An inquiry into language uses
of bilingual primary school children

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an inquiry into the linguistic biographies of bilingual children of immigrant families. For this purpose, during the school year 2017-18, a questionnaire was administered to parents coming from countries other than Italy of all the children attending the first and second grades of a primary school in the province of Trento. More than 1500 questionnaires were returned, providing a large amount of data on the families' linguistic practices, the amount and length of exposure of the children to Italian (L2), and the variety of inputs in L1 (the native language) and in L2. The questionnaire, which was divided into nine sections, aimed to collect very precise information about the bilingual child's exposure to the two languages, including age of first exposure to each language, current quantity and quality of exposure, but also length of exposure. An important aspect emerging from the questionnaires concerns the marked difference between the children's competence in L1 (low) and L2 (high), and in particular the lack of attention to the literacy component in L1. Because of the large amount of data collected, the questionnaire is not only a diagnostic tool of the linguistic situation of each child, but also a means to support his / her bilingual growth and schooling.

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

In this paper, we present a research based on a questionnaire, the *Questionnaire on the Language Uses of Multilingual Children*, that was developed and administered to investigate the linguistic practices of children with at least one non-Italian parent, and who were attending the first or second grade of primary school in the province of Trento.

The first aim of the inquiry was to obtain a precise picture of the real exposure to the two languages of a bilingual, by taking into consideration several elements involved in the recognition of a non-traditional bilingualism index for each student. The calculation of this index depends on several elements involved in the formation of multilingual competence: the family's sociolinguistic context, the age of exposure to the second language (L2), the number of years of exposure to it, the exposure measured in number of hours per day, the quality of the input received in L1 and in L2 determined by the variety of sources and linguistic registers[2].

A further aim of this research was to contribute to mapping the multilingual repertoires of immigrant groups in Italy: various studies have started to do this for both intra-ethnic domains within the immigrant community, such as family, and inter-ethnic domains, such as school.

Some recent surveys concern the areas of Turin, Pavia (Chini 2004; Chini 2009; Chini – Andorno 2018), Verona (Massariello 2004), Siena (Vedovelli – Villarini, 2001; Bagna – Barni – Siebetcheu 2004), Palermo (D'Agostino 2004).

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[1] The research was promoted and financed by the Provincial Institute for Educational Research and Experimentation IPRASE, within the project *The new frontiers of the right to education. Remove learning difficulties, encourage an inclusive school and prepare responsible and active citizens of the future*, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the operative program 2014-2020 of the Autonomous Province of Trento.

[2] See De Houwer (1999); Meisel (2007); Unsworth – Hulk – Marinis (2011); Sorace 2011; Unsworth 2016.

We recall in particular the survey conducted by Chini (2004) in Turin, Pavia and its province on about 400 minors and 170 adults. The research shows a widespread multilingualism, especially in adults, originating from the typical repertoires of the original countries, where the local vernacular and a *lingua franca* are used in different situations. Previous migratory experiences in other countries, mostly European, also contribute to the multilingualism of adults, whose diglottic repertoire could cause an imbalanced alternation between the language of the family and the language of the immigration country[3].

The large amount of data collected in the Trentino inquiry allows a comparison with previous studies regarding several aspects of multilingualism in a migratory context, such as innovation and loyalty to the original language, literacy in L1, linguistic transmission in the family, contexts of L1 and L2 use.

Finally, the administration of the questionnaire served – and may still serve – as an opportunity to raise awareness of all those people who play an important role in the children's development of multiple language skills: parents, teachers, school managers, future teachers, cultural mediators, speech therapists and health professionals.

The questionnaire, which will be described in the next section, was distributed to all families with at least a parent coming from a country other than Italy who had a child in the first or in the second year of a primary school in the province of Trento. The following data summarize the broad scope of the research: 49 comprehensive institutes were involved in the research; 2167 questionnaires were distributed, 1541 were returned.

61 % of the questionnaires were completed by the child's mother, 15 % by the father, 22 % by the parents together, 2 % by brothers or sisters. The high percentage of questionnaires completed by the mothers

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[3] Valentini (2005) shows that in the intra-ethnic domain of the family, the language of origin dominates only in 30 % of cases.

shows that they have a special attention towards their children in the early school years[4].

For contact with families, three main strategies were adopted. The first one consisted of administering the questionnaire concurrently with the delivery of school reports. On these occasions, families were invited to complete the questionnaire in a class where a researcher was present to help them answer any unclear questions. This strategy proved to be effective only in some schools, where previous work had been done to improve the quality of communication with parents.

The second strategy consisted of inviting families to have a meeting with an expert who was interested in how their children used languages. For many parents, this meeting was an opportunity to start a dialogue with educators about important and delicate issues, such as identity and linguistic integration.

The third strategy consisted of the self-compilation of the questionnaire. It was adopted in some schools, which delivered the questionnaire to the families with the request to return it once completed. The low number of returned questionnaires and incomplete and / or inaccurate answers has shown that this strategy was not effective.

The questionnaire had been translated into the seven languages most spoken by immigrants in Trentino (Romanian, Albanian, Arabic, Urdu, Ukrainian, Serbian, Mandarin Chinese) and into three popular languages for education in the African and Asian continents (English, French and Spanish). However, due to the discrepancy between the varieties spoken in the families and the standard languages into which the questionnaire had been translated, most parents preferred to complete it

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[4] A question to which the data of the questionnaire will allow us to answer in future research concerns the mother's conservative or innovative role in linguistic transmission. Valentini (2005: 195), studying some specific immigration contexts, recognizes different roles that mothers with different origins play on language transmission. Specifically, the author notes that women are usually conservative if they come from China and Morocco, and innovative if they come from Eastern Europe or from Central and South America. Pozzi (2014) also addresses the topic of mothers' role in linguistic transmission in immigrant families.

in Italian. This choice suggests that immigrant families often know oral languages better than written languages, and is in contradiction with the answer to a question on the parents' level of competence in L1 reading and writing, in which more than 90 % declare that they can read and write well.

The sum of the declared languages exceeds one hundred: those with a higher percentage reflect the number of national immigrant groups residing in the province of Trento fairly well: Albanian (271), followed by Romanian (259), Arabic (248), Spanish (110), Urdu (67), Portuguese (44), Russian (37), English (33), German (31), Macedonian (30), Serbian (26), Chinese (25).

Parents referred to the languages spoken in their families in various ways. Many questionnaires report the names of supranational languages (Arabic, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese); others express the names of national languages (Polish, Albanian, Romanian), even when the family uses a regional linguistic variety (Kosovar, Macedonian, Moldovan, Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian). The awareness of a double level of reference is revealed by some noun phrases, which express both the language and the country in which it is spoken (Bissa French, Egyptian Arabic, Tunisian Arabic, Indian English, Pakistani Urdu, Brazilian Portuguese, Albanian Kosovar, Romanian Moldovan, Mauritian Creole). Some questionnaires report names of 'non-existent' languages, composed of the adjective referring to the country of origin, i.e. 'Indian language', 'Pakistani', 'Senegalese' and 'Ghanaian'.

To complete this composite linguistic picture, it is important to report the number of mixed couples, which corresponds to about a quarter of the total (24 %). Of these, 20 % say that they use more than one language in the family. Finally, the number of children born in Italy is relevant. This corresponds to 84 % of the total and confirms the progressive increase of the second generations.

2. The Questionnaire

To gather information about the linguistic biography of the bilingual children who took part in our study, we developed an original questionnaire, the *Questionnaire on the Language Uses of Multilingual Children*, based on the one proposed by Unsworth *et al.* (2012) and adapted to Italian by Vender *et al.* (2016). In addition to giving a clear signal of openness and acceptance of all languages, including those of migrant families, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, this instrument also aimed to accompany and support the child in his / her bilingual growth and in his / her schooling. It is, indeed, well-known that bilinguals, especially if they are still in the process of acquiring their second language, may display weaknesses in their linguistic competence, especially in the lexical and morpho-syntactic domains (Bialystok *et al.* 2010; Paradis *et al.* 2005), but also in the acquisition of literacy (August – Shanahan 2006; Bellocchi *et al.* 2016). Since it is also known that these difficulties tend to disappear and spontaneously resolve as the bilinguals' exposure to and competence in the L2 increases, it is of the utmost importance for educators and health specialists to have a picture of the real amount and length of exposure of the child to his / her second language, also to avoid the risk of misidentification of language and learning disorders in bilinguals (Paradis *et al.* 2005).

In this spirit, our questionnaire aimed to collect very precise information about the bilingual child's exposure to the two languages, including, in particular, age of first exposure to each language, current quantity and quality of exposure, but also length of exposure, considering both the traditional and the cumulative index. The traditional index is a simple measure, calculated by subtracting the age of first exposure to the language of the child from his / her chronological age, while the cumulative index is a more precise measure which provides a more reliable measure of the child's exposure to each language by considering the various linguistic experiences that the bilingual has had throughout his / her life and that have contributed to the development of his / her linguistic competence (Unsworth *et al.* 2012).

The questionnaire was divided into nine sections (see Arici *et al.* 2020 for a more complete presentation of the instrument) and, for convenience, it was mainly composed of multiple-choice questions. Parents were asked to indicate the languages their child was regularly exposed to (including Italian, which was assumed to be the L2), specifying how they came into contact with these languages for the first time and evaluating his / her ability in the four modalities (listening, speaking, reading and writing). In order to have a precise picture of the linguistic environment in which the child lived, we also collected information about the languages spoken by parents, siblings and other relatives or people who had regular contact with them. In a further section, parents were asked to indicate how often they used the family language(s) to communicate with the child (amongst the options: *always*, *almost always*, *half and half*, *almost never*, *never*) and how often the child used these languages. This permits us to clarify the actual complexity of the child's linguistic interactions at home: it may happen, for example, that a parent speaks to the child using the home language, and that he / she responds using Italian instead. Furthermore, in this way it is possible to know the variety of the linguistic exchanges within the family: it is not uncommon, in fact, that children use the family language with their parents, but tend to use the majority language with their siblings.

To calculate the real amount of exposure to the two languages of the child, we also collected information about his / her typical daily routine, including the number of hours spent with each family member (distinguishing between weekdays, weekends and summer holidays), at school and in extracurricular activities, indicating which language was used and in which percentage. In addition, we asked for information about the amount of time spent with friends, and in activities such as reading books and using technological tools like computers, smartphones, tablets and televisions, always indicating the language used, in order to give a complete and accurate description of the current amount of exposure to the two languages of the bilingual.

To calculate the length of exposure to each language, the cumulative index of exposure, which can be very useful in the analysis of the child's linguistic behavior, and the linguistic history of the child from birth to the present time, were considered. Information was gathered about attendance at nursery school, kindergarten and primary school, both in Italy and abroad, and respondents were asked to indicate, in addition to the years of attendance, the language used. Furthermore, the language habits adopted by the family were considered, with respondents being asked to indicate which language was used in the past by family members to communicate with the child, with three periods being distinguished: from birth to 3 years, from 3 to 6 years and from 6 years onwards.

These data are particularly important because they allow us to define the length, in terms of years, of exposure to the languages of the child both at home and in the more structured and formal context of the school in which the child can be exposed to different communicative registers in interactions with educators and peers. This can help to explain possible language or learning difficulties of the child: eventual weaknesses in the L2 could indeed be related to maturational issues, such as insufficient exposure to the language, in a child whose current quantity of exposure and length of exposure are still limited. Awareness of these aspects can then support a more complete analysis and understanding of the linguistic development of the bilingual.

A final variable that has been taken into consideration due to the fact that it can significantly affect the amount of exposure to the languages spoken by the child, concerns the periods spent abroad during which use of the Italian language may be greatly reduced, if not completely absent. To take this data into consideration, we asked respondents to indicate whether any periods had been spent abroad, of what duration, and which language was used, adopting, also in this case, a temporal division into the three periods from 0 to 3 years, from 3 to 6 and from 6 years onwards.

3. MAIN RESULTS

In this section we illustrate some of the most significant data collected from the 1541 questionnaires, such as the level of the children's proficiency in L1 and L2[5] (§ 3.1.), the uses of the two languages by children and parents (§ 3.2.), the current quantity of the children's exposure to Italian L2 (§ 3.3.).

3.1. Children's knowledge of L1 and L2

Figure 1 shows the parents' judgements regarding their children's knowledge of L1 and L2. There is a clear asymmetry between the two languages, since parents evaluate their children's L2 competence as much better than their L1 competence.

Specifically, according to parents, only 62 % of children understand their L1 very well (30 %), or well (32 %), while many children understand it only sufficiently (23 %), or poorly (13 %), or even do not understand it at all (2 %). For the L2, on the contrary, over 90 % of parents judge their children's passive competence excellent (65 %) or good (27 %). Only a few children have average skills (7 %) or poor skills (2 %), while none are completely unable to understand Italian.

Looking at active competence, the difference between L1 and L2 is even clearer: only 50 % of children can speak very well (22 %), or well (28 %) in the L1, while 22 % have average competence, 24 % have poor competence, and 5 % cannot speak at all in L1. In L2, on the contrary, 90 % of children can speak (58 % very well and 32 % well), while 7 % have average competence, and 2 % have poor competence.

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[5] The labels L1 and L2 are adopted here for convenience to refer to the family language and to Italian respectively: although it should be noted that the majority of the children who took part in our study were exposed to both languages simultaneously from birth, the family language is considered as the L1 as it is the one most widely adopted at home and, as a consequence, the one to which children were exposed most in their first years of life.
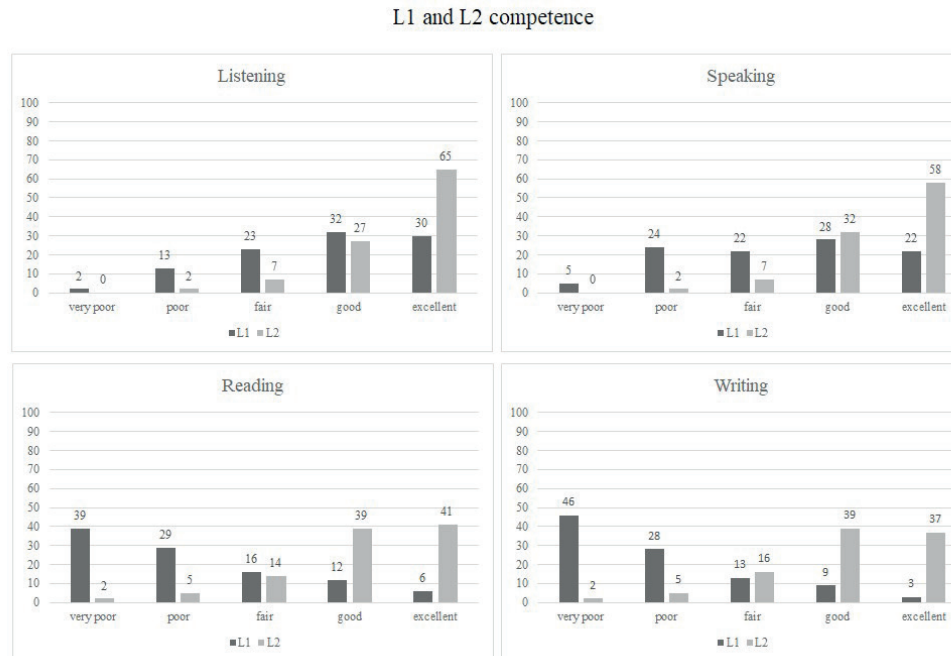
L1 and L2 competence

Figure 1. Children's competence in L1 and L2

As for reading-writing skills, the data show a clear tendency to neglect literacy in L1: only 17 % of children can read in L1 (5 % very well and 12 % well). 16 % have average reading competence, 29 % poor competence and 39 % are unable to read in L1. On the contrary, most children can read in L2 very well (41 %) and well (39 %), and only a few have average competence (14 %), poor competence (5 %), or null competence (2 %).

The gap further widens in writing: only a small percentage of the children can write very well (3 %), well (9 %) or sufficiently (13 %) in L1, while 28 % of children have poor competence and 46 % cannot write in L1. Most children, on the other hand, can write very well (37 %), well (39 %), or well enough (16 %) in L2, and only a small percentage has poor skills (5 %) or cannot write at all (2 %).

To summarize, the collected data reveals an important difference between the children's L1 and L2 skills: parents report high competence in Italian L2, but not in L1, where only slightly more than half of the children have good comprehension skills and even fewer have good production skills. Furthermore, little attention is paid to the literacy component in L1. Even considering the age of the children and the fact that their schooling is still at an early stage, the disparity between reading and writing in the two languages is clear. Most children start writing and reading in Italian. The family language is mainly relegated to the dimension of orality.

3.2. Use of L1 by bilingual children and their parents

The discrepancy in competence in the two languages reported above is mirrored by differences in their use, with a marked preference for Italian shown by the majority of the children, even in the domestic environment.

It is interesting to observe, however, the peculiar nature of the linguistic exchanges, which appear to be characterized by the choice of the L1 on the part of parents and siblings, counterbalanced by a preference for Italian L2 on the part of the children who participated in the survey, as shown in Figures 2.-4.

More than half of the mothers reported using the L1 with the child always (35 %) or almost always (22 %), similar to that reported for fathers (46 % and 19 % respectively). Parents who never or almost never use the L1 with their children are almost absent (2 % and 8 % respectively of the mothers and 1 % and 7 % of the fathers). One third of the parents reported that they tend to use both languages in a balanced way. The children show, instead, a specular tendency in their language choices: the majority of the children interviewed always or almost always use the L2 with their parents (35 % and 22 % respectively with their mothers and 46 % and 19 % with their fathers), while a not insignificant percentage never or almost never uses the L1 (16 % and 20 % respectively with mothers and 21 % and 18 % with fathers). One third

of the children, instead, tend to use both languages in a more balanced way.
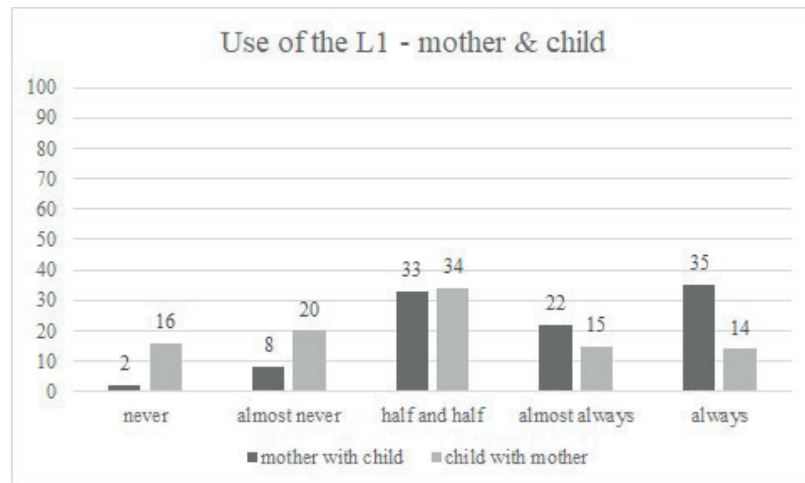

Figure 2. Percentage of use of the L1 by the mother speaking to the child
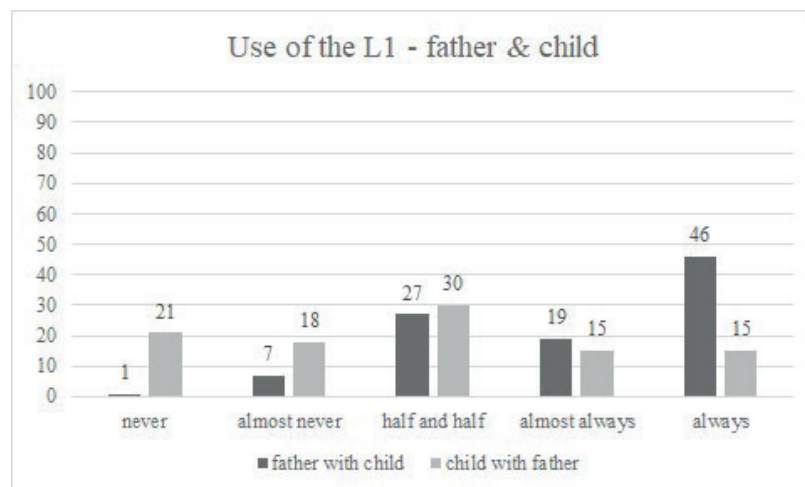and by the child speaking to the mother

Figure 3. Percentage of use of the L1 by the father speaking to the child
and by the child speaking to the father

On closer inspection, we found a marked difference between first- and second-generation children, with L2 Italian being more widely adopted by parents of second-generation participants and by the children themselves.

The same tendency is observed in the conversational exchanges between the children and their siblings (Figure 4.): also in this case it has been reported that, although a significant percentage of the siblings tend to use the L1 always (36 %) or almost always (15 %), a large portion of the children never (28 %) or almost never (20 %) use it, replacing the family language with Italian. The fact that siblings tend to use the L1 more frequently than the children of first and second years of primary school might be explained by hypothesizing that they are older than the children, who are 6-7 years old, and that therefore they could have been exposed later to Italian and tend to use it less frequently at home.
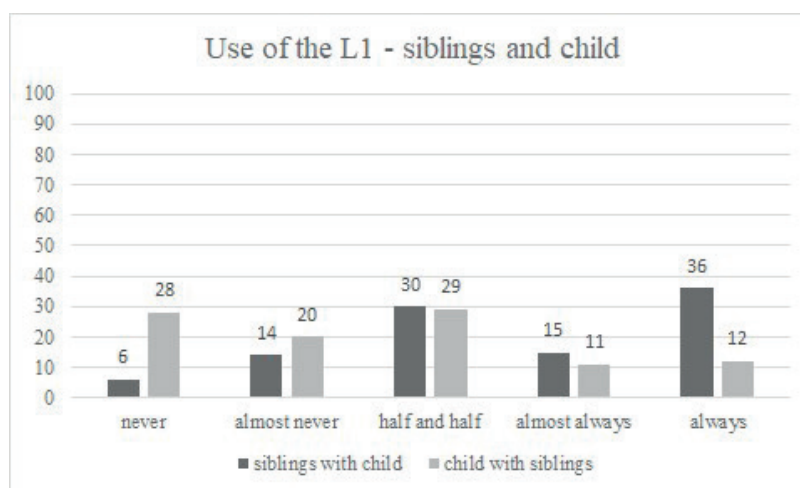

Figure 4. Percentage of use of the L1 by siblings speaking to the child and by the child speaking to the siblings

To summarize, according to parental reports, only one third of the bilingual children use their L1 at home, and display a clear-cut preference for Italian, even when their parents and siblings opt for the family language.

3.3. Current quantity of exposure and length of exposure

The analysis of the data collected by means of our questionnaire which considers the exposure to the home language and Italian at home, in the school and in extracurricular activities, reveals that migrant children have considerable exposure to Italian, amounting to 69 %. A closer examination reveals, however, that there are significant differences between the school year and the holidays, with the percentage decreasing respectively from 76 % to 57 %, which is arguably related to the extensive amount of exposure to Italian that children receive at school. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this amount remains quite high also during the holidays, which seems to suggest an almost equally balanced use of the two languages at home. However, the data discussed in the previous section seem to indicate that this apparent balance is more likely to be the result of the discrepancy in the languages chosen, on the one hand, by parents and siblings, who resort to the L1 more consistently, and on the other hand, by the children, who showed a marked preference for Italian. Again, these differences are even sharper if children of first and second generation are compared, with the former showing lower current exposure to Italian (61 % vs 70 %).

Finally, concerning the length of exposure to Italian of the bilingual children, we found that this generally corresponds to their chronological age, since the vast majority of the parents (80 %) reported that their children were exposed to L2 from birth. However, having calculated both the traditional and the cumulative length of exposure, we found confirmation for the higher precision of the latter in determining the exact amount of exposure to the two languages in time: 7-year-old children who were born in Italy and exposed to Italian from birth, for instance, have 7 years of exposure to L2 in terms of traditional length, but an average value of 4.22 years of exposure to L2 in terms of cumulative length, with a difference that can be estimated at around 40 %. The cumulative index provides a more reliable measure of the amount of exposure to the two languages over time: in future research we aim to analyze how this relates to the development of linguistic competence and literacy achievements in Italian.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The data collected in this research depict a picture of great richness and diversification of the linguistic experience that characterizes the migratory context in the province of Trento and, more generally, in Italy. An important aspect that emerges from the results discussed in this paper concerns the marked discrepancy that we found between the competence of children in the home language and in Italian: although, according to the parents, proficiency in Italian is high in all four modalities, the data relating to family languages reveals an alarming picture. Just over half of the 1541 children who participated in the survey have, according to their parents, good or excellent comprehension skills in the family language, and even fewer are able to speak this language well. Furthermore, it appears that little attention is paid to the component of literacy in the minority language, which appears to be almost absent and even neglected by families. The low competence in L1 seems to be attributable to the linguistic dynamics adopted at home, in which children tend to use Italian even if parents speak to them using the home language, with differences being even more evident in the second generation. This is also in line with what reported in the previous studies mentioned in the introduction, indicating that Italian is generally preferred in the conversational exchanges also at home, especially by children, at the expense of the family language (Valentini 2005).

While it is natural for Italian to carve out more and more space in the linguistic habits of the child due to the involvement in community life, at school and, afterwards, in the labor market, it is evident that family languages risk disappearing if they are not sufficiently valued and cultivated. To prevent this from happening, it is important to develop specific language policies and initiatives. More particularly, it is fundamental to spread appropriate information to the families, helping them understand that maintaining the family language, in all of its aspects, including literacy, is not an obstacle to the development of the majority language, as is often erroneously believed, but on the contrary, can pro-

vide important socio-cultural, professional, cognitive and linguistic advantages, at all ages and also in the presence of specific language or learning disorders (Garraffa – Sorace – Vender 2020).

In the future, the research stemming from the present study will be further developed to provide a finer analysis of the data collected in relation to the children's scholastic attainments and their literacy abilities in both the L1 and the L2. The large database that we collected constitutes, in fact, an important basis for conducting in-depth investigations on numerous aspects of multilingualism in the context of migration.

Regarding the development of educational applications, we underline that the questionnaire we developed was intended as a flexible tool. Although in the present study it was divided into nine sections with numerous very detailed questions, it is nevertheless possible to propose a more manageable and quicker instrument, which can be easily administered in all grades to trace the linguistic biography of incoming migrant students. Having a detailed linguistic profile of the child, crucially including amount and length of exposure to the L2, can be very helpful in analyzing their linguistic competence and in better understanding possible language and literacy difficulties, which could be related to immature linguistic competence which is still immature.

More particularly, an important follow-up of this research will analyze the presence of correlations between exposure factors, linguistic competence and literacy development of the bilingual children: it is indeed worth observing that the information we collected about the children's competence in both minority and community language reflects only their parents' perception and could therefore be only partially reliable. Future studies will inquire the bilinguals' competence in a more objective way, by administering specific tests to address their performance at different linguistic levels, including their reading and writing skills, and taking into account also teachers' reports.

In conclusion, the questionnaire that we developed represents, on the one hand, a first, important sign of openness to the richness of multilingualism, and is offered as an instrument of knowledge of the linguistic situation of bilingual children. On the other hand, it aims to be a practical tool that can support both the bilingual growth of the children and their schooling, allowing us to interpret and understand more clearly any weaknesses that could be attributed to underdeveloped linguistic competence.

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