

HERITAGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN ITALY: FIRST SURVEY AS PART OF A EUROPEAN PROJECT

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1. THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

The migration phenomena that conspicuously mark contemporary societies require special attention to the educational needs of migrants, from early childhood to adulthood. The cultural, linguistic and social differences of migrants pose new challenges for teachers and impose the search for new solutions, which are theoretically and practically based on the latest research, not only pedagogical, but also sociological and linguistic. In learners with a migrant background, linguistic, social and cultural difficulties typically accumulate, which are particularly delicate when migrants are children or adolescents. It therefore seems essential that teachers are enabled to welcome and follow this new type of learner profitably and that they are prepared on migrant pupils' acquisition of second-language skills.

Alongside the “integration” aspect in the target language, which allows the migrant to live fully in the host country, it is equally important to maintain and teach the inherited languages and cultural background they bring with them. Adults, as well as migrant children, often have a rich linguistic heritage that must be enhanced and supported in the new host country. While maintaining and developing the mother tongue is fundamental for the migrant's identity and well-being, it should be remembered that knowledge of the mother tongue and at least two other foreign languages is becoming the standard, so it is necessary to take all measures to support the child in the realization of this linguistic heritage, which is also promoted by European Union directives.

To achieve this goal, it is essential that there is knowledge of statistical data in the different countries, which are often scattered, and of the teaching methods used in educational institutions, which are usually little or not at all known. This is the aim of the pilot project conducted jointly by Charles University in the Czech Republic, the University of Warsaw, the University of Hamburg, the University of Milan, and the University of Paris-Sorbonne¹. The pilot project, located within the 4EU+ Alliance, was conducted in 2022 as part of the annual project *Educating Bilingual Children with Language Attrition and Children of Foreigners: Differences in Approach* funded by the 4EU+ Mini-Grant within the European Centres Network, Flagship 2 - *Europe in a changing world: Understanding and engaging societies, economies, cultures, and languages*². This article intends to present some of the first research results from Italy.

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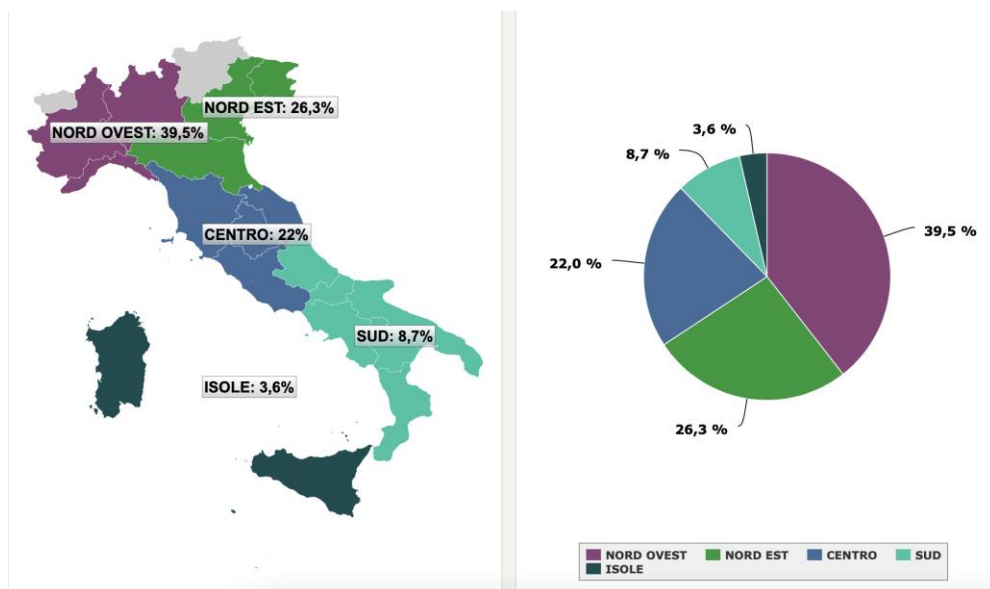
² In the same framework of the 4EU+ minigrants, the project continued in 2023 and was aimed at investigating the following topic: *Educating heritage language (HL) learners and pupils learning a second language (SL): Differences in approaches*. The partner universities involved were again the Charles University in the Czech Republic, the University of Warsaw, the University of Milan and the University of Paris-Sorbonne¹, joined by the University of Geneva and the University of Iceland.

2. TWO ROADS TO ONE QUESTION: THE INSTITUTIONAL SIDE

To answer the questions posed in our project, and concerning the Italian side, the research was conducted on two tracks. On the one side, on a more institutional track, turning to official sources mostly available on the web. On the other side, on a more informal track, concerning which we consulted some teachers working in international and bilingual schools and some colleagues, that is university lecturers³, who have dealt with or are dealing with these issues, for example, for their doctoral theses.

On the first front, that of officiality, to find information that was significant for us, we first turned to ministerial sources and, in particular, to the Ministry of Education website⁴, where there is a section dedicated to “Data and Statistics” that can be investigated through various search queries. It was relatively easy to find the information we were looking for; the only difficulty was that, predictably, the site was extremely rich in terms of information and not always appropriately hierarchized⁵. Nevertheless, with a little research, from the Ministry of Education website we obtained data for the school year 2020/2021: the total number of students (with both Italian and foreign citizenship) enrolled in primary and secondary schools (that is, pupils from 6 to 14 years of age) are 4,179,587; these pupils are evenly distributed across Italy, from north to south. If we refine the search and focus only on students with foreign citizenship, we see that the number of these pupils amounts to 471,966. This means that in the first grades of Italian schools, more than one in ten students have foreign citizenship. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, these students appear to be concentrated mainly in northern Italy, with the highest concentrations in Lombardy (where more than a quarter of students with non-Italian citizenship study) and Emilia Romagna.

Table 1. *Number of students (foreign citizenship only) enrolled in primary and secondary schools (years 6-14) in the school year 2021/2021. Total: 471,966 pupils*



³ The writer of this article teaches Italian linguistics and the Italian language for foreigners at the University of Milan, specifically within the *Linguistic and Cultural Mediation* courses. In these courses, there is a three-year degree course called STRANIMEDIA, dedicated exclusively to both EU and non-EU students who have a foreign qualification.

⁴ Accessible at <https://www.miur.gov.it>.

⁵ On problems related to the hierarchization of information in administrative texts, with particular reference to the web, see Cattani, Sergio (2018) and Jullion, Sergio (2020).

Each Italian region keeps a register of these foreign children attending Italian schools; the registers distinguish whether these children were born abroad or in Italy but have foreign parents (i.e., Italian citizenship is not acquired by being born on Italian territory; in other words, under Italian law, not only the newly arrived person is considered a foreigner, but also the child of a foreign couple born in Italy). Perhaps the most significant fact for us is that over 60% of these students were born and raised in Italy; they are, therefore, the sons and daughters of immigrants, also known as “new Italian generations”⁶.

The first Italian document on the integration of foreign pupils and intercultural education dates back to 1989. Since then, the last thirty years have seen a heterogeneous succession of circulars, studies, guidelines and legislative indications that have outlined an “Italian way” to intercultural education⁷. The most recent document, “Guidelines for the Right to Study of Students Outside their Family of Origin” (see *Guidelines* 2017 in the bibliography), contains useful indications and guidelines for teachers, foster families, residential care facilities and voluntary guardians. This document, as well as other documents published in recent years (see Favaro, 2018: 28-31; Favaro, 2020: 293-294), offer regulations that make explicit the focus on the issue and provide recommendations without, however, going into detail. They leave the various educational institutions free to regulate themselves on a case-by-case basis. Put another way, schools act based on need and not on a long-term-project basis⁸.

Other important sources to probe our topics are the ISTAT website⁹ and the ISMU Foundation website¹⁰. The former is the National Institute of Statistics; the latter, whose initials stand for Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity, is an institute that deals with the documentation, training and promotion of studies and research on the many aspects connected with the multiethnic transformation of society. These sites also provide data from a historical perspective, showing that the number of Italian students has decreased in the last few years and, conversely, that the percentage of foreign students grew exponentially until the early 2000s, then slowing down (the latter fact is due to the economic crisis of the last decade and the recovery of some of the countries of origin). The above-mentioned sites also offer important data on the origins of these children. We know that there are about 200 Countries of origin and that for the most part these are children from Romania (154.525 pupils), Albania (116.819), Morocco (109.401), China (50.875), Egypt (31.298), India (29.482), Moldavia (25.562), Philippines (24.655), Pakistan (22.547), Bangladesh (22.155) and so on.; pupils from Poland are 6.198, from France are 1.670, from Czech Republic 329. These data come from the *Ministry of Education* (2022: 25) and are referred to the school year 2020/2021. In the following Table 2, we can also see how, over the last ten years, the ranking has remained stable as far as the first four positions are concerned, while there have been some changes since then.

⁶ On this topic, see Sergio (2011), Vedovelli (2017), Ellero (2018), Favaro (2018).

⁷ Cf. <https://www.miur.gov.it/web/guest/interculturala>.

⁸ We can only quickly mention that the starting point for the recognition of languages other than Italian is rooted in Article 6 of the Italian Constitution of 1947, which states: “The Republic protects linguistic minorities with appropriate regulations”. This article gives recognition to the fact that there are groups in Italy that do not speak Italian as a first language, after the experience of Fascism that had instead aimed at the suppression of all languages other than Italian, including Italian dialects. We refer to situations of contact between Italian and foreign languages, but we must remember that in Italy, where Italian is recognized as the official language, minority languages are not only recognized, but also valorized through the promotion of national or local projects. In Italy, there are twelve recognized language communities: Albanian, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan and Sardinian.

⁹ Cf. <https://www.istat.it>.

¹⁰ Cf. <https://www.ismu.org>.

Table 2: *Pupils with non-Italian citizenship by top 10 countries of origin (absolute values and percentages). Source: Ministry of Education (2022: 27)*

A.S. 2020/2021			A.S. 2010/2011		
Paesi	v.a.	per 100 alunni stranieri	Paesi	v.a.	per 100 alunni stranieri
Romania	154.256	17,8	Romania	126.300	17,8
Albania	116.819	13,5	Albania	99.102	14,0
Marocco	109.401	12,6	Marocco	92.347	13,0
Cina	50.875	5,9	Cina	32.671	4,6
Egitto	31.298	3,6	Moldavia	20.575	2,9
India	29.482	3,4	India	20.531	2,9
Moldavia	25.562	3,0	Filippine	19.755	2,8
Filippine	24.655	2,8	Ecuador	19.524	2,7
Pakistan	22.547	2,6	Tunisia	18.193	2,6
Bangladesh	22.155	2,6	Ucraina	17.393	2,4
<i>Sub totale</i>	<i>587.050</i>	<i>67,8</i>	<i>Sub totale</i>	<i>466.391</i>	<i>65,7</i>
Altri paesi	278.338	32,2	Altri paesi	243.872	34,3
Totale	865.388	100,0	Totale	710.263	100,0

Instead, what does not seem to be known, at least from these sites, is the exact number of foreigners who are learning their heritage language in Italy (e.g., an Albanian or a German student respectively studying Albanian or German in Italy).

3. TWO ROADS TO ONE QUESTION: THE INFORMAL SIDE

At this point, we can ask ourselves what the concrete response of Italian schools is, especially primary and secondary schools, to this variety of “new Italians”. Let’s begin by saying that in Italy, specific Italian courses for foreigners are especially aimed at adults. In primary and secondary schools, the foreign child is not offered specific linguistic support; generally speaking, the practice is for teachers to pay some extra attention to this child, but without specific linguistic instruction either in Italian as L2 or in his/her language of origin. As an aid to the child’s integration (including linguistic integration), the practice is rather to place the foreign child entering the Italian school in a class lower than the one he/she would attend in his/her country of origin; for example, a Polish child who in Poland would attend the fourth grade of primary school is placed in the Italian school in the third or even second grade (cf. Favaro, 2018: 15-16). Within a year, foreign children normally catch up with their Italian mother-tongue peers, although in many cases, they lag. Moreover, schools do not seem to use specific techniques with which to address the pupils; rather, this depends on the preparation and sensitivity of individual teachers.

We may recall how this fumbling around is in contradiction with what the law says¹¹. This means that the provisions would be there, but it is difficult to establish how much,

¹¹ See above, § 2. We can also cite the Decree of the President of the Republic 394/99 art. 45 (in particular paragraph 4) says that «The teachers’ board defines, about the level of competence of individual foreign pupils, the necessary adaptation of teaching programs; to this end, specific individualized interventions or

where and how they are put into practice. The impression that the behavior varies from school to school emerges from interviews with two teachers: Interviewed A and Interviewed B¹².

Interviewed A is a 48-year-old female teacher who works at the European School in Varese (a province in Lombardy, north of Milan). This school was founded in 1960 and is part of a network of 13 schools spread across Europe; founded for the children of European officials, it is also open to Italians. The system depends on a head office, which is in Brussels, and from which a program called ‘syllabus’ is issued. In the school, the vehicular language is English. This teacher has twenty years of experience in the school and now teaches, as a native speaker, Italian as L1, L2, L3, and L4, because in her school, up to four different languages are taught.

Interviewed B is a 28-year-old male teacher; he has less teaching experience, having taught for only two years at an international school in Milan. He has a degree in English and has undergone training that prepared him for didactics and especially glottodidactics. In the school where this second interviewee teaches, there are children from primary (early years) to high school; he is a support teacher who follows 13/14-year-old pupils; in the classes, there are children of various nationalities: Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese, American, English, Russian. Here, too, English is spoken in all subjects except for Italian lessons.

We asked both interviewees a few questions, the answers to which are summarized below. At first, we asked if they had any specific information on how to teach foreigners and heritage language speakers and if they had enough information available. Interviewed A answered they were given no specific information. The instructions on how to create the syllabus come from Brussels, which distributes a “syllabus”; they, on the other hand, create the tests themselves, which then go to Brussels for approval. Interviewed B also confirmed that they were not given specific information. Teachers are provided with an international program called MYP - Middle Years Program. Teachers are given access to a book, available both in PDF and printed form, in which all the subjects can be found.

Secondly, we asked if they knew where to find information about teaching these groups (textbooks, websites with materials etc.). Interviewed A answered that she has postgraduate degrees and has the possibility and ability to find her way through the scientific literature. This is not the case for the majority of her colleagues, who try to find information independently, mainly on the web. Interviewed B answered that he has not yet asked himself this question, but if so, he would know where to turn.

Thirdly, we asked if they evaluate foreigners and heritage language speakers in the same way (that is according to the same criteria) as monolingual pupils and, in case of a negative answer, if these criteria are uniform for all (it means criteria given by the state or by the

interventions for groups of pupils can be adopted to facilitate the learning of the Italian language, using, where possible, the school’s professional resources. The consolidation of the knowledge and practice of the Italian language can also be achieved through the activation of intensive Italian language courses based on specific projects, also within the framework of additional teaching activities for the enrichment of the educational offer» (<https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:presidente.repubblica:decreto:1999-08-31;394~art45>).

¹² The subject of teaching considered from the teachers’ side has been dealt with several times in the journal *Italiano LinguaDue* (the home page can be reached at this link: <https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/promoitals/index>); see, for example, the comprehensive and recent essay by Deiana (2022). The journal *Italiano LinguaDue*, which is open access, is published by the University of Milan and is linked to the first-level master’s degree Promoitals, aimed at the promotion and teaching of Italian language and culture to foreigners (see the link page to the master’s site: <https://www.unimi.it/it/corsi/corsi-post-laurea-e-formazione-continua/master-e-perfezionamento/catalogo-master/aa-2023/2024-master-promozione-e-insegnamento-della-lingua-e-della-cultura-italiana-stranieri-promoitals-i>).

school) or if they create them for their own needs. Interviewed A answered that all students are assessed using the same, very strict evaluation grid; in particular, everyone is required to take the same tests. Also, Interviewed B said that there are no different assessment grids. Rather, they are guided on a case-by-case basis and tend to be more “generous and comprehensive” to foreigners, and vice versa to be more demanding with native speakers. Since he works in an international and officially recognized school, one can choose whether to take the final exam according to the international criterion or according to the Italian one; in the latter case, foreigners have more difficulties.

Finally, we asked what are the biggest complications in teaching these groups. Interviewed A reports that when she teaches Italian as L2 or L3, she doesn't encounter any difficulties, as the students know Italian very well (living in Italy, for them, Italian resembles a mother tongue; plus, they very often have an Italian mother or father). For these students, the difficulties are mainly in writing. The biggest problems are encountered by students who choose Italian as their L4; in these cases, they are helped by using English or French in class or by writing assignments on the blackboard. For newcomer students, there are extra hours of lessons; these hours are taught by teachers from the school without any specific preparation (in fact, they generally do pure grammar without any special arrangements concerning the heritage language). Interviewed B pointed out that, in the teaching of Italian, the greatest difficulties are in the written abilities because in the school, people mainly speak and write in English. These difficulties are particularly felt by newcomers.

4. AN OVERVIEW OF SOME POSSIBILITIES OF LEARNING HERITAGE LANGUAGES¹³

In Italy, the framework of schools where one can continue to learn one's heritage language is rather fragmented and, above all, reduced (Campanale, 2020); this fact entails a very high risk of incurring *subtractive bilingualism*, i.e., the possibility of forgetting the language of origin for linguistic reasons and due to social pressures (Favaro, 2020: 290; and cf. this essay also for the concepts of “language ranking and hierarchy” and “linguistic market”). Below are some of the most relevant possibilities in this regard. About bilingual or international schools where the languages of immigrants present in Italy are taught, a review showed that there are five languages concerned with this teaching: Romanian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic and Albanian.

In Romanian primary and secondary schools, we can mention the LCCR project (courses in Romanian Language, Culture and Civilization), which offers free extra-curricular courses financed by the Romanian Ministry of Education; this means that the courses are completely free for students. This opportunity works like this: a school that has a pool of interested users can apply to activate a course and from the year following the application, the course can be activated; it is taught by Romanian mother-tongue lecturers; the calls for applications are annual.

For Chinese, there is the SIIC - Scuola Internazionale Italo-Cinese¹⁴, based in Padua, where two curricula are followed, Italian and Chinese; it starts from primary school and at the end of high school and students can decide whether to obtain the Italian or Chinese Diploma or both. This school is not only attended by Chinese children or children of Chinese (mixed and non-mixed couples); there are also children with both Italian parents.

¹³ For the writing of this sub-chapter, we thank Irina Suzana Stan for the very useful information she kindly provided.

¹⁴ Cf. <https://www.siic.it>.

We can also remember, in Naples, the “Orientale” Italian-Chinese Primary School, the first bilingual Italian-Chinese school in Campania (a region in South Italy).

For Spanish, we can mention the Liceo Cervantes¹⁵, which covers pre-school to high school. It operates very similarly to the Italian-Chinese International School. In this case, however, most of the children are Italian; in Italy, Spanish-speaking immigrants come mainly from South America and these immigrants, who generally have a medium-low socio-economic profile, simply tend to enroll their children in Italian schools.

For Arabic, there is only one Italian-Arabic school in Italy, the Egyptian school “Nagib-Mahfuz”, named after the Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian writer¹⁶. The school is physically located in Milan and is mainly attended by Arab children who can already speak Arabic and who have to learn to read and write Arabic. The school has eight classes (five primary and three secondary) and is sponsored by the Egyptian Consulate of Lombardy, which, by the way, offers textbooks in Arabic. 2 to 3 hours per week are dedicated to teaching Arabic, as is the case for the above-mentioned Romanian project. For Chinese and Spanish, it is more difficult to quantify the number of hours in the language of origin because at SIIC and the Liceo Cervantes some subjects are taught in the language of origin and others in Italian.

These seem to be the most relevant institutions at a national level. Then, of course, there may be other initiatives that may arise within important cultural associations: for example, in Parma there is the Scanderbeg association¹⁷ that offers (offered?) Albanian language and culture courses for the children of immigrants.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have tried to answer some questions posed collectively within the 4EU+ project *Educating bilingual children with language attrition and children of foreigners: Differences in approach*. We have tried to make some initial queries on the Italian situation, hoping that there will be a way to explore these interesting topics in more depth.

In conclusion, we know the number of foreign children who attend Italian schools and we also know how many of them were born in Italy to foreign parents; conversely, we do not seem to know how many students know their hereditary language or are learning it. In this area, the educational offer, as we have seen, is very diverse.

As far as the answers to specific questions are concerned, we note that to teach bilingual children or children with heritage languages, teachers do not apply any specific techniques. Research bears results, but very little research has entered schools and institutes. Schools seem to be assessed on a case-by-case basis to help the pupil. Furthermore, classes are often multilingual (for example, there are Romanian, Chinese, and Egyptian children etc.) and this makes it even more difficult to think of techniques that are valid for everyone. In terms of assessment, these pupils are also assessed in the same way.

The problematic aspects mainly concern older students (in middle school, but especially in high school) because, in many cases, they are students who were born abroad or moved to Italy when they were already older. For primary school students, these problematic aspects do not arise because they are almost always children born in Italy; generally, these children are limited to speaking the heritage language in the family. Despite the wishes of Italian law, there does not seem to be any attention paid to the fact

¹⁵ Cf. <http://liceoespanolcervantes.educalab.es/centro>.

¹⁶ <https://scuolaegiziana.com/>.

¹⁷ <http://www.scanderbegparma.org>.

that different heritage languages are taught at school. Not surprisingly, very often, children only speak their heritage language, while they cannot write it, precisely because they have attended Italian schools.

Finally, it appeared that teachers are not yet fully aware of a different *modus operandi*, that is, of a specific project to be applied to bilingual or foreign students. Studies do exist (e.g., on inter-linguistic interference in learning; for example, on what are the most common errors of Russian learning Italian), but they remain mostly limited to specialist areas.

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