Language Buddy

Support the language learning of migrant children and young people through language buddies.

D4.3. Policy Recommendations Report

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1. Introduction and Methodology

This report consolidates the national implementation and policy findings of the Language Buddy Model across eight European countries: Malta, Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Romania. The Language Buddy Model is a pilot programme funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF; project no. 101141117), implemented between late 2025 and mid-2026, which tests relationship-based language mentoring as a complement to formal language provision for migrant children and young people.

The purpose of this consolidation is to synthesise the evidence, implementation experiences, and policy recommendations from the national pilots into a single cross-cutting analysis that can inform future programme design, institutional cooperation, and policy development at both national and EU levels. This document distils the common lessons, shared challenges, and transferable good practices that emerge when the model is adapted to different national contexts. It responds to three needs: to provide a cross-cutting evidence base for EU-level policy dialogue on integration, education, and language learning; to support national and local stakeholders who wish to learn from implementations beyond their own country; and to create a single reference point for future programme design, ensuring that the lessons learned across eight pilots are not lost when individual project cycles end.

The central policy question addressed is: How can structured, relationship-based language mentoring be embedded within existing national integration and education architectures as a complementary measure that reinforces formal language learning, supports social participation, and builds belonging for migrant children and young people? This question arises from a consistent finding across all national pilots: formal language provision, while essential, does not fully address the informal, relational, and confidence-building dimensions of language acquisition and social integration. The Language Buddy Model operates in the space between formal instruction and everyday participation, offering repeated, low-pressure opportunities to use the host-country language in meaningful real-life situations within a trusted mentoring relationship.

The Language Buddy Model is a structured, non-formal mentoring programme that pairs trained volunteers —primarily higher-education students and community volunteers— with migrant children and young people, aged 12–17, for regular one-to-one and group language

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practice and socio-cultural integration support. The model is built on personalised matching, initial mentor training, ongoing coordination and supervision, and a combination of individual mentoring sessions with complementary group activities. Mentors' role is to provide consistent practice, encouragement, orientation, and social connection, with clear referral pathways when specialist support is required. The model emphasises reciprocal learning, intercultural exchange, and the gradual development of trust, positioning language as a tool for participation and belonging rather than solely as a subject to be studied.

The consolidation is based on the national implementation and policy reports produced by each piloting country, together with the internal evaluation data and project documentation referenced in those reports. These sources include quantitative data on participation, retention, session delivery, and evaluation responses, as well as qualitative findings from mentor and mentee feedback, coordinator observations, and evaluation responses. The comparative framework used for the consolidation is organised around four dimensions: context, encompassing migration and refugee trends, national education systems, and existing policies; model implementation, including coordination structures, matching processes, delivery formats, session frequency and duration, and group activities; evidence of impact, covering satisfaction, perceived language development, relationship quality, personal and social outcomes, and stakeholder cooperation; and policy and implementation lessons, including best practices, areas for improvement, and recommendations addressed to different stakeholder groups. This framework was applied consistently across the national reports, allowing the consolidation to identify both recurrent patterns and notable exceptions.

Several limitations should be borne in mind when reading this consolidation. The pilots differed substantially in size, duration, and participant profiles, and a finding from a pilot with 21 pairs cannot be treated as equivalent in weight to a finding from a pilot with 76 pairs. The evaluation methods were not fully harmonised across countries: while most pilots collected post-session and final evaluations from mentors and mentees, the specific questions, response scales, and timing of data collection varied, and some pilots adapted their monitoring processes during implementation. In addition, the pilots did not include standardised pre- and post-assessments of language proficiency, meaning that the reported language outcomes reflect participant perceptions and self-reported progress rather than independently measured learning gains. Response rates also varied across pilots and stakeholder groups, and certain groups, were

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sometimes underrepresented in the final data. The pilots operated under different timeframes and were affected by different external circumstances, including school calendars, administrative processes, and the availability of mentors and mentees. Some pilots experienced compressed timelines, late pairing, or scheduling conflicts that affected implementation and may have influenced outcomes. Finally, the consolidation relies on the national reports as its primary source; while these reports are detailed and evidence-based, they reflect the perspectives and priorities of their authors. The consolidation does not independently verify the underlying data, but it does compare findings across countries and notes where claims are supported by multiple sources or where they rest on more limited evidence. Where national data are not directly comparable, the consolidation reports the findings as presented in the national reports and notes the limitations; it does not attempt to pool quantitative data into aggregate statistics, as the differences in pilot design, participant profiles, and evaluation methods would make such aggregation misleading.

Across the eight national pilots, satisfaction and perceived impact were consistently high. Mentees and mentors reported very high levels of satisfaction, strong mentor-mentee relationships, and near-universal willingness to recommend the programme. Mentees consistently reported improvements in language confidence, speaking and listening skills, social connection, and independence, while mentors reported significant personal and professional development in communication, empathy, patience, and intercultural competence. Retention and continuity emerged as the principal operational challenges, with dropout linked to work or study commitments, unsuitable matching, mentor unavailability and personal circumstances. Coordination proved to be a structural pillar of success rather than administrative overhead, consistently rated highly by mentors and mentees. Matching needed to go beyond availability and language level, taking into account personality, shared interests, communication style, expectations and individual circumstances. Flexible delivery formats and group activities strengthened outcomes, though face-to-face interaction remained irreplaceable for building trust and rapport. Formal recognition and institutional anchoring were identified as necessary for sustainability, as short-term, project-based funding cycles proved insufficient to embed mentoring within national integration and education systems.

The headline general policy recommendations are as follows. Structured peer language mentoring should be embedded within national integration and education frameworks as a

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complementary measure alongside formal language provision, with clear referral pathways and recognition in national reception and language-support policies. Professional coordination should be funded as a core programme cost on a multi-year basis, covering matching, supervision, safeguarding, rematching, monitoring, family and school communication, and partnership management. Sufficient programme duration and flexible delivery formats should be provided, combining online and in-person sessions, one-to-one mentoring with group activities, and individualised support with community-based intercultural events. Mentor training and participation should be institutionalised through formal recognition mechanisms such as ECTS credits, micro-credentials, service-learning recognition, or volunteering certificates, with recurring mentor recruitment and training cycles established in partnership with universities. Structured initial training, ongoing supervision, and peer-learning networks for mentors should be implemented, covering adaptive communication, intercultural competence, safeguarding, boundaries and referral procedures, with clear guidance that mentors do not replace teachers or specialist professionals. Finally, a common monitoring and evaluation framework should be introduced that combines participation data, mentor and mentee feedback, qualitative evidence, and, where feasible, objective indicators of language development, to assess sustained impact on language use, education and employment engagement, social connection and belonging.

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2. The Shared Challenge: Migration, Education, and Language

2.1. Cross-National Migration and Refugee Trends

Across the eight pilot countries, migration has become a structural and demographic reality rather than a temporary or exceptional phenomenon. While the scale, composition and legal status of migrant populations vary considerably, several common patterns emerge from national contexts.

Migration is now the principal contributor to population growth and diversification. Malta recorded a population of 588,254 at the end of 2025, with net migration of 13,906 people and non-EU citizens representing 78.1% of net migrants. Austria counted 1.88 million foreign nationals in early 2026, or 20.4% of the population, with 22.9% born abroad; Vienna reached 36.8% non-Austrian citizens. Spain approached 10 million foreign-born residents, roughly one in five of its nearly 49.6 million inhabitants. Portugal saw its foreign resident population rise from 992,837 at the end of 2022 to 1,585,854 by the end of 2025, though the annual growth rate slowed from 31.4% in 2023 to 2.7% in 2025. Even countries traditionally characterised by emigration or transit —Bulgaria and Romania— are increasingly becoming destinations: Bulgaria counted approximately 246,600 foreign-born residents (3.8% of the population) as of January 2025, while Romania hosted 219,355 non-EU citizens displaced from Ukraine under temporary protection by July 2026.

The migrant populations reached by the Language Buddy pilots were highly diverse. In Greece, mentees came from eleven countries, mainly in Africa and West Asia, and spoke nine mother tongues, with Arabic the most common; more than half had been in the country for less than six months. Austria's mentees came from seven countries and represented ten mother tongues. Italy's cohort was distinctive in including a large share (62.5%) of mentees resident for more than two years and a predominance of Chinese-speaking participants (58.3%), alongside Peruvian, Ukrainian, Egyptian, Pakistani and Afghan students. Portugal's mentees were mostly adolescents from São Tomé and Príncipe and speakers of Forro. Romania's mentees were predominantly Ukrainian-speaking adolescents, almost all of whom had lived in Romania for more than two years. Spain's participants came primarily from Morocco, Gambia, Algeria and Senegal, with Arabic, Mandinka, Wolof and Amazigh among their mother tongues.

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The pilots worked with children and young people at different stages of settlement and with different legal statuses. Some countries focused on newly arrived refugees and asylum-seekers, often living in reception facilities or having recently left them —Greece being the clearest example, where the programme reached young people at the earliest and most vulnerable stage of settlement. Others worked predominantly with settled migrant communities or beneficiaries of temporary protection, as in Portugal, Romania and Italy. In Malta, delays in documentation and administrative processes sometimes left migrant children unable to enrol in school or access the induction hub for extended periods. In Spain, a considerable number of people lived without regular status, although an extraordinary regularisation measure announced by the Government was expected to cover an estimated 400,000 people between April and June 2026. These differences shaped both the needs of mentees and the operational context in which the pilots operated.

A cross-cutting finding is that language needs do not disappear after the first months or years in the host country. In Austria, even mentees who had spent a considerable period in the country continued to face challenges in spontaneous spoken German, confidence in conversation, understanding fast speech and vocabulary for everyday situations. In Romania, almost all mentees had lived in the country for more than two years yet still required support in Romanian language practice, social connection and intercultural understanding. In Italy, the majority of mentees had been resident for more than two years. This challenges the assumption that integration needs are confined to the reception phase and underscores the need for medium- and longer-term support mechanisms.

Despite the diversity of contexts, the obstacles faced by migrant children and young people were remarkably similar. Language barriers were not only grammatical; learners often hesitated to speak because of limited opportunities for informal practice, uncertainty about social conventions and fear of negative judgement. In Spain, the national report describes “linguistic anxiety” and “linguistic shock” as paralysing uncertainties that trap learners in a damaging cycle: initial gaps in proficiency reduce opportunities for practice and participation, which in turn makes fluency harder to attain. In Greece, stress and trauma were noted to affect concentration and increase the risk of dropping out. In Malta, instability at home, the stress of moving to another country, and the challenges of making new friends and understanding the host-country language were identified as factors that can inhibit learning and cause children to

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feel lost in school. These commonalities provide the empirical basis for a shared policy response. While the scale and composition of migration differ across countries, the underlying challenge —how to support migrant children and young people to move from formal language knowledge to confident everyday use and meaningful social participation— is strikingly consistent.

2.2. Common Gaps in National Education Systems

All eight pilot countries have established legal and policy frameworks guaranteeing access to education for migrant children and providing some form of additional language support. Yet across the national reports, a consistent gap emerges between formal entitlement and effective participation.

Formal provision reaches only a minority of those who need it. In Portugal, only 19,1% of foreign pupils in basic education whose mother tongue is not Portuguese (10,638 of 55,827) attended Português Língua Não Materna (PLNM) in 2023/24, and only 13.8% at secondary level. Retention rates of foreign pupils were three to five times higher than those of Portuguese pupils, reaching 29% in secondary education compared with 8.3%, and more than 80% of foreign pupils did not sit the 9th-grade national exams in Portuguese and Mathematics, limiting monitoring of their progress. In Greece, teachers reported limited access to specialised Greek as a second language provision, too little training in intercultural pedagogy, and a shortage of cultural mediators. Many schools were overstretched. In Bulgaria, existing assessments continued to identify gaps in specialised support, institutional capacity and the consistency of the national approach to the inclusion of refugee children, particularly beyond the initial phase of enrolment. In Italy, the number of students with non-Italian citizenship reached roughly 869,000–931,000 in 2023/24, or about 11.6% of all enrolled students, yet provision remained concentrated in urban areas and depended on individual school leadership.

Support is often concentrated in the reception phase and does not address longer-term needs. In several countries, language support was designed primarily for newly arrived pupils and was not systematically available to those who had been resident for longer periods but still struggled with academic language, social communication, or participation in school life. In Italy, post-compulsory provision —Sixth Form, Vocational Training, and other non-mandatory education— lay outside the framework for language integration, creating a substantial gap for

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migrant youth who had finished compulsory education or never entered it. Adult Education Centres had not assumed a clearly defined or proactive role in language teaching for migrants. In Spain, language integration programmes existed within compulsory primary and secondary schooling but were confined to that phase. In Romania, formal provision did not address every dimension identified in the pilot, including the need for low-pressure opportunities to speak Romanian, build relationships with Romanian peers, and develop confidence in everyday interaction.

Administrative and access barriers delay or prevent participation. In Malta, delays in documentation and other administrative processes sometimes left migrant children unable to enrol in school or access the induction hub for extended periods. In Greece, despite a legal entitlement to education regardless of legal status, access in practice remained uneven. In Spain, complex and at times contradictory policies on legal residence and work permits left a considerable number of people without regular status, obstructing their full social and economic participation. These barriers are not primarily pedagogical; they are administrative and legal, yet they have direct consequences for language learning and integration.

Teacher shortages and limited training in intercultural pedagogy constrain the formal system's capacity to respond to linguistic and cultural diversity. In Greece, in-service training in intercultural pedagogy remained optional and uneven. In Portugal, the CNE Recommendation No. 5/2026 called for extending PLNM to all pupils who need it, avoiding rigid minimum class sizes, strengthening staffing and teacher training, and reviewing higher-education access rules for late-arriving pupils. In Italy, the pilot's recommendations included strengthening initial mentor training and providing ready-to-use teaching materials, reflecting broader gaps in the system's capacity to support newly arrived and long-resident foreign-origin students.

Non-formal provision fills critical gaps but is project-based and time-limited. In several countries, NGOs and civil society organisations delivered much of the day-to-day language support that public administration did not provide. In Greece, non-formal provision by NGOs and civil society, often funded through AMIF, Erasmus+, or national programmes, filled critical gaps but was project-based, time-limited, and rarely integrated into the formal system. In Spain, civil society organisations stepped in to fill the void, with programmes such as *Rossinyol*, *Entandem*, and *Urretxindorra* responding directly to gaps in mainstream provision. In Portugal,

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the national volunteer programme *Mentores para Migrantes* and school reception plans relying on classmates as informal mentors were recognised in policy, but none gave a defined place to structured, coordinated language mentoring by trained higher-education students for adolescent migrants.

Taken together, these gaps point to a shared structural challenge: formal education systems, however well-intentioned, are not designed to provide the regular, informal, relationship-based language practice and social connection that migrant children and young people need to move from knowing a language to using it confidently in everyday life. This is the space in which the Language Buddy Model operates.

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3. The Language Buddy Model Across Countries

3.1. Core Model and Common Design Elements

The Language Buddy Model was implemented in eight European countries under a single AMIF-funded project, with each national pilot coordinated by different partnerships and adapted to local contexts. Despite these differences, all pilots shared a common methodological core, derived from the Language Buddy Model developed within the project.

All pilots were designed as complementary, non-formal interventions rather than substitutes for formal language education or specialist services. The model was positioned explicitly as a bridge between formal language learning and everyday communicative participation. This positioning was consistent across all national reports, although the precise relationship between the pilot and formal provision varied depending on the national education system and the availability of accredited language courses.

All pilots recruited and trained volunteer mentors, primarily higher-education students, though some also drew on community volunteers. Mentor recruitment was organised through universities, NGOs, volunteering platforms, or a combination of these channels. Before entering the mentoring process, mentors completed initial training covering the Language Buddy Model, intercultural sensitivity, inclusion, communication, safeguarding and the boundaries of the mentor role. The content and duration of training varied across countries, but the core components were consistent.

All pilots used a personalised matching process based on information collected in advance about language proficiency, languages spoken, interests, availability, and individual circumstances. Several pilots conducted interviews with both mentors and mentees before matching, and some maintained a reserve pool of mentors to enable rematching where initial pairings did not function as expected. The matching process was consistently described as going beyond simple availability to consider compatibility and shared ground.

All pilots combined one-to-one mentoring with complementary group activities. The balance between individual and group formats varied: Austria, for example, placed a strong emphasis on structured group cohorts, while Greece and Portugal relied predominantly on one-to-one

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online sessions with a small number of group meetings. Group activities served multiple purposes: team-building, reducing initial uncertainty, creating a sense of community, and providing additional low-pressure opportunities for language use.

All pilots provided ongoing coordination and supervision by a coordinating team. Coordination encompassed matching, mentor support, safeguarding, monitoring, problem-solving and communication with mentees, families and partner institutions. In several pilots, coordination also included the organisation of group sessions, the adaptation of monitoring processes, and the management of rematching. The national reports consistently identified coordination as a structural pillar of the model rather than administrative overhead.

All pilots collected participant feedback through post-session and final evaluations, completed by both mentors and mentees. The specific instruments, response scales, and timing of data collection varied, and some pilots adapted their monitoring processes during implementation —for example, moving from session-by-session to monthly evaluations— but the commitment to systematic feedback was common to all.

Finally, all pilots emphasised reciprocal learning and intercultural exchange. Mentoring was framed not as one-way transmission of language and culture but as an encounter between equals with different areas of expertise. Mentors were expected to learn from mentees about their languages, cultures and experiences, and the national reports documented that mentors consistently reported personal and professional development in communication, empathy, patience, and intercultural competence.

1.1. National Adaptations and Synthesis of Pilot Data

The national pilots varied considerably in scale, coordination arrangements, duration, delivery modes, and data collection methods, which limits direct comparability. The table below presents the main features of each national implementation alongside the key quantitative indicators reported.

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Country	Coordination	Duration	Delivery Mode	Pairs	Sessions
Austria	BildungsLAB	10 months (Nov 2025 – Aug 2026)	Combination of structured group sessions and one-to-one breakout sessions; primarily in-person at a fixed location	53	721
Bulgaria	University of National and World Economy (UNWE) with Multi Kulti Collective	8 months (Mar – Oct 2026)	Combination of in-person and online; majority of sessions in person	46	735
Greece	PDE, UoM (University of Macedonia) and Symplexis	7 months (Dec 2025 – Jun 2026)	Predominantly online (99.49% of sessions); 2 group sessions in person	50	589
Italy	COSPE NGO and University of Florence	6 months (Feb – Jul 2026)	One session per week, combining individual mentoring with two structured group sessions	49	392
Malta	SOS Malta and Advenio eAcademy	10 months (Oct 2025 – Jul 2026)	Predominantly online; face-to-face and hybrid where needed	17	202
Portugal	Casa do Professor (CDP) and Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP, Braga)	4 months (Mar – Jun 2026)	Predominantly at a distance, complemented by three group sessions and an Infoday	50	813

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Romania	Migrant Integration Center Brasov and Transilvania University of Brasov	6 months (Jan – Jun 2026)	Flexible: face to face or online; group painting workshops and a cultural visit complemented one-to-one mentoring	52	397
Spain	Peñascal Koop. and EHU (University of the Basque Country)	6 months (Nov 2025 – Apr 2026)	One-to-one mentoring supported by three group sessions	53	669

The table illustrates the range of adaptations across the eight pilots. Duration ranged from approximately four months to ten months, with most pilots running between six and seven months. Coordination ranged from university-based partnerships with community organisations to NGO-led coordination with school and reception centre involvement. Delivery mode ranged from predominantly online to primarily in-person at a fixed location, with most pilots combining individual and group formats, and offering flexibility between online and in-person sessions.

It is important to note that these figures are not directly comparable. The number of pairs, sessions, and hours varied according to the situation in each country, including participant availability, programme duration, scheduling constraints, and the balance between individual and group formats. The figures presented here should therefore be read as indicative of the scale of implementation in each national pilot rather than as a basis for direct comparison across countries.

1.2. Cross-Cutting Evidence of Impact

Despite the differences in scale, duration, and evaluation methods, the national pilots reported remarkably consistent outcomes. The evidence can be grouped into four outcome types, with the strength of evidence indicated as robust, promising or anecdotal.

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The evidence for perceived language improvement is robust. Across all pilots, mentees and mentors reported visible progress in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and comprehension. In Greece, 82.2% of mentee and 83% of mentor session evaluations declared objectives fully achieved. In Spain, 69.2% of mentees and 53.1% of mentors reported significant improvement, with no participant reporting none. In Portugal, all mentees reported some improvement (55.6% significant, 44.4% moderate). In Bulgaria, 95.5% of mentors reported moderate or significant progress. In Austria, 97.5% of mentors observed clear or significant improvement. In Malta, all mentors completing the final evaluation observed notable progress. In Italy and Romania, mentees reported gains in vocabulary, oral communication, confidence, and understanding of school subjects. However, no pilot included standardised pre- and post-assessments of language proficiency, so these outcomes reflect participant perceptions rather than independently measured learning gains. The evidence for perceived improvement is robust; the evidence for objectively measured gains is currently absent.

The evidence for improvements in confidence, self-esteem, and emotional well-being is robust. Across all pilots, mentees reported increased confidence in speaking the host-country language, reduced fear of making mistakes, greater independence, and a stronger sense of being supported. In Greece, mentees reported increased confidence, reduced fear of speaking Greek, and a better understanding of Greek society and culture. In Austria, mentees described becoming more confident, less afraid of mistakes, and better able to express themselves. In Spain, Portugal, Malta, Bulgaria, Italy, and Romania, similar improvements in confidence, communication, and social skills were reported.

The evidence for social integration is promising. Across the pilots, mentees reported new friendships, greater openness, and a stronger sense of connection to the host community. In Austria, 73.2% of mentees described the bond as very close and positive, while 22.0% considered it adequate without problems. In Greece, an overwhelming majority of mentees rated the bond as very close and positive. In Portugal, no mentee described the relationship as weak or problematic. In Spain, relationships were described as very close and positive by 69.4% of mentors and 78.8% of mentees. In Malta, 66.7% of mentors described the relationship as very close and positive compared with 40% of mentees. In Italy, 100% of mentees rated the relationship as very positive or appropriate. In Bulgaria, 95.4% of mentors described the relationship as very close and positive or good. The evidence is promising rather than robust

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because it relies primarily on self-reported relationship quality and because the pilots did not include standardised measures of social connection or belonging.

The evidence for education and employability pathways is anecdotal. While several pilots reported that mentees requested support for school activities, advice on social lives, and orientation for further learning opportunities, and while some mentees discussed situations connected to school, apprenticeship, and work, no pilot included systematic follow-up on education or employment outcomes. In Greece, success could also be measured by mentees requesting support for school activities or professional orientation. In Austria, mentees frequently discussed school, apprenticeship, and work situations. In Portugal, the pilot strengthened cooperation between an educational NGO, a university, and higher-education institutions. In Spain, mentors reported improved teaching skills and better understanding of migrant students' educational challenges. In Italy, mentees reported gains in understanding school subjects. In Romania, the pilot connected university engagement with community-based integration expertise. However, these reports are isolated and do not constitute systematic evidence. The national reports consistently recommend longitudinal evaluation to assess long-term integration, education, and employment outcomes, which is currently lacking.

In summary, the cross-cutting evidence of impact is strongest for perceived language improvement and psychosocial well-being, promising for social integration, and anecdotal for education and employability pathways. Across all outcome types, the findings are consistent and positive, but the evidence base would be strengthened by standardised pre- and post-assessments, harmonised indicators across countries, and longitudinal follow-up. These limitations are themselves an important finding of the consolidation and inform the policy recommendations that follow.

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2. Lessons Learned and Enabling Factors

This section bridges the evidence presented and the recommendations that follow. It identifies what made the pilots work and what hindered them, drawing on the implementation experience across the eight countries.

Institutional hosting provided stability and access. The most successful pilots were hosted or co-hosted by institutions with established community relationships. Austria's partnership with an NGO VET organisation provided access to mentees, rooms and a stable location. Portugal's NGO–university partnership combined proximity to schools with academic mobilisation. Greece's three-organisation partnership combined regional education expertise, EU project management, and academic rigour. Spain's social cooperative–university partnership combined engagement with evaluation capacity. Romania's partnership combined migrant integration expertise with access to student mentors. In each case, institutional hosting provided continuity, credibility and infrastructure that would have been difficult to build from scratch.

Volunteer training was a key determinant of confidence and quality. Initial mentor training was consistently identified as a success factor. Bulgaria found that training in intercultural sensitivity, inclusion, communication and role boundaries prepared mentors effectively. Portugal found that initial training determined mentors' confidence and ability to manage early-session difficulties. Greece and Spain both identified initial training as a key success factor. Common elements were preparation for intercultural communication, clarity about the mentor role and practical strategies for building trust.

Personalised matching fostered strong relationships. Pilots that invested in structured matching —interviews, profiling, assessment of interests and availability— consistently reported stronger relationships. Greece found that matching was informed by a genuine attempt to understand each participant as an individual. Romania found that compatibility depended on personality, shared interests, age, availability, and motivation. Malta stated that personality, communication style, expectations, language needs and realistic availability all needed assessment before a relationship began. Time invested in matching reduces dropout and improves relationship quality.

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Incentives and recognition supported recruitment and retention. Several pilots offered or recommended formal recognition for mentors. Bulgaria recommended integrating mentoring into internships, practical training, volunteering and university courses, with recognition through certificates, ECTS credits or micro-credentials. Greece recommended accrediting mentor training via micro-credentials or ECTS. Portugal recommended academic credit or equivalent volunteering recognition. Romania recommended institutionalising university-based mentoring as civic engagement or service learning. Malta recommended recognising mentor training through higher-education mechanisms where rules permit. These incentives helped recruit mentors, maintain motivation and signal the value of non-formal language support.

Funding stability enabled coordination, training and evaluation. Pilots with sufficient funding for coordination and training were better able to maintain quality and respond to challenges. Austria's coordinating team was rated excellent by 97.6% of mentors; Greece's by 100% in one metric; Spain's by 81.6% of mentors and 88.5% of mentees. Portugal's daily coordination prevented dropouts and reactivated stalled pairs. Romania described active coordination as a defining feature. Funding stability —covering coordination, training, safeguarding and evaluation, not only session delivery— is a precondition for quality.

Group activities strengthened belonging and peer interaction. Pilots that combined one-to-one mentoring with group activities found that group sessions helped break the ice, create community, and provide additional low-pressure opportunities for language use. Austria's group cohorts provided community and peer interaction. Romania's workshops and cultural visit strengthened belonging. Portugal's Infoday reversed several mentor dropouts. Spain's three group sessions focused on team-building, cultural activities, and shared evaluation. Greece held two group sessions for team-building. Group activities are not an optional extra but a core component of the model.

However, the pilots also faced significant barriers. **Legal status issues** created access barriers and uncertainty. Malta reported that documentation delays sometimes left migrant children unable to enrol in school or access the induction hub for extended periods. Spain reported that complex and contradictory policies on legal residence and work permits left many without regular status, obstructing full social and economic participation. Greece reported that despite

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legal entitlement, access in practice remained uneven. These barriers are administrative and legal, yet they have direct consequences for language learning and integration.

Transport and geography limited participation. Malta found that online delivery reduced travel barriers for families facing journeys exceeding an hour and a half each way. Greece delivered 99.49% of sessions online because mentors and mentees were from different parts of the country. Portugal found schedule incompatibility and end-of-day tiredness were the main difficulties, and that sessions in mentees' free time were perceived as unfair. Flexible delivery, combining online and in-person formats, is necessary to overcome geography and transport barriers, but face-to-face contact remains important for trust and rapport.

The digital divide affected access and quality. Some mentees lacked reliable internet access or devices. Some mentors found structured online content too complex or time-consuming for live sessions. Greece found activities often too basic or designed for classroom settings rather than one-on-one online tutoring. Portugal found 40% of mentees found resources "not very useful." Spain and Greece both reported 44.9% of mentors found teaching resources "not very useful." Digital tools must be simple, practical and designed for online mentoring, with alternatives where connectivity is limited.

Staff time and coordination capacity were often stretched. Portugal described coordination as continuous. Malta found that only sixteen mentors completed training and thirteen participated, preventing a reserve pool and limiting suitability-based matching. Greece found last-minute cancellations and no-shows a major frustration. Romania found scheduling conflicts, shyness, limited responsiveness and language barriers required coordinator intervention. Coordination capacity must be funded and staffed at a level reflecting actual programme demands.

Sustainability after pilot funding was uncertain. Austria reported that nine pairs were planned for continuation in autumn 2026 with the Ukrainian School of Vienna, demonstrating that sustainability can extend beyond the formal project period when local partnerships are maintained. Portugal recommended embedding mentoring within regular structures of universities, schools and local partnerships. Bulgaria recommended institutional anchoring through university internships, volunteering and courses. Romania recommended continued

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participation through alumni activities and future mentoring cycles. Sustainability depends on institutional anchoring, not on project funding alone.

Monitoring and evaluation requirements were sometimes burdensome. Austria found session-by-session feedback difficult and adapted to monthly collection. Portugal found late pairing and compressed timelines affected more than half of the pairs. Data collection must remain proportionate and flexible if it is not to burden participants.

Taken together, these lessons point to conditions policymakers and programme designers should consider. Institutional hosting matters, because embedded programmes benefit from stability, access and credibility. Coordination must be funded as a core cost, because it makes matching, training, supervision, safeguarding and rematching possible. Matching requires time and structure, because personalised matching improves relationship quality and reduces dropout, and a reserve pool enables rematching. Incentives and recognition support recruitment and retention, because formal recognition signals the value of mentoring and sustains the mentor pool. Flexible delivery is necessary but face-to-face contact is irreplaceable, because online delivery overcomes geography while in-person interaction builds trust. Group activities strengthen belonging, because they provide additional opportunities for language use and peer interaction. Sustainability requires institutional anchoring, because programmes should be embedded in regular structures so core activities continue beyond project cycles. And monitoring must be proportionate, because data collection should support learning without burdening participants, with monthly check-ins, milestone evaluations and final questionnaires proving more sustainable than session-by-session reporting. These implications are developed further in the policy recommendations that follow.

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3. General Policy Recommendations

3.1. Target Stakeholders

The recommendations address a consolidated map of stakeholders. At EU level: DG HOME, DG EAC, DG EMPL, the European Parliament, and the managing authorities of AMIF, ESF+ and Erasmus+. At national level: ministries responsible for education, migration, integration, youth, employment and social inclusion, as well as national agencies for integration and asylum. At regional and local level: regional education directorates, municipalities, local councils, and county-level social assistance and child protection services. Education institutions include universities, higher-education institutions, schools, VET centres and lifelong-learning services. Civil society and implementing organisations include NGOs, migrant-led organisations, reception centres, youth services and community associations. Funders include EU programmes, national and regional funding bodies, municipalities, and private foundations. Employers and employer associations are relevant where mentoring connects to apprenticeships, vocational training and employment pathways. Organisations representing communities of people of foreign origin and EU nationals play a role in outreach, trust-building and cultural mediation. Volunteers, including university students and community members, are both participants and ambassadors of the model.

3.2. Recommendations for National Governments

National governments should embed structured peer language mentoring within national integration and education strategies as a complementary measure alongside formal language provision. They should establish dedicated funding lines covering coordination, training, safeguarding, and evaluation as core costs, not only direct session delivery. They should recognise mentor training and participation through ECTS credits, micro-credentials, service-learning recognition, or volunteering certificates. They should address the legal status of participants as a barrier to access, ensuring that legal status does not prevent children and young people from accessing education, language support, and mentoring programmes. They should support programmes of sufficient duration, ideally 9–12 months, and align mentoring cycles with the school calendar so that pairing takes place in the first term.

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3.3. Recommendations for Regional and Local Authorities

Regional and local authorities should establish matching infrastructure connecting mentors and mentees across schools, universities and community organisations, with clear referral pathways and shared responsibility for participant support. They should coordinate with schools and municipalities to embed mentoring within existing educational and integration structures, including formalising the teacher-intermediary role and structured cooperation mechanisms. They should provide or facilitate access to suitable meeting spaces for in-person mentoring and group activities, making community, cultural, sporting and educational spaces available. They should promote inclusive recruitment so that the mentor and mentee pool reflects the diversity of the local population, including targeted recruitment to address gender imbalance.

3.4. Recommendations for Education Institutions

Education institutions should host mentoring schemes and integrate them into existing structures such as internships, practical training, volunteering programmes and relevant university courses, with formal academic or civic recognition where appropriate. They should provide initial and ongoing training for mentors covering intercultural competence, adaptive communication, safeguarding, trauma-aware practice, boundaries and referral procedures, with clarification that mentors do not replace teachers or specialist professionals. They should co-design practical mentoring resources with mentors and mentees, with separate guidance for different languages, proficiency levels, and delivery modes, and simplify e-learning resources into short, practical, ready-to-use activities. They should recognise and support the teacher-intermediary role in schools, and promote reciprocal learning and frame integration as a two-way process rather than cultural assimilation.

3.5. Recommendations for Civil Society and Implementing Organizations

Civil society and implementing organisations should maintain strong coordination capacity, including dedicated staff for matching, supervision, safeguarding, rematching and family communication, and preserve the dual-coordination model between an NGO and a university as a structural feature. They should implement quality assurance and safeguarding procedures as structural requirements, including clear consent, child protection and communication procedures for participants under 18, with parental or caregiver involvement where needed. They should treat rematching as a standard retention mechanism rather than programme failure, with clear procedures and proactive check-ins for mentees showing reduced

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engagement. They should engage parents and schools appropriately for minors, and create referral and partnership pathways with schools, higher-education institutions, lifelong-learning services, local councils and relevant NGOs. They should combine one-to-one mentoring with regular group and community activities, including an opening Infoday, a mid-programme in-person event, and a re-engagement session.

3.6. Recommendations for Funders

Funders should provide multi-year or sufficiently long funding cycles covering coordination, mentor training, non-formal activities, safeguarding, accessibility and evaluation, not only direct session delivery. They should require minimum standards for safeguarding, data protection, matching, training, supervision, complaints, referral, and evaluation in funded mentoring programmes. They should support the development, testing and open sharing of country-specific mentoring resources, including materials for different languages and practical orientation to everyday life, with open licensing and a central repository. They should fund longitudinal evaluation, ideally including follow-up 6–12 months after participation, to assess sustained language use, education and employment engagement, social connection and belonging. They should support scale-up where migrant pupils are most concentrated and adaptation to new linguistic profiles. They should recognise peer language mentoring as an eligible, evidence-based measure within EU integration funding, including AMIF, ESF+, and Erasmus+, and support exchange of national models across countries.

3.7. Cross-Cutting Recommendations

- Digital tools should be simple, practical and designed for the realities of mentoring, including short activity cards, searchable everyday topics, ready-to-use conversation prompts, activities for different proficiency levels, and printable or mobile-friendly formats; mentee materials should be simpler and youth-centred, with sessions not dependent on a platform.
- A common monitoring and evaluation framework should be introduced, combining participation data, mentor and mentee feedback, qualitative evidence, and, where feasible, objective indicators of language development, with harmonised indicators for cross-country comparison and a baseline for longitudinal follow-up.

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- Gender and vulnerability sensitivity should be integrated into recruitment, matching, and programme design, including targeted recruitment to address gender imbalance, consideration of personality, shared interests, age, availability, motivation and expressed gender preference, and better assessment of mentees' psychological state and true motivation.
- Participation should be voluntary and based on informed consent, with clear expectations set from the outset through a structured introductory session or "Session 0" clarifying objectives, roles, expectations, tools, frequency, communication rules, safeguarding, the role of parents or caregivers, and what to do when a pairing is not working.
- Programme designers and coordinators should balance model fidelity with local adaptation, preserving the dual-coordination model between an NGO and a university as a structural feature, and formalising structured cooperation mechanisms between mentoring coordinators and schools.
- Participants should be treated as co-designers and ambassadors of the model, with mentors involved in resource revisions, practical experience informing future resource development, and routes for continued participation.

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4. Conclusions

The Language Buddy Model was piloted across eight European countries—Malta, Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Romania—under a single AMIF-funded project. Across very different migration contexts, education systems and institutional arrangements, the pilots produced a remarkably consistent picture: structured, relationship-based language mentoring can complement formal language provision effectively, reaching migrant children and young people in the space between classroom instruction and everyday participation.

The evidence base is substantial. Collectively, the pilots involved hundreds of mentors and mentees, delivered thousands of mentoring sessions and thousands of hours of direct mentoring, and generated a rich body of quantitative and qualitative feedback. Satisfaction was consistently high, relationships between mentors and mentees were overwhelmingly described as positive, and near-universal proportions of participants said they would recommend the programme. Mentees reported improvements in language confidence, speaking and listening skills, social connection and independence. Mentors reported significant personal and professional development in communication, empathy, patience and intercultural competence. The model operated as a two-way learning experience, not a one-way transfer of knowledge.

At the same time, the pilots were aware about their limitations. No pilot included standardised pre- and post-assessments of language proficiency, meaning that the reported language outcomes reflect participant perceptions rather than independently measured learning gains. Response rates varied, evaluation instruments were not fully harmonised, and the pilots differed substantially in scale, duration and participant profiles. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings, but they mean that the evidence should be read as strong indications of perceived benefit and acceptability rather than as definitive measures of impact. This is itself an important lesson: future programmes should build in harmonised indicators, CEFR-aligned measures where feasible, and longitudinal follow-up so that the model's contribution can be assessed more rigorously.

The implementation experience was equally consistent. Coordination emerged as a structural pillar of success in every pilot, consistently rated highly by mentors and mentees. Matching needed to go beyond availability and language level, taking into account personality, interests,

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expectations, and individual circumstances. Retention and continuity were the principal operational challenges, with dropout linked to work or study commitments, unsuitable matching, mentor unavailability and personal circumstances. Rematching should be treated as a normal retention mechanism rather than programme failure. Flexible delivery was necessary to overcome geography and transport barriers, but face-to-face contact remained irreplaceable for building trust and rapport. Group activities strengthened belonging and peer interaction. Learning resources needed to be practical, adaptable, and co-designed with mentors. Safeguarding had to be a structural requirement, not an administrative add-on, and institutional anchoring —through universities, NGOs, schools, and local partnerships— was essential for sustainability beyond project funding.

These findings point to a clear policy conclusion. Language integration is not achieved through formal instruction alone. Migrant children and young people also need safe, repeated opportunities to speak, interact, build relationships, and navigate everyday life with members of the host community. The Language Buddy Model provides that relational bridge. Its added value lies not in replacing formal education, professional language teaching or specialist services, but in complementing them through sustained mentoring relationships in which language practice is embedded in real social situations.

For the model to be scaled and sustained, several conditions must be met. Structured peer language mentoring should be recognised within national integration and education frameworks as a complementary measure, with clear referral pathways and links to existing language-support policies. Funding should be multi-year and should cover coordination, training, safeguarding and evaluation as core costs, not only direct session delivery. Mentor training and participation should be formally recognised through mechanisms such as ECTS credits, micro-credentials, service-learning recognition or volunteering certificates. Programmes should run for sufficient duration, ideally 9–12 months, to allow trust and meaningful progress to develop. Delivery should be flexible, combining online and in-person formats, one-to-one mentoring with group activities and individualised support with community-based intercultural events. A common monitoring and evaluation framework should be introduced, combining participation data, participant feedback, qualitative evidence, and, where feasible, objective indicators of language development, with follow-up 6–12 months after participation.

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The pilots also demonstrated that sustainability depends on institutional anchoring, not on the continuation of project funding alone. Universities can integrate mentoring into internships, practical training, volunteering and relevant courses. Schools can provide links to the educational environment and designate teacher focal points. Municipalities and civil society organisations can support outreach, local coordination, and access to families and communities. Local and regional authorities can establish matching infrastructure, coordinate with schools and provide suitable meeting spaces. National governments can embed mentoring in integration strategies, establish funding lines and address legal status barriers. EU-level actors can recognise peer language mentoring as an eligible, evidence-based measure within AMIF, ESF+, and Erasmus+, and support the exchange of national models and the development of open-licensed resources.

The central message of this consolidation is that the Language Buddy Model works best when language is treated not only as something to be learned but as something to be used within meaningful human relationships. Across eight countries, the pilots showed that regular contact, trust, flexibility, and everyday relevance can help young migrants move from knowing a language in principle to feeling confident enough to use it in practice. The evidence is strong, the demand is clear and the recommendations are actionable. What remains is the will to act —to move beyond short-term, project-based responses and to build the structural support that will allow relationship-based language mentoring to become a sustainable part of Europe's integration and education ecosystems.

The next step is not simply to repeat the pilot, but to use its lessons to make future language mentoring more accessible, practical, and sustainable, so that more migrant children and young people can find, in a trusted relationship, the confidence to speak, participate, and belong.

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