fleeting, intensely euphoric sensation; it resists commodification and is not easily reappropriated by consumer capitalism. Instead, it serves as an “escape hatch” from the alienated condition of everyday life—an experience that can arise unexpectedly, anywhere, and at any time (Shields, 2005, p. 58).

Here, moments are interpreted as markers of hope. As Lefebvre writes, “structures of society influence our everyday life, but we produce the everyday life [...] with our conditions of life, as well as the possibilities for changing our situation” (1961/2002, pp. 110–111). From the perspective of this study, a trusting classroom atmosphere fosters authentic expressions of both positive and negative experiences, which in turn contribute to a sense of human connection. In light of Lefebvre's idea, the classroom becomes a space where the dynamics of everyday life can be reconfigured. Within this setting, the teacher—by virtue of their institutional authority and pedagogical expertise—and the learners—through their choices in how they engage with peers and the teacher—can actively reshape their roles. While society may position migrants primarily as passive recipients of integration efforts, the language classroom offers a counter-space where learners can assert themselves as active subjects. In doing so, they challenge prevailing societal structures and reimagine their own positionalities as adult learners.

Greil Marcus's (1989, p. 144) definition of Lefebvre's moments is particularly descriptive:

Moments of love, hate, poetry, frustration, action, surrender, delight, humiliation, justice, cruelty, resignation, surprise, disgust, resentment, self-loathing, pity, fury, peace of mind, those tiny epiphanies, in which the absolute possibilities and temporal limits of anyone's existence are revealed.

The abstract—therefore timeless and contextless—nature of moments makes them particularly relevant to this study, in which globally diverse individuals with different socio-historical backgrounds come together and produce social space through interaction. While the goal of “capturing moments” may be challenging, it becomes more approachable when considered alongside the concept of the production of social space.

The Production of Social Space

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of social space (1974/1991) emphasizes the social and processual nature of space. Social space consists of constantly evolving processes that are produced simultaneously as both abstract and concrete spaces (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 288). Importantly, Lefebvre's approach is not binary but triadic. The dimensions of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces are not mutually exclusive but overlapping. These correspond to the related concepts of perceived, conceived, and lived space.

Spatial practice, associated with perceived space, links daily routines with urban reality. It is empirical and positivistic, concrete, sensory, and material. This commonsense perception is self-evident and tied to the everyday use of space, illustrating how societal and material frameworks manifest in local practices. It involves the use of the body, hands, limbs, and sensory organs. Representations of space, or conceived space, is the dominant space in any society or mode of production. It consists of conceptualized, often abstract, understandings of space; systems of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs. Conceived space includes official definitions and discourses, logical information, and formal structures such as statistics, plans, and documents created by administrators, planners, researchers, and developers who shape and control the production of space.

Representational space is the space of “inhabitants” and “users,” whose imaginations seek to change and appropriate it. It overlays physical space by making symbolic use of its objects and tends toward more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, pp. 38–40). Lefebvre (1991/2002, p. 284) defines a symbol as something that “includes and excludes, by bringing members of one particular group closer together, while excluding other individuals and groups”. Symbols, therefore, both reveal and conceal group membership. They are not neutral; rather, they constitute systems of meaning and carry direct emotional (affective) power (Lefebvre, 1991/2002, p. 286), as will be further exemplified in the empirical analysis.

Following Lefebvre, language education is both abstract and concrete. It encompasses conceptions, such as plans and documents created by specialists and policymakers, and the actions of individuals who are bodily present in physical space, engaging with daily routines and commonsense perceptions. Lefebvre’s spatial triad has been empirically applied to various contexts, including offices (Kinnunen et al., 2017) and villages (Kumpulainen, 2012), affirming its continued relevance in contemporary settings such as 21st-century Finland. Similarly, the notion of capturing moments endures—not as a utopian ideal, but as an everyday potential (Elden, 2004, pp. 117–120; Gardiner, 2004). Here, moments are understood as instances of human connection enabled by interaction, creating emotionally resonant memories that stand out from the otherwise monotonous flow of daily life. These moments are not dream-like, unattainable ideals of interpersonal bonding, but rather real possibilities for experiencing vivid and meaningful human interaction within the everyday. They do not rely on external efforts to create festivity but emerge as inner sensations of fulfilment—offering hope and grounding, and thus representing a genuine potential for real-life connection rather than merely a theoretical construct.

The Concept of Atmosphere

According to Hermann Schmitz (2023), “atmosphere” is a sensorial and affective quality that permeates space, a tone that shapes how we experience our surroundings. It refers to something without visible boundaries, yet it envelops us, resonates within our lived body, and draws us into shared emotional and spatial experiences. Emotions and moods are thus spatially extended and collectively felt. A central concept is the felt body, which is affected by emotional atmospheres. It is neither body nor soul, but an entity that is spatially extended in a way similar to sound. Communication through the felt body can begin without direct contact; it represents a fundamental form of perception. Studying atmospheres involves analyzing unintentional or involuntary experiences, particularly those that emotionally “tonalize” our everyday life.

Methodologies

This study employs directed content analysis and comparative ethnography as its primary methods. The data consist of ethnographic field notes documenting interactions between participants in adult migrants’ integration training in Finland and Germany, specifically, between language teachers and students. These field notes were analyzed using Lefebvre’s theoretical concepts and

the notion of atmospheres. The following chapters provide a more detailed description, beginning with the analytical approach.

Lefebvrian analysis explores the complex rhythms of social relationships in the ongoing production of space, considering both latent and active forces, human and non-human elements, and both sound and silence (Christie, 2013). This form of analysis is more attuned to moods than to images, and to atmosphere rather than specific events (Lefebvre, 2004, pp. 87–88; Löfgren & Ehn, 2010). In the observed exchanges, both formal and informal aspects were valued: “The specific does not preclude the formal [...] and the particular does not preclude the general” (Lefebvre, 1961/2002, p. 180, as cited in Gardiner, 2004, p. 238). This reflects the idea that even a focus on specific, individual cases can yield broader insights into social phenomena. Following comparative ethnography, the unit of analysis is process and practice rather than outcome; a “case” is something discovered through the research process (Simmons & Smith, 2019). One goal is to identify linkages between communities that ultimately form global systems (Angrosino, 2007), that is, the broader social, economic, political, and cultural forces that shape the environments in which ethnographic research takes place. In this study, this entails comparing globally diverse communities of actors rather than focusing solely on national contexts.

The ethnographic fieldwork took place in two phases: two weeks in Finland (summer 2016) and two weeks in Germany (late 2017). The researcher (first author) accessed two educational institutions, each with over 40 years of experience. She selected the sites carefully (Walford, 2001) for their size, urban setting, labor-market-oriented integration training aligned with CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), and qualified staff. This was especially relevant in Germany, where demand had led to a rise in small, less-established language providers. At each site, the researcher observed five groups in Finland and nine in Germany, attended events and meetings, interacted with students and staff, photographed settings, and conducted interviews (as analyzed in Häkkinen & Mikkilä-Erdmann, 2023, 2025).

The researcher observed classes quietly, sitting among the students. Instructors taught in their native languages, which differed from the students’ socio-cultural backgrounds (see Lynett, 2019). The instructors had 20 and 5 years of experience, respectively, and held formal qualifications in Finnish or German language instruction. The researcher, whose first language is Finnish, had studied German in Germany, worked as a language teacher in Finland, and was also a parent in Finland. She was familiar with educational budgeting, some participants’ cultures and languages, and life in a new linguistic environment, though not as a refugee. She approached European integration training as an outsider (Delamont et al., 2018, p. 71). Ethical standards, including the European Union’s GDPR-compliant research data policy, were followed throughout.

Although the observation phase was initially structured, early classes revealed that free-form notes more effectively captured interaction and atmosphere than formal metrics (see Walford, 2009). Taking notes discreetly among participants felt more natural than using official forms. The resulting data consist of 118 handwritten A5 pages of descriptive field notes (Jeffrey, 2018, p. 113), which are used extensively throughout this article to illustrate theoretical concepts (see Emerson et al., 2001).

The analysis began with a thorough reading of all field notes. Early engagement with Lefebvre’s theory of the production of social space—and increasingly, his theory of moments—suggested a focus on human connection in classroom interactions, particularly through humor and emotional support. Out of 54 observed classes, two stood out: a standard integration course in Finland and a slower-paced literacy course for learners new to the Latin alphabet in Germany. Using directed content analysis, the researcher applied theoretical concepts to identify codes (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and to conceptually validate the theoretical framework (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Existing theory supported the identification of relationships between codes by predicting relevant variables and connections (Assarroudi et al., 2018). Key concepts included Lefebvre’s (1974/1991, pp. 39–40) dimensions of social space: the perceived, conceived, and lived.

To address instances where the theoretical framework felt too abstract, the researcher color-coded references to time and place and underlined verbs to track and compare communication patterns between the cases. Comparing two ethnographies revealed aspects that might have been overlooked if the focus had been limited to a single site (Simmons & Smith, 2019, p. 14), such as pedagogical traits. Further analysis, informed by Lefebvre's work and the verbalization of even less salient behaviors, enriched the findings (Löfgren & Ehn, 2010, p. 171). Silences, pauses, sighs, and laughter (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Leander, 2002) also gained meaning. Laughter, for instance, could signal joy, sarcasm, or frustration—highlighting how meaning is constructed in lived space.

Results

The following section presents two sample episodes of ethnographic observation, using pseudonyms. All communication took place in Finnish (Episode 1) and German (Episode 2). The order of the extracts follows the natural flow of each class.

Episode 1: Urban Scenery and Finnish Nature in Exam Aftermath

Integration training in Finland, 8:40 a.m. Ten participants and the instructor are present in the classroom. The group's first languages include German, Estonian, Polish, Russian, Albanian, and Arabic. At the beginning of the class, the instructor introduces me. I greet the students and take a seat among them.

Lived Space of Participants

The class begins. The instructor starts writing on the interactive board. A student enters the classroom late, interrupting the flow, but the instructor responds with humor: "Long time, no see [sic, said in English]," said the sailor!

He continues writing on the board: "This sentence was in your exam yesterday." A student asks about a different version of the sentence she had written in her exam. The instructor exclaims, "Correct!" The student smiles and waves her hands excitedly.

The instructor improvises an example sentence, referring to a student in the class: "Silke is pregnant."

He also quotes an exercise: "How long have you been living in Finland?" and adds, "This was our first week's question." Waving a sheet of paper, he announces that the language test results have arrived.

A student begins to say, "The examiner said that if you cheat, all..."

And the instructor finishes the sentence: "...is failed!" This makes many of the students laugh, and they begin joking about the examiners.

The instructor's humorous greeting to the student reflects Lefebvre's observation that "social groups take as their starting point magical words and actions, designed to protect moments that become rituals of everyday social life: greeting, blessing, shaking hands, etc." (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 171). From a rule-based perspective, the student's late arrival might be considered rude. However, the instructor's calm response reflects a nonjudgmental atmosphere within the classroom. This moment highlights the fleeting boundaries between external and internal worlds: when the student enters the classroom space, the classroom also enters the student, shaping his experience (see Pallasmaa, 2014, p. 20).

The instructor's choice of humor over authority manifests solidarity. This is especially possible at the end of the course, when the instructor faces less pressure to enforce rules such as strict attendance recording. The students' visibly relieved reaction to the instructor's validation of a

linguistic query fosters a sense of social affiliation; the community is on her side, even though the assessment of her high-stakes exam lies in the hands of others. Similar tokens of trust emerge when the instructor refers to a pregnant student's physical state, an observation that might otherwise be considered indiscreet. I interpret the atmosphere through the lens of the felt body: I could sense the presence of the pregnancy—not through my physical body or sensory perception (see Schmitz, 2015, pp. 15–16), but through the idea of someone being pregnant, shaped by my own prior experience of pregnancy.

The spontaneous exchanges, which also recall the group's shared history, demonstrate how participants collectively make meaning of their lived space, positioning themselves as “us” in contrast to the “them” of the examiners, representing the conceived dimension of their social space (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, pp. 39–40).

Conceived Space of Frontal Relations

The class continues with a discussion about another test, an entrance exam for a course designed to prepare adults for the labor market following integration training.

A student exclaims, “We'll have a Valma test!”

Silke responds, “I'll come there with the baby!”

The instructor advises, “When you write the application, it says that Finnish skills must be at level A2.2, but that's modest. A2.2 is very modest. If someone has B1, they usually go to study elsewhere.”

Silke replies, “All the Valma instructors say it's not even A2.2—it's lower.”

Instructor: “Yes, you repeat a lot of what was done during integration training.”

Suddenly, a voice from the classroom loudspeaker interrupts: “Sorry for the interruption. An information event will start in the auditorium at nine o'clock. An interpreter will be present.”

The participants' exchanges reference a conceptualized dimension of space—a system of verbal, intellectually constructed signs linked to production relations (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, pp. 38–39). Hierarchy and power relations are reflected in the skill level codes A2.2 and B1, as well as in the high-stakes “Valma” test. Interestingly, the pregnant student's exclamation transforms this conceived space into a lived space of “inhabitants” and “users,” which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 39). The student also challenges the commonly referred levels of difficulty, which the instructor validates. Once again, their meaning-making turns the conceived space of language education into the lived space of its users (ibid.).

The announcement represents institutional power. It interrupts the flow of the lesson, thus exemplifying “frontal” relations (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 33). Although the instructor had previously criticized this initiative in a private conversation with me, he remains neutral in front of the group. His personal meaning-making, embodying complex symbolism, contributes to the production of social space (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 33).

Lived Space of Symbolism

The instructor continues writing on the interactive board and cites a sentence to be completed: “When it is hot, I go swimming...” followed by options: in the sea/lake/river/[name of a local area].

A student exclaims, “In river X!” [referring to a local river]. The instructor responds, “No, not there. If you go there, they'll come in a red car and get you—tuutuu...” imitating the sound of an ambulance. “In X [the student's former home city], you may go...”

The student mumbles, “No... but a good place for a suicide.”

The students continue working on the assignment. Suddenly, one of them asks, “What is ‘norppa?’ [Eng. ringed seal]. The instructor searches Google, places an image on the smartboard, and writes “norppa.”

A student shows his mobile phone: “I looked for it!” Another asks, “But who makes the hole?” A third student speaks in Russian and is met with a playful, mock-angry look from the instructor.

Then, a student says in Finnish, “vesipossu” [Eng. water pig]. The instructor places a picture of a ringed seal’s nest on the smartboard.

The group appears accustomed to their roles: some comment spontaneously, while others remain quiet. In their exchange about deviant behavior, a reference is made to a European metropolis. In the teacher’s comment, one can interpret a symbolic reference to group membership—an expectation that the student understands what it means to live in a city environment, where one may witness distressing incidents as an anonymous observer. For Lefebvre, symbols—such as the life of a large city—both reveal and conceal social affiliations, and form systems of meaning (Lefebvre, 1991/2002, pp. 284–286). This symbolic representation of lived space also connects to the clandestine or underground dimensions of social life (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 33). The symbolism here carries emotional resonance, much like my own reaction to this exchange; the brief dialogue lingers in my memory.

The exchange illustrates a reference to the atmosphere of a city: “the subjective experience of urban reality shared by its people” (Böhme, 2016, as cited in Schmitz, 2023, p. 85), which the student introduces into the social space by drawing on her own urban background. This contribution adds an atmospheric dimension that reflects a realistic perspective on adult life, one that also acknowledges its more somber aspects.

After a break and the info event, two more students enter considerably late. The instructor greets them: “The Kosovo bus has arrived!” Then, turning back to the class, he says, “So, how much? [Are there ringed seals in Finland?] Let’s see...” as he searches on his computer in front of the class. “Wikipedia doesn’t know...”

Student: “On the WWF site, 320,” he says, showing his mobile phone.

The instructor then places a picture of a fly agaric from Google Images on the smartboard and writes next to it: “kärpässieni (don’t eat!)”

Student: “Good food for mother-in-law!”

Instructor: “...and the eyes roll like in a slot machine in the hallway of Citymarket [a local hypermarket]”

The instructor’s humor acknowledges cultural identity. The students’ smiling responses and relaxed body language indicate a shared understanding. To me, they convey a sense of contentedness—calm, not arrogant, but a composed self-confidence (Schmitz, 2019)—which affirms rather than disrupts my perception of a harmonious classroom atmosphere. Implicitly, elements of a perceived space begin to emerge: routes that link the places designated for work, “private” life, and leisure (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 38). The students take turns leading the interaction, which resembles a form of play. They also draw a connection between tame Finnish animals and wild Finnish men, thereby reinventing the play in a new way (Elden et al., 2003, p. 174).

Moments as (Possible and Impossible) Forms of Communication

The group moves on to discuss clothing vocabulary:

Instructor: “Let’s take a look at our book.”

A student refers to the protagonists: “In the first book, they were friends; in the second, they got married...”

Instructor: “...in book three, they have children; in book four, they get divorced—normal process.” [laughter]

A student thinks aloud: “The bride wears a white dress because she’s happy. But why does the groom wear a black suit?”

Another student adds: “I want to buy a ‘jumpsuit’ for the baby!”

The instructor writes on the board: potkupuku [Finnish for “jumpsuit”], potkia [“to kick”], and antaa potkut [“to get fired”].

Student: “To kick out!”

Instructor: “In Finnish, please! I do know what it is in English.”

Applying the newly learned word, the student says to a peer: “Hey, there’s this really good offer on potkupuku at Citymarket!”

Peer: “Oh, I want to buy that too!”

Student: “Yeah, let’s meet up there!”

Referring to Western traditions, the group learns new vocabulary as a student initiates a topic, which the instructor then turns into a language learning opportunity. This creates a rhythm. To grasp rhythm, Lefebvre (2004, p. 27) writes: “one must let oneself go... like in music and the learning of a language (in which one truly understands the meanings and connections when one comes to produce... spoken rhythms)”. Between moments of free-flowing interaction, the instructor briefly reasserts authority to steer the learning process. The social relationships within the group, expressed through communication, echo a Lefebvrian moment: “The form in which I present myself to the other is also that in which the other presents himself to me... I recreate, reinvent the game through the way I play it, and in a new way on each occasion” (Elden et al., 2003, p. 174). This spontaneous exchange can be seen as a moment that balances between the possible and the impossible in communication (Lefebvre, 1961/2002, p. 347). By ‘possibility,’ I refer to the potential to deviate from the typical classroom conduct observed in both Finnish and German educational settings, where the teacher speaks and the students primarily listen—especially when the students are still developing the language skills required for classroom interaction. Beyond the question of who speaks and when, I am also concerned with what can or cannot be said spontaneously in the classroom. The extract above illustrates a relaxed and playful interaction, which is not always characteristic of this educational context. It therefore represents a moment that balances between what is communicatively possible and impossible. The adult learners’ subjectivity transforms the conceived space of language education into the lived space of its users, where their own meaning-making plays a central role—indicating active participation.

Epilogue 1

The social space analyzed in this classroom revealed aspects of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces. The classes took place after the students’ high-stakes language exam, which likely contributed to the sense of relief I observed. Interestingly, this closure of integration training marks the transition from a structured social space to one in which students continue their lives in a new environment, now without the daily language class. The atmosphere was characterized by informal remarks, positive non-verbal cues such as smiles and laughter, and a great deal of humor. I noticed that some individuals’ positive energy spread throughout the group, “leaving them floating in lightness” (Schmitz, 2023, p. 120). I captured moments of spontaneity and boldness in expression, particularly among students, as they actively co-produced the social space alongside their instructor, doing so almost entirely in the new language.

Episode 2: Sympathy and Struggle at German Chalkboard

The German literacy class is about to begin. It is 8:30 in the morning. The instructor introduces me, and I speak briefly. A student surprises me by bringing coffee from the vending machine

in the hallway and offers me a seat next to him. Seven students are present, and their first languages are Arabic and Persian.

Moments of Presence through Care

The class begins with the workbook, and today's topic is sports. At the instructor's request, students exchange books to check each other's homework. One student walks up to the chalkboard to write the answers to the exercise. As he writes slowly, the others offer verbal suggestions, along with the instructor, who says:

"Don't write all the words together, leave a little space," the instructor advises. When the student finishes, the instructor walks to the board, reads the text aloud, makes small edits, and invites another student to come forward.

In the middle of the activity, a student enters the classroom 40 minutes late. The instructor greets him and asks, "Have you caught a cold? You always take turns; yesterday it was Ahmed, now it's you."

The student doesn't respond much.

Instructor: "Did you take the kids to daycare? Is everything all right?"

Meanwhile, another student takes a turn at the chalkboard, wipes it clean, and begins writing.

A third student comments, "It's gotta be 'i'!" Some students speak in Arabic, prompting the instructor to respond: "Hey, in German again, please!"

In this instance, the instructor engages students physically by stepping aside and directing them to the chalkboard, rather than providing or stating the correct answers herself. When students exchange books, the social space reflects their peer relationships. By incorporating students' physical movement, the instructor shifts the power dynamics, allowing them to take charge at the front of the class—an area typically controlled by the instructor. Atmospherically, students influence one another through a form of solidaric, felt-bodily communication, in which they are connected by a shared "integrating topic," even without direct interaction. Although such interaction is difficult to capture empirically, this empathic connection plays a key role in social integration (Gugutzer, 2020).

When a student arrives late, the instructor expresses concern rather than irritation. She adapts her communication by referencing the student's family and daily routines, gently acknowledging his physical state with a lighthearted joke. Observing the instructor, I am reminded of Lefebvre's notion of "moments," which are "those times when one recognizes or has a sudden insight into a situation or an experience beyond the merely empirical routine of some activity" (Shields, 2005, p. 58). The instructor prioritizes student participation over asserting authority. She appears to recognize the power of atmosphere and intentionally fosters a sense of comfort for her students. This is noteworthy because the teacher's choice of behavior may leave a lasting impression on the student—a memory of a sympathetic rather than distant approach. Such an experience can offer emotional support not only within the classroom but also in other contexts of the student's life. According to Schmitz (2023, p. 48), this sense of comfort is not tied to a specific location; instead, it accompanies the individual wherever they go.

Toward Fully Lived Engagement

As the group moves on to another activity, the instructor once again engages a student by inviting him to switch roles with her:

Instructor: "Hey Ali, I'll draw that grid for you, write it on the board, I'll take your seat."

Ali walks to the board.

While sitting among the students, the instructor notices how some of them use their mobile phones to “cheat.”

Instructor: “Hamza, hey, I see you...” she says, playfully pretending to be angry.

Ali writes on the chalkboard, and the other students guide him as he writes. They comment on his handwriting, particularly the letter “y,” prompting the instructor to exclaim: “Hey, come on now, it’s a *Ypsilon*, all right? Everyone writes it differently.”

When a student asks for paper in Arabic, the instructor gently redirects: “Oh, but ask again in German!”

She then turns to a student sitting next to her: “You do yoga, meditation?”

Student: “Yes, next week again.”

Instructor: “Oh, but Adil and Amani say: ‘But Daddy, we want to go to the playground!’” she responds, smiling warmly.

The students are highly engaged, and their way of correcting and supporting their peer reflects a strong ambition toward learning. The instructor fosters and reinforces the group’s sense of affiliation by defending a student whose performance is being discussed. She also demonstrates deep familiarity with her students’ family lives. By rearranging the physical positions in the classroom, she shifts the “frontal relations” of the social space. Non-normative social and spatial practices begin to emerge, revealing new configurations of social relations and space (see Lefebvre, 1974/1991, pp. 33–40).

Space is directly lived through its associated images and symbols. The teacher’s pedagogical choices, such as inviting students to lead at the chalkboard, can be interpreted as symbolic acts that foster inclusion and shared agency. Symbols function to include and exclude, thereby shaping group identity (Lefebvre, 1991/2002, p. 284). Simultaneously, images appeal to affectivity, provoking emotional resonance and movement within the subject (Lefebvre, 1991/2002, p. 287). This is evident, for example, when the teacher defends a student who is being criticized by peers, and when she expresses empathetic understanding toward an adult learner’s role as a parent. Such affective recognition constitutes an image—a social act that is projected toward the learner and elicits a reciprocal emotional response (Lefebvre, 1991/2002, pp. 288–289). The teacher’s insistence on using only the German language further reinforces group cohesion, while her emotional acknowledgment of the learners’ multifaceted roles exemplifies how images and symbols co-construct the lived space of the classroom.

When the teacher returns to her role as authority, she does so with humor. Her reference to a student’s children links the language classroom, as a perceived space, with the daily routines and urban realities of life, connecting the domains of work, “private,” and leisure that Lefebvre (1974/1991, p. 38) argues are interwoven throughout everyday life.

Fighting Alienation

This time, the instructor activates students by addressing them one by one in German:

Instructor: “Amir, do you still do sports?”

Amir: “No, not anymore.”

Instructor: “Why?”

Amir responds in Arabic, and another student translates into German.

One student remains quiet.

Instructor: “Hassan, do you do gymnastics?”

Hassan: “No...” He begins to talk about his sports hobby, but only in a few words.

Instructor: “Form a full sentence, please.”

Hassan responds, seemingly hurt: “I’m sorry, I’m trying, but I have a lot of worries in Germany... I have a meeting with a lawyer, but some receipts are missing.”

Another student joins in: “I’ve got a problem with a rent increase.”

The instructor looks at him sympathetically and promises to look up a social pedagogue during the break. She then turns to a student who seems absent-minded: “Have you caught a cold? Would you like some water?” He shakes his head.

Instructor: “Are you sure? Let’s open the window.”

She returns to her desk at the front of the classroom: “Okay then, let’s listen. This is how it will be in the exam too—you’ll have to listen.”

Moments arise between full engagement and alienated withdrawal (Shields, 2005, pp. 40–41). Hunger, thirst, fear, or pain affect the individual in a perceptible way (Schmitz, 2019, pp. 64–66, in Gugutzer, 2020). In this case, a student withdraws from learning, prompting a peer to express frustration. The instructor steps in, offering support and demonstrating solidarity. She turns the situation into a learning opportunity by asking the student to bring his official letter to class.

The instructor then returns to the official agenda, preparing the students for their exam. Her approach to meaning-making within the social space transforms it into a lived space for the students, while still operating within the framework of conceived space, defined by institutional norms and goals (see Lefebvre, 1974/1991, pp. 38–40). The instructor’s choice to express empathy and care in the adult refugees’ classroom is significant from a broader Lefebvrian perspective. According to Lefebvre, the quality of any society is reflected in the opportunities it offers its members for unalienated and authentic life experiences (Shields, 2005, p. 2).

Epilogue 2

After class, the instructor noted that it had been an exceptionally good day for the group. The calm, positive atmosphere I had witnessed was not always typical, as mental health struggles affecting some individuals could sometimes dominate the mood of the entire group. Joy can quickly fade in the presence of sorrow, which demands respectful attention (Schmitz, 2023, pp. 13, 77). But today, there was no anger or frustration—what stood out was the absence of tension. The group had clearly bonded, a fact the instructor confirmed, partly through the shared experience of a student’s family hardship. This trust enabled both deep engagement and quiet withdrawal. Despite some signs of fatigue, a calm atmosphere prevailed, as if the group were collectively pausing from daily life. Though exhaling is a personal, bodily act (Schmitz, 2023, p. 47), the shared atmosphere created a collective sense of ease within the social space of the adult language classroom.

Discussion

The discussion of findings centers on a comparison of the two cases, as this approach offers deeper insight than focusing on a single case and, importantly, enhances the study’s theoretical contribution (Simmons & Smith, 2019, p. 14). This ethnography is grounded in the idea that the processes related to the goals of integration services and language education are sufficiently similar across various settings to allow for comparison between aspects, such as the use of technology or expressions of humor and care. At the same time, comparing the cases for differences helps to formulate more nuanced conclusions. Next, the findings are discussed in response to the three research questions: How is social space produced in adult migrants’ and refugees’ language education? What reflections of Lefebvrian moments can be observed? And what can be learned from comparing two cases?

In response to the first research question: How is social space produced in adult migrants' and refugees' language education? the findings indicate that, in both cases, social space is initially produced as *conceived space*, referring to institutional elements such as tests, courses relevant to labor-market entry, and codes of European language proficiency levels. However, as the instructor and students collaboratively interpret these official codes and discourses, the space transforms into *lived space*. Shared meaning-making also emerges when instructors validate students' interactions in the new language. In both cases, students show respect toward their instructor, speak their own languages, and demonstrate trust by discussing personal matters. All participants challenge rules and express humor, including dark and culturally specific humor. The most evident differences appear in the concrete and perceptible *perceived space*. The spacious Finnish classroom, with student desks arranged in a U-shape, benefits from technology such as an interactive board, the instructor's PC, and students' smartphones. This setup influences the rhythm of interactions and the use of visual support.

In contrast, the German classroom is a small space with no technology apart from students' smartphones. The instructor relies on physical materials, including a chalkboard, printed textbooks, and handouts. The use of the chalkboard encourages students' physical movement within the room, whereas in the Finnish classroom, it is primarily information that moves—between the instructor's PC and the smart board. From this perspective, the atmosphere of the physical learning environment is shaped by economic factors, legal frameworks, and social norms (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2014, pp. 109–122). Economic factors are reflected in the resources available for teaching, such as classroom equipment. Legal frameworks, such as the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration in Finland and the Residence Act in Germany, define education as a legal obligation, which in turn influences the classroom atmosphere. Social norms, embedded in Finnish and German adult education practices, are evident in how lessons unfold, including the roles of teachers and learners and the nature of their interaction. This multidimensional view emphasizes how space is not neutral but shaped by overlapping forces that influence everyday interactions in educational settings.

As a *lived space*, the Finnish classroom evokes imagined yet somewhat shared spaces through images and symbols, such as nature, urban environments, and technology platforms like Google and Facebook. In the German classroom, participants also refer to urban spaces, but more frequently to family and home, with a temporal focus on the present. While the Finnish instructor's approach appears somewhat personal and students express some peer relationships, the German instructor engages with her students even more personally, showing care for their well-being. Overall, the German classroom sequences are more instructor-initiated. Students express joy, which is closely tied to the atmosphere, and also express frustration, highlighting the significance of peer relationships.

Humorous references to cultural identity are prominent in the Finnish classroom, whereas the German instructor's humor is gentle and intended to ease tension. The tight seating arrangement in this *perceived space* also reflects the social closeness of the group. Finally, inspired by comparative analytic imagination (Delamont et al., 2018, p. 71), a thought experiment emerges: What if the instructors had swapped groups? The Finnish instructor's challenging style might not have been optimal for the German group, which appeared to benefit from a gentler approach. While speculative, this comparison offers insight into the nuances of pedagogical strategies.

The second research question was: What reflections of Lefebvrian moments can be observed? To address this question, I draw on the finding that, in both cases, I could capture moments of love, frustration, action, delight, humiliation, surprise, pity, and peace of mind (Marcus, 1989, p. 144). The German learners, in particular, were in a vulnerable situation and benefited from the instructor's care and empathy in their everyday lives. In the Finnish classroom, such moments emerged through the playful rhythm of interactions, revealing the possibilities of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1961/2002, p. 343) and pushing the boundaries of what was previously considered possible (Halvorsen, 2015). By this, I refer to the power and possibility to challenge established norms within the social space of education, challenging the positioning of adult migrants as

passive objects of integration, rather than as active subjects in language learning, participation, and interaction. My argument is that this is fundamentally about being one's adult self—an active agent in the social space—even when developing language skills may easily position a person as passive in interaction, more of a follower than someone who leads or initiates communication, as would be more natural when using one's first language in a familiar context. Even within an institutional setting such as integration training, the social space provided opportunities to reflect on one's evolving everyday life in a friendly atmosphere and to build a sense of togetherness (Brown & Schweisfurth, 2024).

Despite increasingly distanced modes of participation, this study argues that educational spaces should foster opportunities for participants to engage in diverse interpersonal relationships (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, 2024) and learn from one another's trajectories (Brown & Schweisfurth, 2024). Experiencing an atmosphere of being together “in the grip of emotions” can cultivate a powerful sense of commonality (see Schmitz, 2014, p. 59). This was especially relevant for the German learners, for whom classroom behavior was generally less familiar (see Lynett, 2019). An experience of trust appeared fundamental, paving the way for spontaneity and humor—even among the students. Both educators' pedagogical approaches deviated from a curriculum-only model, which arguably enabled the capturing of moments “characterized by playfulness, the overthrowing of orthodoxies, and attempts to ‘replace domination by appropriation’” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 171, as cited in Middleton, 2017).

The third research question asked: What can be learned from comparing two cases? The following reflections elaborate on the insights gained through comparison. This study examined globally diverse groups of participants in two European educational settings that share similar policy challenges (Walford, 2001), with a primary focus on human interaction. Adopting sociological and philosophical lenses for the analysis inevitably reduced the richness of contextual detail in the research (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). However, employing spatial imagination allowed a shift in focus—from national contexts to human interaction, and from local places to potentially global spaces of education (Larsen & Beech, 2014). By the latter, I refer to the idea of interpreting findings on human interaction and the potential for experiencing meaningful everyday moments in the two educational settings as connected to broader markers of interaction, regardless of geographic location. The heterogeneous group of participants, characteristic of integration training, challenges the binary of local and global and transforms the local place into a global space.

Henri Lefebvre used to observe Paris from his balcony, believing that to analyze social space, one must situate oneself both inside and outside (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 27). Today, we observe the world through our screens, inhabiting both inside and outside simultaneously, an experience that shapes our interactions. Looking down from a balcony—or a screen—may offer an overview, perhaps even interaction, but physically being among others on the street—or in a classroom—allows our presence to be felt in all senses. Receiving accepting glances, even smiles, may be more decisive for future participation than mastering independent learning.

Technology offers possibilities, but it is not necessarily the solution for spontaneous and meaningful exchanges that prepare language learners for offline societal spaces. Learning to speak and listen in a new language requires practice among others, and for this purpose, physical gatherings with live interaction remain essential for adult migrant language education, even in the future.

Conclusions

This study investigated how social space is produced through the language to be learned in adult migrants' and refugees' integration training. It focused on reflections of Lefebvrian moments in human interaction, exemplifying connection and participation between local instructors and adult learners. The socio-spatial approach, grounded in ethnography, was significant in acknowledging the multisensory nature of our presence in social space. The findings

demonstrate that social space plays a crucial role in human interaction, particularly when relearning a language. Social space is dynamic and actively shaped, fostering comfort that extends beyond the classroom. Adult education can cultivate a sense of belonging by offering spaces where individuals are seen and heard, leading to affective engagement in the process of language learning. Future research could explore how atmospheres are shaped in virtual spaces by asking: How does the physical positioning of participants influence their interactions? Which learner groups benefit most from technological solutions? Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of active participation across diverse social spaces—not to identify challenges, but to illuminate moments of human connection that resonate through both body and mind.

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Notes on contributors

This article concludes the doctoral dissertation of MAMiira Häkkinen, which examines language education for working-age migrants in Finland and Germany. Her research is informed by over a decade of professional experience in the global educational technology sector and by her work in language instruction across age groups.

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