Emerging Technologies for Holistic Literacy in Adult Education

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Collection of learners stories

Interviews developed in the framework of the ETHLAE project

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Learner Voice: Croatia

This learner-centred insight from Croatia offers a detailed view into the lived experience of an adult navigating work, language, and technology in a new country. The participant, a Filipino national who moved to Croatia in 2022 for employment in the hospitality sector, illustrates how informal digital practices can coexist with significant systemic barriers to structured learning and inclusion.

Her daily use of technology is shaped by communication needs and self-directed information seeking. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are her primary digital spaces, used to maintain personal connections. She has experimented with tools like ChatGPT, which she described as useful and unintimidating: “It will translate it for you, so I don’t have any difficulties using it.” However, such use remains exploratory rather than educational. Formal training, especially language instruction, has not been made accessible to her through public or workplace channels.

Though she has regular access to a smartphone and stable internet, her experience underscores a recurring theme in the research: access alone is not inclusion. The digital tools she has tried, such as the Monday.com platform for learning Croatian, were described as costly and ineffective: “It’s not really a user-friendly platform… and you have to pay for full access.” Her limited exposure to structured digital learning reflects the broader lack of digital support offered to migrants in Croatia, compounded by linguistic and financial barriers.

Her journey also highlights the challenges of engaging with public digital services. While she uses mobile banking and has attempted to navigate the Croatian e-Građani system, she relies heavily on her husband and the Filipino community for guidance. “It’s really hard because everything is in Croatian. Some people don’t want to speak English, and others maybe don’t understand it either,” she explained, pointing to a lack of multilingual or user-friendly design in public systems. This linguistic exclusion is both a practical and emotional barrier to full participation in society. Importantly, her reflections also pointed to systemic gaps in employer and institutional support. She voiced concern over legal uncertainties caused by bureaucratic complexity and poor communication. “People come legally and then become illegal because they don’t know about bureaucracy,” she said, emphasising the urgent need for clear orientation processes and accessible information for both workers and employers.

In her own words, the solution is clear: “Better both employees and employers should have knowledge about bureaucracy - this is the biggest thing.” Her appeal goes beyond access to digital tools; it touches on the fundamental right to navigate a new society with dignity, clarity, and support. This case illustrates the deep interconnection between digital inclusion, emotional security, linguistic access, and institutional responsibility. It is a reminder that emerging technologies can only empower when embedded in an ecosystem that recognises the complexity of migrant learners’ realities.

Learner Voice: Finland

This interview with a woman in her early 40s, originally from Afghanistan and living in Finland for seven years, offers a powerful insight into the ways emerging technologies intersect with migration, caregiving, and digital inclusion. A mother of four and a Farsi speaker with limited Finnish proficiency, her experience illustrates the complex interplay of motivation, digital access, and systemic obstacles in the lives of many vulnerable adult learners.

Her primary digital environment is her smartphone, which she uses daily for communication, information-seeking, and essential tasks such as online banking and social media. She reports using tools like WhatsApp, Facebook, Google, and ChatGPT with relative ease, and finds Google Lens particularly helpful for translating Finnish content in real time—something she relied on even during the interview. Larger devices like computers or tablets remain uncomfortable for her, though she has used them occasionally in libraries and classroom settings.

Despite her active use of digital tools, she notes that she has not yet engaged with them for structured personal development—with the partial exception of searching information via ChatGPT. Her motivation to learn more is grounded in necessity: “Because everything in this life is digital,” she said. From supporting her child’s education to applying for unemployment benefits and managing healthcare, digital proficiency has become an unavoidable part of her daily life. Yet, the barriers she encounters are substantial. Navigating public services online, especially medical systems and school communication platforms like Wilma, is particularly difficult. “For example, at the doctor’s office, I don’t know how to open things, and I read afterwards what happened,” she explained. These gaps in access and understanding have real-life consequences. On multiple occasions, she missed deadlines for unemployment benefits due to difficulty using digital platforms—leaving her without income for weeks.

Her main source of support is her 14-year-old son, who acts as a digital mediator. “He helps me, especially with things like Wilma (the school platform). I trust him. He’s truly the best boy,” she said. However, she also acknowledges the emotional burden these places on both of them: “I don’t want to disturb my son… he has his own schedule and goes to sleep, so I can’t always ask him to help.” Other support options, such as employment counsellors or digital support at educational institutions, are often geographically inaccessible or not available at convenient times.

She has participated in a classroom-based digital skills course at an adult education institution, which she described as transformative, especially in terms of learning how to apply for jobs. “It’s really important how we fill out the application. This has always been very important to me. I had problems before, but now, luckily, I know how to do it.”

The success of the course, she noted, was due in large part to the teacher's approach: slow, clear, and patient. By contrast, she finds many courses too fast-paced and difficult to follow due to language barriers and the speed of instruction. When asked how digital skills training could be made more relevant, her response was clear: it should focus on practical, everyday challenges: booking medical appointments, understanding health information, and communicating with schools. These are the domains where digital exclusion becomes a source of stress and disempowerment.

This case underscores how motivation alone is not enough to guarantee digital inclusion. While this learner shows resilience, adaptability, and initiative, she continues to face significant structural and linguistic barriers that inhibit her full participation in society. Emerging technologies hold promise, but without accessible, multilingual platforms and sustained, person-centred support, they risk reinforcing exclusion rather than alleviating it.

Learner Voice: Switzerland

This case study from Switzerland sheds light on the experience of an adult learner participating in the Simply Better at Work programme. Having migrated to Switzerland a decade ago and employed in an industrial company, the learner's motivation to improve digital skills is strongly professional. He had completed only compulsory schooling in his country of origin, making this adult learning experience his first structured engagement with digital literacy.

In daily life, he primarily uses a smartphone, which is more accessible and familiar than a computer. While he has encountered emerging technologies, such as AI-based chat systems or even virtual reality during museum visits, his interaction with such tools remains cautious and limited. Installing and using new applications is particularly difficult. The complexity of interfaces, often lacking in localisation or language support, amplifies the sense of exclusion: "If I don't understand what it says, I'm not going to risk clicking something wrong." This hesitation is compounded by mistrust and insecurity, especially when digital environments are perceived as unsafe or confusing. He noted concern about not knowing what is trustworthy online, reflecting a broader fear among people with limited educational backgrounds of "doing something wrong" or inadvertently compromising their privacy.

Access itself remains an issue. While the learner has a smartphone, he lacks consistent access to a computer or reliable internet. He therefore relies heavily on support from family members, particularly children or grandchildren, to navigate more complex digital tasks. Occasionally, he turns to teachers or staff in local libraries, who offer critical guidance in trusted, face-to-face settings. When asked about digital learning programmes, he expressed appreciation for those that offer clear, paced, and supportive instruction. The best learning environments were those that involved small groups or paired training, ideally hosted in familiar community settings like libraries or adult education centres. However, programmes that moved too quickly or used overly complex language were discouraging. "When the words are too difficult, or things move too fast, I just stop following," he explained. For digital learning to be meaningful, he emphasised the need for step-by-step guidance, repetition, and human presence. Apps with simple navigation, voice narration, and no advertising were considered much more usable. Above all, he stressed the importance of access to a person.

Learner Voice: Spain

This case features a vulnerable adult learner living in a small town in Spain. Originally from Peru and now a mother of three, she is representative of a group often overlooked in digital education initiatives: women with caregiving responsibilities, part-time employment, and limited opportunities for formal learning. Her story reflects both the invisible labour of digital navigation and the barriers faced by low-income migrant women in accessing inclusive digital education. Her everyday use of digital technologies revolves around necessity. She uses her smartphone for WhatsApp, Facebook, email, and video calls, primarily to communicate with her family and manage routine tasks. However, more advanced or unfamiliar applications, especially those related to work or formal services, are a source of confusion and stress. “Sometimes I just ask my son to help me because I don’t know if I’m doing it right,” she explained, illustrating how intergenerational support often fills the gap left by institutional failures.

Her digital learning is entirely informal, driven by urgency rather than structured educational opportunities. For example, she taught herself how to fill out forms online when required by the school or public authorities, but struggles when websites are poorly designed or only available in Spanish. As she noted: “I speak Spanish, but the way some of these forms are written... It’s like another language.” Even with native language proficiency, bureaucratic digital communication can present serious obstacles for vulnerable adults.

Financial constraints are another critical barrier. Her smartphone is outdated, and her internet connection is unstable, making even basic digital tasks difficult. While she would like to take a course to improve her digital skills – especially to help her children with schoolwork or find better job opportunities - she cannot afford to pay for one or travel to a nearby city to attend. “It’s not just the cost of the course,” she said, “it’s the bus, the time off work, someone to watch the kids.” She also expressed a deep lack of confidence in using unfamiliar platforms, particularly those involving online banking, e-government services, or job applications. Mistrust of digital systems, fear of making mistakes, and the absence of human guidance are major inhibitors to participation. “I don’t want to click on something and lose money or send the wrong document. Who can help me if I get it wrong?” Her concern reflects a broader pattern identified in the EU-level research: digital exclusion often stems not from total absence of access, but from the fragility of use in high-stakes contexts. Despite these challenges, she is eager to learn and improve, particularly if courses are offered in community spaces, in small groups, and with patient, empathetic instructors. She values training that starts from the basics and relates directly to her life - understanding school portals, applying for jobs, navigating public services, and supporting her children’s learning. “If someone could just sit with me and show me, not too fast, I think I could do it,” she said.

This case illustrates the compounded nature of digital vulnerability: it is not only technical, but economic, gendered, and social. For emerging technologies to be inclusive, they must be introduced within frameworks that acknowledge these layered realities and provide scaffolding that respects the learner’s lived experience and constraints.

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