

# EMPOWERING UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN RURAL ITALY: THE ROLE OF LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION

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**Abstract.** *Unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) face unique challenges when arriving in Italy. To foster their integration, especially in rural contexts, a holistic approach is essential. This abstract explores the role of linguistic integration in supporting UFMs. This study represents a second phase building upon a prior research project. The initial investigation focused on a case study in a rural area in Southern Italy, providing valuable insights. Our current research extends and refines those findings, examining linguistic integration strategies for unaccompanied minors in similar rural contexts. **Actuality:** Unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) arriving in Italy face unique challenges. Initial research provided insights from a rural case study in Southern Italy. **Purpose:** Our current study extends and refines these findings. We focus on linguistic integration strategies for UFMs in similar rural contexts. Specifically, we investigate the role of language teaching and Language Assessment and Certificate. Our aim is to contribute practical solutions for enhancing integration. **Research Methods:** We combined a literature review on language certification requirements and programs with fieldwork involving interviews with UFMs, educators, and local community members. **Results:** Language proficiency is crucial for legal status. Community support mechanisms play a vital role in guiding UFMs through certification. However, inclusive policies and collaboration among stakeholders are essential. **Keywords:** integration, minorities, linguistic integration, Italy, refugees, education, **JEL:** F22, I21, J15, J60, Z13 **UDC:** 314.15(450)*

**Introduction.** The integration of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFMs) into rural Italian communities presents unique challenges and opportunities. Unlike urban areas, rural regions often lack the infrastructure and resources necessary to support the diverse needs of UFMs. However, these communities also offer a close-knit environment that can foster a sense of belonging and support. This paper explores the linguistic integration strategies tailored for UFMs in rural Italy, with a

particular focus on the role of language teaching, assessment, and certification. Language teaching is a cornerstone of linguistic integration, providing UFM s with the essential skills to communicate effectively, succeed academically, and build social connections. In rural areas, tailored language courses that consider the specific needs of UFM s, along with supportive learning environments, are crucial. The use of technology and digital tools can also play a significant role in enhancing language learning, especially in areas where access to traditional educational resources may be limited. Language assessment and certification further support the integration process by offering formal recognition of language proficiency. These assessments ensure that UFM s receive appropriate language support and provide motivation for continued learning. Certificates, such as CELI and CILS, are not only symbols of achievement but also essential tools for accessing further education, employment, and residency opportunities.

By examining the linguistic integration strategies for UFM s in rural Italy, this paper aims to highlight the importance of language teaching and certification in fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for these vulnerable individuals. Through a comprehensive analysis, we seek to understand how these strategies can be optimized to better serve the needs of UFM s and facilitate their successful integration into rural Italian communities.

**Literature review.** The integration of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFMs) into host communities is a multifaceted process that involves various social, educational, and psychological dimensions. Linguistic integration, in particular, is crucial as it enables UFM s to communicate effectively, access education, and build social connections. Research has shown that language proficiency is a key determinant of successful integration and overall well-being for migrants (Esser, 2006; Chiswick & Miller, 2001).

*Language Teaching Strategies.* Language teaching is a fundamental component of linguistic integration. Tailored language courses that address the specific needs of UFM s are essential. These courses should consider the learners' backgrounds, previous education, and trauma experiences (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). In rural areas, where traditional educational resources may be limited, innovative approaches such as blended learning and the use of digital tools can enhance language acquisition (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Studies have highlighted the effectiveness of technology-enhanced language learning in providing flexible and accessible education for migrants (Stockwell, 2007; Warschauer & Healey, 1998).

*Language Assessment and Certification.* Language assessment and certification play a critical role in the integration process by providing formal recognition of language proficiency. Certificates such as CELI (Certificato di Conoscenza della Lingua Italiana) and CILS (Certificazione di Italiano come Lingua Straniera) are widely recognized and can open doors to further education, employment, and residency opportunities (Council of Europe, 2001). Research indicates that standardized language assessments can motivate learners to continue their studies and achieve higher levels of proficiency (Alderson, 2005; Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

*Role of Technology in Language Learning and Migrant Integration.* The use of technology in language learning has gained significant attention in recent years. Digital tools and online platforms can provide interactive and engaging learning experiences, which are particularly beneficial for UFM's who may have disrupted educational backgrounds (Blake, 2013). Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have been shown to improve language skills and learner motivation (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Chapelle, 2001). Additionally, technology can facilitate personalized learning, allowing UFM's to progress at their own pace and according to their individual needs (Reinders & White, 2010).

Digitalization plays a pivotal role in facilitating the integration of migrants by providing innovative tools and resources that address their unique needs. The integration process is multifaceted, involving social, educational, and economic dimensions. Digital tools can enhance these aspects by offering personalized support, improving access to information, and fostering social connections.

Liao, Welsch, and Moutray (2008) highlight the importance of resources for successful integration, drawing parallels to entrepreneurial success. Just as entrepreneurs require resources to thrive, migrants need access to educational, social, and economic resources to integrate effectively. Digital tools can provide these resources in a flexible and accessible manner, ensuring that migrants have the support they need to succeed in their new environments.

Ntioudis et al. (2020) present the IMMERSE system, which emphasizes personalized support for migrant integration. The IMMERSE system leverages digital technology to create tailored solutions that address the specific needs of migrants. By providing personalized learning experiences and support services, the IMMERSE system helps migrants overcome barriers to integration, such as language proficiency and access to employment opportunities.

Zhang (2010) discusses the factors influencing migrant integration into urban life, stressing the importance of social and economic support systems. Digital tools can facilitate access to these support systems by connecting migrants with social services, community organizations, and employment opportunities. Online platforms and mobile applications can provide migrants with the information and resources they need to navigate urban environments and build social networks.

Simonsen and Viberg (2022) explore the use of SKANDIBOT, a chatbot designed to support second language learners. Chatbots and other digital tools can enhance language learning by providing interactive and personalized learning experiences. These tools can simulate real-life conversations, offer instant feedback, and adapt to the learner's pace and proficiency level. By improving language skills, chatbots help migrants communicate more effectively and integrate into their new communities.

Bates et al. (2014) examine the application of gamification in non-formal educational contexts, highlighting its potential in engaging and motivating Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM's). Gamified learning experiences can make education more enjoyable and interactive, encouraging migrants to participate actively in their learning process. Serious games and gamified applications can

teach language skills, cultural norms, and vocational skills, making them valuable tools for migrant integration.

Digitalization offers numerous benefits for migrant integration by providing personalized support, enhancing language learning, and facilitating access to social and economic resources. By leveraging digital tools, we can create more inclusive and supportive environments for migrants, helping them overcome barriers and succeed in their new communities.

*Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Area.* Rural areas present unique challenges and opportunities for the integration of UFM. While these regions may lack the infrastructure and resources found in urban centers, they often offer a close-knit community environment that can foster a sense of belonging and support (Hugo, 2008). Studies have shown that community involvement and support are crucial for the successful integration of migrants (Putnam, 2007). Tailored language programs that leverage local resources and community networks can enhance the integration process in rural areas (Simich, Beiser, & Mawani, 2003).

The literature highlights the importance of language teaching, assessment, and certification in the linguistic integration of UFM. Tailored language courses, supported by technology and digital tools, can address the specific needs of UFM in rural areas. Formal language assessments and certifications provide motivation and recognition, facilitating access to further opportunities. By understanding and addressing the unique challenges and opportunities in rural communities, we can develop effective strategies to support the integration of UFM and foster a more inclusive society.

**Research methodology.** The study employs an exploratory approach based on relevant literature and pertinent legislation. It critically highlights the pathways for protecting and integrating unaccompanied migrant minors. Key areas include language teaching strategies, the role of technology, and language assessment and certification. Sources include academic journals, books, conference papers, policy documents, government reports, and official guidelines. A case study at the CPIA of Benevento was conducted using qualitative methods such as interviews and observations. The focus was on language assessment processes and inclusive practices.

**Main results.** The integration of unaccompanied minors in rural Italy is a multifaceted challenge.

**Presence and Demographic Characteristics of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM) in Italy.** Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM) in Italy are notably present in regions like Sicily, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna, coming from countries such as Egypt, Ukraine, Tunisia, Gambia, and Guinea (*Figure 1*).

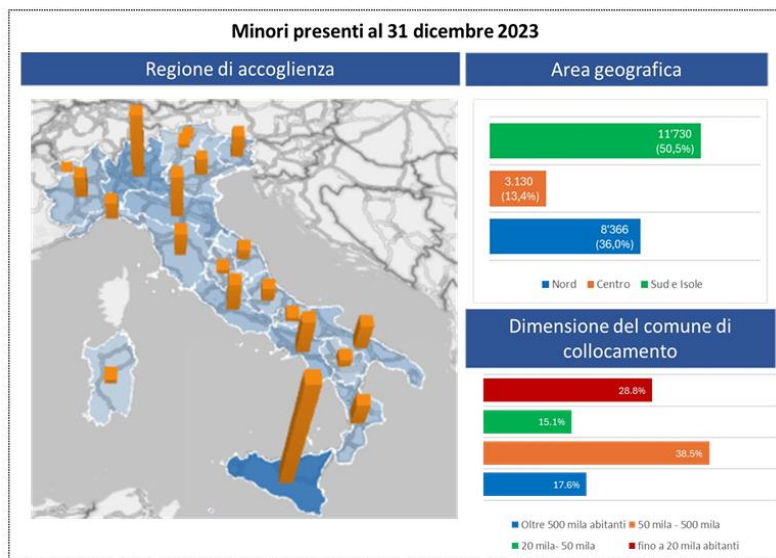


Figure 1. **Distribution of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (MSNA) present as of 31.12.2023 by geographical area, Regions, and Municipality of reception**

Source: <https://integrazioneimmigranti.gov.it/AnteprimaPDF.aspx?id=6065>

By the end of 2023, over half of these minors were in southern regions and islands, 36% in the north, and 13% in the center. They are hosted in 1,836 municipalities, with 28.8% in large municipalities (over 500,000 inhabitants), 15% in mid-sized municipalities (50,000-500,000 inhabitants), 38.5% in smaller municipalities (20,000-50,000 inhabitants), and 18% in the smallest municipalities with under 20,000 inhabitants.

Over 73% of unaccompanied minors in Italy are over 16 years old, with 46% being 17 and 27.3% being 16. Minors aged 7-14 make up 13.7%, 15-year-olds account for 11%, and those up to 6 years old represent 1.8%. The age distribution differs by gender: male minors are mostly over 16, while female minors are predominantly aged 7-14 (43.7%) and up to 6 years old (over 7%). Older female minors (16-17) make up less than 36%. The presence of minors from Ukraine significantly influences the age distribution of female minors. The Italian government supports their integration through various policies and projects, including the PUOI Project (Protection United with Integration Objective), an initiative aimed at promoting the socio-economic integration of vulnerable migrants in Italy.

**Linguistic Integration.** Linguistic integration is crucial for the social and educational inclusion of UFM. Proficiency in the Italian language enables minors to access education, interact with peers, and participate in community activities. Studies have shown that language barriers can hinder the integration process and limit opportunities for UFM. Here are some key strategies:

1. **Language Courses:** providing Italian language courses tailored to the needs of UFM's. These courses often focus on practical language skills that are essential for daily life and education.
2. **Cultural Orientation:** offering cultural orientation programs that help UFM's understand Italian customs, traditions, and societal norms. This helps them feel more comfortable and integrated into their new environment.
3. **Educational Support:** ensuring that UFM's have access to education, including support for language learning within the school system. This can include additional tutoring and language support classes.
4. **Community Engagement:** encouraging UFM's to participate in community activities and programs. This helps them build social connections and practice their language skills in real-life situations.
5. **Legal and Social Support:** Providing legal and social support to help UFM's navigate the complexities of their new environment. This includes assistance with residency permits, healthcare, and other essential services.
6. **Collaboration with NGOs:** working with non-governmental organizations that specialize in supporting migrants and refugees. These organizations often provide valuable resources and support for linguistic integration.

**Language Certification Requirements.** Language certification for immigrants is an essential tool for their integration into the host society. In Italy, language certification policies for immigrants are designed to ensure that foreign nationals have a sufficient knowledge of the Italian language, which is essential for their integration into society. To obtain an EC residence permit for long-term residents, immigrants must demonstrate knowledge of the Italian language at a minimum level of A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). For those applying for Italian citizenship, a higher level of language proficiency (B1) is required.

The language proficiency can be certified by one of the four recognized authorities:

- University for Foreigners of Perugia (CELI Certification)
- University for Foreigners of Siena (CILS Certification)
- University of Roma Tre (IT Certification)
- Società Dante Alighieri (PLIDA Certification).

Immigrants can also prove their language proficiency through an education degree obtained in Italy (e.g., Junior High School, High School, Graduation), enrollment in an Italian university course, PhD, or university master course or completion of an Italian language course at a CPIA - Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti (Provincial Centers for Adult Education).

The *CELI i* (Certificato di Conoscenza della Lingua Italiana per Immigrati) is specifically designed for immigrants. Issued by the University for Foreigners of Perugia, this certification aims to facilitate the integration of adult immigrants into Italian society. The *CELI i* exams are available at three levels:

- *CELI Impatto i* (A1 level)
- *CELI 1 i* (A2 level)

- CELI 2 i cittadinanza (B1 level)

These certificates assess Italian language competence and are recognized for various purposes, including residency and citizenship applications.

Moreover, achieving certification can motivate immigrants to continue their language learning journey and strive for higher proficiency levels. Finally, language certification helps immigrants integrate into the host society by improving their communication skills and understanding of cultural norms.

**Challenges and Considerations for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors Enrolling in Italian Courses.** Immigrants can find local language schools that offer Italian language preparation courses through several resources:

1. **CPIA (Centers for Adult Education):** these public centers provide educational activities for adults, including free Italian language courses. Each main province in Italy has its own CPIA, and you can find the nearest one by searching “CPIA + [city]” on Google (e.g., CPIA Milano).
2. **Local Organizations:** various local organizations offer free or low-cost Italian language courses. For example, in Bologna, you can find courses at *ApriMONDO Centro Poggeschi* and *Scuola d’Italiano* by Piedi Marina Gherardi.
3. **Online Platforms:** websites like Refugee.info provide comprehensive lists of language learning options, including both online and in-person courses. They also offer information on Italian language certifications and levels required for permits of stay and citizenship.
4. **Italian Language Schools:** the ASILS (Association of Schools of Italian as a Second Language) website provides a map of accredited Italian language schools across Italy. These schools offer various courses, including preparation for language certifications.
5. **University and Cultural Centers:** many universities and cultural centers offer Italian language courses. For example, the Accademia di Italiano in Milan offers long-term courses that prepare students for CILS and CELI exams.

Unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy have the right to education, including language courses, as part of their integration process. This is supported by national legislation and international agreements.

Various organizations and institutions provide support to unaccompanied minors, helping them access educational opportunities. This includes assistance with enrollment procedures and providing necessary documentation.

**Discussion and conclusions.** The analysis of human mobility processes, particularly focusing on Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFMs) and the relevant EU and Italian policies, offers a valuable opportunity to explore broader reflections on linguistic integration. The EU is focusing on integration and rural development, encouraging rural areas to play a key role in welcoming and integrating refugees and migrants.

## **Case Study: The Role of CPIA in Benevento in Migrant Integration**

*Overview of Benevento's Economy.* The economy of Benevento shares common traits with many internal areas of Southern Italy, characterized by modest industrial development, a significant tertiary sector, and a still relevant primary sector. Over half of the local workforce is employed in unskilled tertiary activities (small trade and public administration), while about 20% work in agriculture. Agriculture is fragmented and low-tech, focusing on cereals, fruits, vegetables, and tobacco, with notable wine and olive oil production. Rural activities also include livestock farming and forestry. The local industry is mainly in traditional sectors like food, textiles, construction materials, building, metallurgy, and wood. Natural beauty, thermal stations, and historical, archaeological, and religious sites (such as Padre Pio's places in Pietrelcina) promote tourism, though the hospitality infrastructure is still lacking. As of January 1, 2021, there were 9,432 foreign residents in the province of Benevento, making up 3.5% of the population.

*CPIA education courses.* Adult education courses at CPIA, including those held in prison or IPM, juvenile detention center, are organized into the following pathways:

- Literacy and Italian language learning courses
- First-level education courses
- Second-level education courses (Technical Institute, Professional Institute, and Artistic High School)

First-level education courses and literacy and Italian language learning courses are provided by CPIA, while second-level education courses are provided by technical, professional, and artistic educational institutions.

The First Level Education courses are divided into two teaching periods. The first period consists of 400 hours and aims to achieve the final certificate of the first cycle of education. If the primary school certificate is missing, the total hours can be increased by up to 200 hours, which can also be used for literacy and Italian language learning. The second period consists of 70% of the total hours of the first biennium of technical or professional institutes and aims to certify the acquisition of basic skills required by DM 139/2007.

The Second Level Education Courses aim to obtain diplomas in technical, professional, and artistic education. They are divided into three teaching periods:

The first period focuses on acquiring certification for admission to the second biennium of technical or professional institutes.

The second period focuses on acquiring certification for admission to the final year of technical or professional institutes.

The third period focuses on obtaining a diploma in technical or professional education.

These second-level courses have a total duration of 70% of the corresponding first biennium courses in technical, professional, or artistic high schools. Completing the first teaching period allows young adults (16-18 years) to fulfill their education obligations.

*CPIA "Piero Angela" of Benevento: Structure and Role.* The CPIA (Provincial Center for Adult Education) of Benevento consists of 15 school

complexes distributed throughout the province, including a prison and a juvenile detention center. The CPIA plays a pivotal role in the integration of migrants, particularly unaccompanied minors, by providing educational opportunities and fostering language acquisition.

*Educational Programs and Achievements.* Thanks to the collaboration of the staff of the CPIA of Benevento, it was possible to analyze the following data for the 2022/2023 school year for the First Level Courses:

The CPIA “Piero Angela” of Benevento consisted of 14 classes for the first period and 14 classes for the second period.

The average number of students per class was 25-30.

There were 450 foreign students enrolled, of which 106 were minors. Among the enrolled minors, 50 were unaccompanied minors.

The school schedule is distributed over 5 days a week for 3 hours a day, and the attendance of foreign minors was consistent.

The entry level of students is generally A1, and the mediation languages used by educators are French or English.

At the end of the 2023/2024 school year, 361 students obtained the A2 literacy certificate, while 183 students achieved first-level qualification, equivalent to the final exam of the first cycle of education. At this level, students achieve a B1 literacy certificate.

The A2 level certification is one of the requirements to obtain the EU long-term residence permit, also known as the ‘residence card’, while a B1 level certification is required for Italian citizenship for marriage or residence reasons.

*Priority Educational Objectives.* In the social reporting document for the 2019/2022 three-year period, the CPIA of Benevento established the following among its priority educational objectives: literacy and improvement of Italian as a second language through courses and workshops for students of non-Italian citizenship or language, organized in collaboration with local authorities and the third sector, with contributions from communities of origin, families, and cultural mediators. The Key Projects were:

- FAMI Project “SO.F.I. - SOCIALIZATION TRAINING INTEGRATION”;
- Project “RACCONTAMI”;
- Theater Project.

*Future Perspectives and Employment Opportunities.* The complex structure of the CPIA requires feedback from the territory to promote the occupational integration of foreigners, who could provide added value in terms of repopulation. The hoped-for future perspective is the implementation of a stability plan for foreigners to learn the Italian language, aiming for better work and occupational integration.

By addressing the educational needs of migrants, particularly unaccompanied minors, the CPIA of Benevento not only facilitates their integration into the local community but also enhances their future employment opportunities. Given the demographic and economic context of Benevento, these efforts are crucial for fostering a more inclusive and prosperous society.

The case study of CPIA Benevento highlights the essential role of educational institutions in fostering the linguistic integration of unaccompanied foreign minors (UFM). In rural areas, migrant integration offers a valuable opportunity to enhance the local economy. A holistic approach, supported by technology, is crucial for promoting inclusivity and removing barriers.

Integration and the future development of rural territories are at the heart of several major EU policy initiatives launched in 2020-21, such as the *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027*, the long-term *Vision for the EU's Rural Areas* and the *Territorial Agenda 2030*, which emphasize the importance of local communities and place-based, multi-stakeholder approaches.

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