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## LESLLA Country Overview: Italy

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### Abstract

The paper gives an overview of the context, policies, and educational provisions for LESLLA migrants in Italy. It highlights the shift in Italy's demography, with the transition from a country of emigrants to one of immigrants and a notable increase in the migrant population starting from the turn of the century. It discusses the difficulty in obtaining statistical data about LESLLA migrants. The second section presents the legislative framework governing the residency and citizenship language requirements for migrants and their impact on vulnerable groups, such as LESLLA learners. It also provides an explanation of the terms used in Italy to refer to LESLLA learners and learning. The third part focuses on the role of public educational institutions, particularly the CPIA (Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti), in providing literacy and language education to LESLLA learners. It notes the historical ambiguity in distinguishing the educational needs of LESLLA learners from Italian non-/low-literate adults and other migrant profiles, as well as the evolving recognition of their specific needs. The role of voluntary associations and NGOs in supplementing public education efforts is also highlighted, along with the importance of advocacy by teachers, scholars, and third-sector organisations in shaping policies and practices. The last section examines the teaching approaches adopted for LESLLA learners, noting the decreasing adoption of methods prioritising technical literacy acquisition and the increasing success of action-oriented approaches aligned with the CEFR model and empowerment stances. It underscores the need for specialised training for LESLLA teachers and the positive impact of institutional support and collaboration with universities and research centres. Despite the progress, the document calls for more stable and inclusive legislative measures to ensure the sustainability of literacy and language courses for LESLLA learners in Italy.

**Keywords:** educational opportunities, legislation, educational approaches, advocacy, teacher training

## Introduction

With this contribution, we aim to provide an overview of the educational provision for LESLLA migrants, in light of national language policies as part of migration policies (in the first section), and in the context of the Italian adult education system and its evolution (in the second section). Since the Italian education system is centralised at the national level, except for vocational training (which is the responsibility of local authorities), we focus on that level and refer mainly to relevant official sources for statistical and legislative information on literacy and second language provision. We are also interested in highlighting how a complex interplay between different actors has shaped the provision of education for LESLLA migrants, with special attention to the role of the third sector and the universities (see the second section).

Unfortunately, adult education, in general, and teaching for LESLLA students, in particular, play a secondary role in educational policies. Information on what happens in the classroom is still insufficient, referring to only limited segments of the LESLLA population. Furthermore, we cannot rely on systematic evaluation reports such as those conducted for the education of children and young adults. However, in our decades of involvement as initial and in-service LESLLA teacher trainers, we have witnessed an evolution in teaching approaches that has followed a similar development at the international level, which is worth documenting (in the third section).

Our focus is on Italy; references to broader contexts are included only where necessary to highlight international, mainly European, phenomena and trends. The Italian provision of literacy and second language education for LESLLA migrants is a constantly evolving system, which still has shortcomings that we will refer to in the conclusions.

### LESLLA Migrants in Italy: The Context

According to the Annual Report of the European Migration Network (2024), 27,383,515 third-country nationals were residing in the EU at the end of 2022, representing 6.1% of the total population. Italy aligned with European data (3,747,559, 6.4% of the total population). It is worth mentioning at the outset that Italy shifted from a country of emigrants (25 million emigrants in the century from 1870, the year of Italian reunification, to 1970) to a country of immigrants, with exponential growth: a 20-fold increase in 20 years (ISTAT, 2020).

The latest "Dossier migrazioni" (IDOS, 2023) reports that there were 5,193,669 legally residing migrants in Italy in 2022, 8.8% of the total population. Among the 198 communities present, the top five accounted for 48.4% of all foreign residents. The most numerous were Romanians (20.8%), followed by Albanians (8.4%), Moroccans (8.3%), Chinese (6.4%), and Ukrainians (4.6%). Again, in 2022, 873,680 people applied for international protection in the EU countries. The number related to Italy was more than double that of the EU average (77,200). Indeed, many of the 59 wars taking place in the world (ACLED, 2023) involve African countries, which often see Italy as a natural bridge in the Mediterranean. According to UNHCR (2023), in 2023, the number of asylum seekers in Italy reached 157,651, with the first four declared nationalities being: Guinea (18,211), Tunisia (17,322), Ivory Coast (16,005), and Bangladesh (12,169). Moreover, special protection was recognised for 53,669 refugees from Ukraine (UNHCR, 2023).

The presence of LESLLA learners within the overall migrant population is a fact, even if it is hard to estimate the exact number and even harder to estimate to what extent LESLLA migrants are involved in any language learning process due to the lack of monitoring, both at macro and meso levels.

At the meso level, the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research (INDIRE) conducted a quantitative and qualitative survey involving a

sample of state schools for adults CPIA (Cacchione, 2024 a). The results show that 70% of students attending classes below level A1 of the CEFR - Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) are LESLLA students. However, these data are merely indicative, due to some methodological difficulties identified by the author, and it would be unwarranted to project them to the national level.

At the national level, the official National Statistics Institute (ISTAT, 2021) estimates that the percentage of LESLLA migrants is around 9% of the overall migrant population. This data refers to those who:

- have never attended any school in any country (thus, probably most low literates are not included);
- are residents, thus excluding asylum seekers who are legally present in the country but have not applied for residence for various reasons (for example, their migration project is not linked to Italy).

Around a third of asylum seekers who reached Italy in 2023 came from countries with a literacy rate of less than 50%, as comes out by cross-referencing the data of the Ministry of Interior (Ministero dell'Interno, 2023) with the countries' literacy rate (World Population Review, 2024). It implies a growing presence of LESLLA migrants in the country and proportionally in its learning environments.

### Policies

Nowadays, in most Western countries, migrants applying for residency or citizenship, or even entering the country for family reunification, must demonstrate proficiency in the language of the country of resettlement. Despite Council of Europe recommendations (Council of Europe – Committee of Ministers, 2014), language tests for migration control purposes continue to spread across Europe, as the latest survey by Council of Europe and ALTE revealed (Rocca et al. 2020). Only 7 out of the 40 countries surveyed (17%) had no language and/or Knowledge of Society (KoS) requirements, and the great majority of countries did not provide exemptions from requirements for vulnerable test takers, such as refugees or LESLLA learners.

Within this scenario, as shown in Table 1, three requirements are currently in place in Italy (Presidenza della Repubblica, 2011; Presidenza della Repubblica, 2018; Ministero dell'Interno, 2021). Language requirements are stated according to the CEFR levels.

Table 1 – Language Requirements in Place in Italy

	<b>Language requirement (CEFR level)</b>	<b>Exemptions</b>
Temporary residency (DPR 179/11)	A2 only speaking with KoS elements (must be met within 2 years from the first arrival)	total exemption for EU citizens, minors under 16, refugees, family reunions, disabled people, and people with learning limitations caused by special needs, pathologies or age.
Permanent residency (Decree DI 7/12/21) can be requested after 5 years of residency	A2	total exemption for EU citizens, minors under 14, disabled people, people with learning limitations caused by special needs, pathologies or age; partial exemption for LESLLA migrants from the reading and writing components of the test.

Citizenship (DDL 4/10/18) can be applied for after 10 years of residency	B1	total exemption for disabled people, people with learning limitations caused by special needs, pathologies, or age.
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The laws in force establish four ways to comply with these legal obligations:

1. Attendance of language courses provided by a CPIA for the first two requirements (not for citizenship).
2. Passing a test administered by CPIAs to migrants not enrolled on courses for permanent residence (Masillo, 2019).
3. Acquisition of at least a lower secondary diploma (ISCED 2) awarded by a state school.
4. Passing an official language certification awarded by one of the CLIQ (Quality Italian Language Certification) institutions<sup>1</sup>.

### Terminology Related to the LESLLA Field

Scholars, educators and professionals in the field of adult literacy have long warned of the risks associated with the term “illiterate”, especially in the context of a polarised opposition between literacy and illiteracy (see, UNESCO, 2017 for an overview, Altherr Flores, 2017; DeCapua & Marshall, 2020). The term implies a stigma and overshadows the fund of knowledge on which adults build their reading and writing skills, as well as the continuum of knowledge between illiteracy and literacy, encompassing lifelong learning. Furthermore, the use of the term “illiterate” risks perpetuating a conception of literacy as a mere technical ability to encode and decode.

These considerations are present in the Italian debate. Thus, the focus has been on redefining the terms and qualifying their use (Brichese, 2018; Minuz, 2005, 2019).

A non-exhaustive review of academic publications, Italian language and literacy courses, teaching materials and training courses shows that the root *alphabet-* is prevalent in referring to the learners, the learning process and the learning outcomes:

- Learners: Learners are referred, usually, as either *adulti alfabeti* o *debolmente alfabetizzati* or *per nulla o debolmente alfabetizzati* (equivalent to non - and low-literate). The Italian translation of the European Reference Guide LASLLIAM - Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants issued by the Council of Europe for teaching planning and curricula designing (Minuz et al., 2022/2024) proposes the following terms as equivalents of ‘non-and low literate adults’; *adulti con alfabetizzazione nulla o debole alfabetizzazione* (adults with no or weak literacy) and *adulti in percorsi di alfabetizzazione e lingua seconda* (adults in literacy and second language educational paths) to shift the focus from the person to the literacy and language acquisition process. More rarely, the phrases *adulti non scolarizzati* (unschooled) and *debolmente scolarizzati/con bassa scolarizzazione* (unschooled and low-schooled/educated) occur in the relevant literature. Low-literate

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<sup>1</sup>CLIQ (Certificazione Lingua Italiana di Qualità) is an association founded in 2012 and recognised by the Ministries of Interior, Education and Foreign Affairs. It is composed of the four official certification bodies: Università per Stranieri di Perugia, Università per Stranieri di Siena, Università Roma Tre and Società Dante Alighieri (<https://www.associazionecliq.it/>).

learners are also referred to as *analfabeti funzionali* or ‘adults with low literacy skills/competences (*competenze alfabetiche*).

- Learning/teaching process: The term *alfabetizzazione* designates the learning or teaching literacy.
- Outcome of the learning process: The teaching/learning process leads to the development of *competenze alfabetiche* (literacy skills/competences), also referred to as *alfabetismo* (literacy).

The terms/phrases refer to both Italian-speaking learners and learners with a migration background. In the latter case, it is common to add ‘learning Italian’. Taken together, they refer to the initial learning/teaching of reading and writing (both as a technique and as a social practice); they, therefore, have a more restricted meaning than the English word ‘literacy’, which is polysemous and not precisely translatable into Italian. For the broad notion of ‘literacy’, the neologism *letteratismo* was coined (Alberici 1999), which is used only in specialist literature.

*Alfabetizzazione* is also used metaphorically, such as in the phrases *alfabetizzazione digitale* (digital literacy) and *alfabetizzazione finanziaria* (financial literacy).

## LESLLA Learners in the Italian Educational System

### Public Educational Provision for LESLLA Learners

The LESLLA learner emerged gradually and with difficulty as a specific figure in the Italian adult education system. Adults who needed to learn to read and write for the first time were undoubtedly present in the educational contexts that, from the late 1970s and increasingly in the 1980s, equipped themselves to respond to the demand for learning Italian as a Second language. Teaching migrants was typically conducted within or in continuity with the education of non- and low-literate Italian citizens in state and municipal schools, as well as in voluntary organisations. In these contexts, the specific educational needs of LESLLA learners were not clearly distinguished from those of other migrant profiles at initial language proficiency levels, on the one hand, nor from those of Italians with interrupted schooling, on the other. This situation was comparable to that in other countries (see, for example, McKay, 1993 for the USA).

The expression ‘literacy in the Italian language for foreigners’ (*alfabetizzazione in lingua italiana per stranieri*) reflects the undefined profiles of LESLLA learners. The name could designate either courses aiming simultaneously at the acquisition of literacy and language, or courses at an initial language level (Pre A1/A1 CEFR levels) for all learners, regardless of their level of schooling. These labels also reflect a tacit diminishment of migrants’ knowledge and competences, which becomes more apparent when considering that the corresponding foreign language courses in Adult Education are labelled ‘for beginners’.

The same ambiguity exists in the laws and the Ministry of Education's papers. The law reorganising adult education by establishing the State CTPs - Territorial Centres for Permanent Education (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1997) did not include language courses for migrants. However, two types of courses, aimed primarily at Italian citizens, also provided language (and literacy) instruction for migrants: the courses for ‘primary functional illiteracy and relapsing literacy’ and for the attainment of qualifications corresponding to compulsory schooling, starting from primary schooling (ISCED 1). In those years, the rate of Italians who were unschooled or had a low level of education was 36.5% (ISTAT, 2002).

The subsequent introduction of ‘courses for the linguistic and social integration of foreign citizens’ (abolished in 2012; see below) did not correct the identification between literacy and the initial language teaching of migrants. Official papers reiterated that those

courses should be considered “in complementary terms to [those] of primary literacy in primary schools” (MIUR, 2003).

One consequence of this frame was that the allocated staff were primary school teachers without specific training in second language teaching. A second consequence was the concealment of the diverse educational needs of the vast and heterogeneous audience of adult migrants and, precisely, the needs of LESLLA learners. Finally, the educational system left teachers to deal alone with situations for which they were unprepared. Between the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, teacher training started focusing on LESLLA learners as a response to the above mentioned problems,; moreover, the first courses/workshops in masters/graduate courses for initial teacher training and the production of handbooks expressly aimed at LESLLA learners began.

Although the growing experience of teachers and educational institutions, as well as the attention of scholars and researchers, has led to an increasing conceptual distinction (not always translated into practices) between ‘Italian language courses for migrants’ and ‘literacy and language courses’, a terminological ambiguity remains. The further reorganisation of adult education and the establishment of the State CPIA (Presidenza della Repubblica, 2012) introduced ‘literacy and Italian language learning tracks’, alongside the courses for attaining first- and second-cycle diplomas (ISCED 1/2 and 3). Thus, paradoxically, the CPIA's second language offer is now named AALI – *Alfabetizzazione e apprendimento della lingua italiana* (Literacy and Italian Language Learning), even though the courses aim exclusively to attain language certification at least at the CEFR level A2. Since the courses typically last 180 hours, they clearly exclude LESLLA learners *de facto*, as an Appeal signed by teachers, researchers, and stakeholders strongly pointed out (*Analfabetismo*, 2013).

It is noteworthy that the 130 CPIAs employ more than 6.000 teachers (Deiana, 2022) and manage to involve more than 100,000 migrants per year (108,539 in 2018; last official data).

Despite the restrictive legislation, the public system actually meets the educational needs of LESLLA learners. First, literacy and language teaching can occur within ISCED 1 and 2-degree courses, a growing trend due to the increasing number of unaccompanied minors (aged 15-18) without educational qualifications. Those classes are often heterogeneous and struggle to provide quality, targeted teaching to LESLLA learners.

Secondly, the law allows CPIAs to expand the educational offer beyond the institutional courses by finding financing from outside the Ministry of Education. Since 2014, the European AMIF - Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, managed by the Ministry of the Interior, has provided LESLLA courses throughout the country (Cacchione, 2024 a). These courses have created opportunities to experiment with innovative didactics, often in collaboration with universities, for example, in language teaching for work (Caon & Cognini, 2022). According to the last survey conducted by CLIQ - association on the 19 ongoing AMIF projects (in print), by the end of 2027, the CPIAs will offer to LESLLA learners 99 courses for level 1, 113 courses for level 2, and 305 courses for level 3, as defined by the reference guide LASLLIAM - Literacy and Second Language Teaching for the Linguistic Inclusion of Adult Migrants (Minuz et al., 2022, see below).

Finally, the guidelines of the Ministry of Interior (Ministero dell’Interno, 2025) for AMIF courses, ranging from LASLLIAM Level 1 to CEFR B1, prescribe the curriculum for LESLLA based on the LASLLIAM Reference Guide. To facilitate the attendance of migrants, complementary free services are embedded: babysitting, dedicated transport services, tutors, cultural mediators, and others.

### **The Role of the Third Sector**

As in other immigration contexts (see for Europe, Beacco et al., 2017), from the beginning, voluntary associations have played a crucial role in the language training of adult immigrants, whether national-level organisations or informal associations at the local level. This overview is not the place to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of voluntary education. We merely highlight some trends that have a positive impact on LESLLA teaching.

- Networks of associations, sometimes supported by municipalities or regions, have been established to facilitate the exchange of experience and training (as in Rome and Genoa).
- The growing demand for training has allowed the creation of experienced and knowledgeable teams of LESLLA educators within individual associations.
- The collaboration between third sector organisations and the CPIAs, expressly foreseen by the law, has sometimes enabled literacy courses to be offered. In other cases, voluntary work has acted as a substitute outside the CPIAs.

NGOs and social cooperatives, which are entrusted with managing reception centres, play a crucial role in language teaching for asylum seekers and refugees. In particular, teaching Italian was among the complementary services offered in the reception centres for asylum seekers, albeit for a limited number of hours. Teaching was provided by NGO educators, as well as by CPIAs and other stakeholders. For example, the University of Palermo provides courses for young refugees (Amoruso et al., 2015; D'Agostino, 2022). Unfortunately, the 2023 regulation repealed the Italian courses (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2023).

### **Stakeholders' Advocacy**

The advocacy action conducted by teachers and their networks/associations, scholars, and the third sector, which began as early as the 1990s (see Casi, 1996; Minuz, 2001, 2005; Vedovelli et al., 2001), has slowly led to the recognition of the need for differentiated pathways for LESLLA learners.

Forums linking different actors, such as the 'Diritto di parola' (Right to speak) network, which has been organising the 'Analfabetismo e cittadinanza' (Illiteracy and citizenship) conference since 2015, an occasion of both teacher training and debate with institutions and universities, have played an important role in this action.

### **Teaching Approaches**

The research on the approaches adopted in teaching LESLLA learners is still insufficient and not entirely reliable due to the difficulty in collecting data. There is also a lack of studies that give the learners themselves a voice, apart from anecdotal testimonies. Therefore, this section is based on indirect sources. To complement existing research, we considered (a) syllabi and curricula for Italian literacy and language learning, (b) handbooks, (c) local, national and European projects involving teachers, and (d) the training offer.

Some teachers still follow the approach that prioritises the development of technical literacy, i.e., the ability to decode and encode written language, over functional literacy, as a survey conducted among teachers from 10 CPIA shows (Cacchione, 2024 b). A further, indirect proof is the recent editorial offer, albeit minoritarian, of handbooks based exclusively on the analysis and synthesis of decontextualised words. In this approach, the development of oracy is disjointed from that of literacy.

The action-oriented approach, as outlined in the CEFR - Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its recent Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020; Piccardo & North, 2019) model, is increasingly widespread also in literacy and Italian language courses. The action-oriented approach considers "the language user/learner as

a ‘social agent,’ acting in the social world and exerting agency in the learning process”. (Council of Europe, 2020:26). This approach represents one of the key concepts of the CEFR and CEFR Companion volume, guiding the description of the communicative language competence.

The CEFR and the CEFR Companion volume focus on language learning, assuming literacy as a requisite. Since these instruments are pivotal in teaching planning, curriculum design, and assessment across Europe, syllabi, curricula, or guidelines for literacy and language learning have been proposed for several European languages (Rocca et al., 2017; Minuz et al., 2022). The first Italian syllabus dates back to 2014 (Borri et al., 2014) and served as the basis for the syllabi of the certification bodies (CLIQ, 2020). The syllabi for literacy and Italian language issued by the CLIQ Association in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) and the Ministry of the Interior, have facilitated the diffusion of approaches to literacy consistent with the principles of the CEFR in the adult education system.

A turning point was the publication of the LASLLIAM Reference Guide by the Council of Europe (Minuz et al., 2022). It complements the CEFR Companion volume for four levels below and up to the A1 level, providing descriptors for the parallel and interwoven paths of literacy and second language learning. It also presents the rationale behind the development of the descriptors, principles for teaching literacy and second languages, as well as suggestions and recommendations for curriculum design at the macro, meso, and micro levels, and for assessment procedures. LASLLIAM has the existing European syllabi among its sources, including the quoted Italian syllabus. It was promptly translated into Italian (Minuz et al., 2024 a), complemented by a new Italian syllabus (Minuz et al., 2024 b) and adapted to the Italian educational context by the CLIQ (Casi & Minuz, 2024 a, b, c).

The vision of literacy and language teaching, according to which technical literacy should go hand in hand with functional literacy, is based on the development of oracy and aims at learners' empowerment in discovering the resettlement society had already been adopted by part of the teachers and schools. For example, Paulo Freire's emancipationist approach to literacy has profoundly inspired adult education in Italy (first Italian translation: Freire, 1997). It is worth emphasising the continuity in humanistic values and teaching experience that has been passed on from the primary literacy experience with Italian dialect-speaking adults to that of migrants (Minuz, 2005). However, that vision now has stronger institutional support.

Regarding technical literacy only, the phonics methods prevail, primarily the syllabic method, which identifies the syllable as the linguistic unit from which to start the literacy teaching (Freire, 1997) and is suitable for the orthographic structure of Italian. Phonics and syllabic methods are usually combined with the analytic method (a known, meaningful word is deconstructed into smaller units, such as phonemes and syllables) in an eclectic analytic-synthetic method. This requires focusing on simultaneously analysing words and blending the sounds again (Minuz et al., 2022). The adoption of the whole-word method is decreasing (Brichese et al., 2020; Nitti, 2020).

Consistent with the above-mentioned trends, the editorial offer of literacy-and-language handbooks reflects the increasing adoption of approaches that focus on learners' communicative needs, social inclusion and empowerment.

The need for specific training for LESLLA teachers in the CPIAs has been highlighted (Cacchione, 2024 b). This is a relatively new professional role, requiring skills distinct from those of a literacy or language teacher (Arcuri & Mocciano, 2016; Arcuri et al., 2017; Bagna et al., 2016; Minuz, 2005). The relevant public agencies, individual or networked CPIAs, voluntary networks, municipalities, and universities have provided in-service training. Here, we would like to quote three institutional factors that foster educational innovation.

- The Ministry of Education has created a new position for teachers of Italian as a Second Language. This fact has introduced young teachers with specific university degrees into the educational system (Presidenza della Repubblica, 2016).
- Furthermore, the language certification system has led to the development of a parallel teaching certification system for Italian as a Second/Foreign language by important universities, to which teachers have taken advantage.
- Finally, the establishment of Regional Research and Experimentation Centres, based at a CPIA (in network with the other CPIAs of the region) and coordinated by a technical-scientific committee in which at least one university or research centre participates, has created forums for potential interchange between grassroots experiences and research.

A 2021 survey found that 86.3% of the respondent teachers had participated in training activities (Gabrielli & Benvenuto, 2024). Other places, however, allow for the exchange between teachers' experiences and research, such as the "Literacy and Italian L2: Research, practices and policies from school to voluntary work" conference, organised by the University of Palermo in connection with the 14th LESLLA symposium.

### Conclusions

The Italian context shows positive trends in literacy and language provision for LESLLA learners. Currently, the double synergy between CPIAs and the Third Sector, on the one hand, and AMIF projects, on the other, has a positive impact on the educational offer and innovation, supported by some universities and scholars. However, such synergy is not always present, and where it is, it is often with too heterogeneous forms across different regions. Most importantly, the literacy and language courses are precarious as long as legislation does not include them in the institutional CPIA educational provision. Due to the lack of institutional awareness about the formative needs of LESLLA learners, specific training for LESLLA teachers remains insufficient.

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