

Emergent plurilingualism and metalinguistic awareness in primary school

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Abstract

This paper aims to present some of the results from a project conducted in primary schools within a bilingual area in northern Italy, focusing on enhancing language skills and metalinguistic awareness. The project is inspired by the “Éveil aux langues” approach as represented in the FREPA/CARAP project (Candelier et al., 2012) and the studies conducted by Andorno and Sordella (Andorno & Sordella 2017, 2018). It took place during the 2021-22 school year in three classes at a primary school in the province of Bolzano, Italy. In this multilingual region there are at least two languages of instruction (German L1/L2 and Italian L1/L2 respectively). Children from international/migrant backgrounds are learning these languages as their L2/L3/LX, presenting a challenge for teachers who need to adapt their classroom practices for newly arrived pupils.

Keywords: *metalinguistic awareness, language repertoire, primary school, L2, plurilingualism*

1. Introduction

At school, pupils are immersed in an educational framework that encompasses linguistic interaction patterns, which often mirror the communicative experiences and practices of the society they are part of (Hélot, 2014). The border region of South Tyrol in Italy is a unique environment characterized by both endogenous and exogenous multilingualism and plurilingualism (Bagna, Machetti, Vedovelli, 2003), requiring a continual analysis of the evolving variables within educational systems.

The IKSU project (in English: Inclusive Framework for Languages Support in Unterland/Bassa Atesina, in German: Inklusives Konzept für Sprach(en)förderung im Unterland) focused on observing classroom practices during the 2021-22 school year in three primary school classes. In one of the planned learning paths, children were engaged through the common thread of the storytelling of “La geometria del Faraone” (“The Geometry of the Pharaoh”, our translation) by the Italian author Anna Cerasoli.

2. Storytelling and activities

The book “La geometria del Faraone” by Anna Cerasoli is a narrative that creatively introduces mathematical concepts such as squares, lines and angles. At the same time, children are prompted to

reflect on the meaning of lexical items and explore Noun morphology.

The languages employed for storytelling, discussions, and reflections primarily included the languages of instruction (Italian, German, and English), as well as languages spoken by migrant children, such as Arabic, Punjabi, and Urdu, etc. Additionally, storytelling was conducted in languages unknown or unfamiliar to all pupils, such as Romanian, Ladin, and Albanian. The overarching approach to storytelling was designed to highlight how “pupils’ languages (and cultural biographies) and experiences play as a springboard for the learning of the schooling language(s) and the subject” (Auger 2023: 5).

The storytelling sessions centred around mathematical content, and the accompanying language-related activities were designed to enhance the metalinguistic competence (Roehr-Brackin, 2018) of the children. This includes their ability to analyse languages, particularly the school languages Italian and German, which are either L1 or L2 respectively in the school curricula. Each language introduced and every sequence of the story shared was presented by L1 speakers, representing pupils’ L2, L3, LX, thereby restructuring language hierarchies within the class. By placing heritage languages on an equal footing with school languages, learners were encouraged to examine how “language” is organised and describe it using metalinguistic tools previously applied to the school language(s). Guided metalinguistic reflection helped pupils recognize similarities and differences between languages (L1, L2, L3, ..., LX), enhancing their metalinguistic competence by applying analytical categories from their mother tongue(s) to observe and describe how “other” languages work.

The observed classes, characterised by plurilingual storytelling and related reflection activities, comprised two second year classes (N=32) of primary school in the Italian school department and one third class (N=16) in the German school department (overall ages 7-9). All groups had more than 50% of pupils with international backgrounds, resulting in highly multilingual classes, as shown in Figure 1 below.

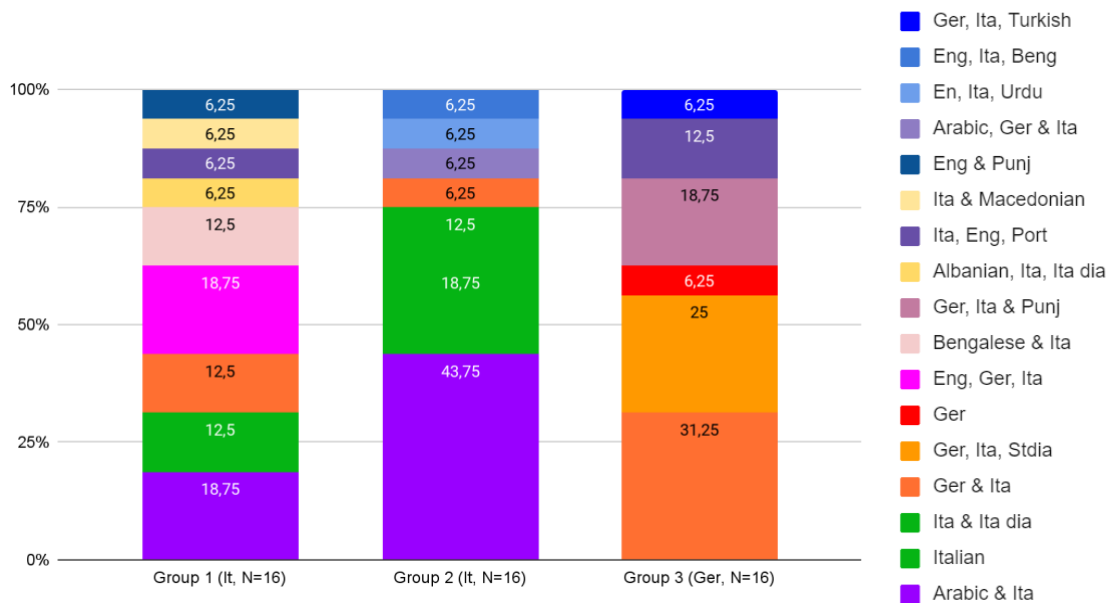


Figure 1: The pupils’ plurilingual repertoire

Among the languages spoken by the three groups, there are not just Italian, German, and the respective dialects - Italian and South-Tyrolean - but also Arabic, English, Bengalese, Punjabi, Portuguese, Urdu, Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish. Pupils’ individual repertoires include both heritage languages and those spoken in the region and taught at school.

Classroom discussions and pupils’ reflections were video-recorded and transcribed using the ELAN software. A qualitative analysis was then undertaken for this contribution to present evidence

regarding young learners’ metalinguistic competence. The following research questions guide the discussion of the results: Can young learners effectively analyse “unknown” or heritage languages? How do they approach the task? Can they explicitly compare languages?

3. The case of Hindi and Punjabi: sharing hypotheses

An initial example illustrates how pupils approach tasks to reflect on languages involved in two heritage languages, Hindi and Punjabi. These are family languages of some learners within the class group, specifically in the context of the Italian school for newly arrived pupils (NAI) and in the German school for two pupils, one of them a SEN (special educational needs) pupil (P8). In Figure 2 below, pupils were asked to complete an activity by writing known words in other languages next to the corresponding pictures and words in Hindi and Punjabi.



Figure 2: Keywords and pictures in Hindi and Punjabi

The activity was carried out in pairs, allowing pupils to share their respective words and provide explanations to their classmates. In the plenary, words were then shared in a list of various languages (see Figure 3 below, and the individual linguistic repertoires in Figure 1).



Figure 3: The multilingual dictionary emerging from the activity

3.1 The morphology of Hindi and Punjabi: singular and plural forms

The subsequent task (depicted in Figure 4) prompted pupils to examine both the pictures and the words presented in the right and left columns. Initially, each pupil conducted individual observations, followed by a collaborative activity with a classmate to share their respective thoughts. Ultimately, these hypotheses were discussed in the plenary.







तूफ़ान toofaan		ਤੂਫ਼ਾਨ tūphāna
ਤੂਫ਼ਾਨ toofaan	 	ਤੂਫ਼ਾਨ tūphāna
मगरमच्छ magaramachchh		ਮਗਰਮੱਛ Magaramacha
ਮਗਰਮੱਛ magaramachchh	 	ਮਗਰਮੱਛ magaramacha

Figure 4: Singular and plural forms of keywords in Hindi and Punjabi

In the following example (1) pupils attempt to discern patterns, similarities and differences between the observed words, ultimately identifying the two languages being employed, i.e. Hindi and Punjabi. The heritage speaker (NAI) is consulted as an expert who validates the hypotheses made in the group.

(1) Italian school, P2, P8, P10, L1: Ita, Ger, Arabic, age 7

P2: sulla prima riga (...) c'è scritto toophan/tufan senza niente e sulla seconda ci sono le sigle (xxx i segnetti) [on the first line (...) it says toophan/tufan without anything, and on the second line there are acronyms (xxx the little marks)]

P8: la prima e la terza sono uguali, e anche la seconda e la quarta sono uguali (lo ripete) [the first and third are the same, and the second and fourth are also the same (repeats it)]

T: risentiamo come le dice M [let's hear it again as M tells her]

M: tufan tufan tufan tufan [tufan tufan tufan]

P2: sono uguali [they are the same]

(P?): sono diverse ma si pronuncia uguale. [they are different but it is pronounced the same.]

T: perché sono diverse? [why are they different?]

(P?): sono scritte diverse... [they are spelled different...]

P10: forse sono lingue diverse? [maybe they are different languages?] (overlapping voices, T asks to raise hands and speak one at a time)

T: dà il turno di parola a E [gives the turn to speak to E]

P10: perché forse sono come diversi eh (...) diverse lingue come uno in punjabi e uno in (...) h (...) [because maybe they are like different eh (...) different languages like one in Punjabi and one in (...) h (...)]

T: hindi [Hindi]

(in sottofondo) P14: tufan vuol dire tempesta? [does tufan mean storm?]

T: allora abbiamo capito che questa potrebbe essere una lingua e questa potrebbe essere un'altra lingua, giusto? (...) allora chiediamo a P13 qual è hindi e qual è il punjabi (...) vieni qua (...) ci indichi per favore? [then we realized that this could be one language and this could be

another language, right? (...) then we ask P13 which one is Hindi and which one is Punjabi (...) come here (...) can you show us to please?]

The examples 2 and 3 demonstrate another noteworthy exploration and reflection centered on the singular and plural forms of nouns in Hindi and Punjabi. Pupils are engaged in a comparative analysis, noticing, for instance, the absence of differences in forming plurals in Hindi, where “मगरमच्छ” (magarmach) can signify both “crocodile” and “crocodiles”. The heritage speaker (P8) in example (2), a SEN pupil with German as a L2, supports the hypotheses formulated by her classmates and validates them by stating that singular and plural forms remain invariable in this language compared to both German and Italian studied at school.

(2) German school, P8, L1 pun, age 9, SEN, I3 Instructor

P8 Sie... sie hat gesagt, diese [*she... she said, these*]

(0.67)

P8 Einzahl, Mehrzahl ist wie Einzahl [*singular, plural is as singular*]

(0.04)

mit Mehrzahl [*with plural*]

(0.12)

[...]

I3 Allora, Einzahl und Mehrzahl...? [*So, singular and plural...?*]

P8 Ist gleich [*is the same*]

In example (3), the L1 Arabic pupil (P5) compares the words in Hindi and Punjabi with the singular and plural forms in the school language, Italian (L2 for the pupil).

(3) Italian school, P5, L1 arabic, age 7

T: lasciamo parlare P5 [*let's P5 talk*]

P5: se c'è uno devi dire tempesta, se ci sono due devi dire tempeste [*if you say one you have to say tempesta (thunderstorm), if there are two you have to say tempeste (thunderstorms)*]

T: in italiano diciamo tempesta tempeste, in hindi diciamo [*in Italian we say tempesta tempeste (thunderstorm thunderstorms), in Hindi we say*]

P5: tufan tufan [*tufan tufan*]

In example (2) and (3), pupils from different groups arrive at the same conclusions by comparing the two heritage languages from different perspectives.

4. Final remarks

The reflection, conducted through various activities, involved the analysis of languages on multiple levels: from phonetics to morphology (singular and plural) in the “unknown” language for the majority of the pupils, and a comparison of morphology across different languages. As illustrated in examples (1), (2), and (3), this reflection helped learners (aged 7-9 years) recognize differences between languages in this context. It facilitated an exploration of how these linguistic forms are categorised across the spectrum of languages.

The findings revealed how children at this age (7) demonstrate metalinguistic awareness and metacognition, as evidenced by the discussion of singular and plural forms of nouns in Punjabi and Hindi. These results underscore that, even at this age, young learners are able to analyse languages in detail, like linguists do, akin to older counterparts studied by Andorno & Sordella (2020).

Consequently, interventions in this direction should be encouraged to mitigate the widening of the “equity gaps in education” (OECD 2022). Moreover, the literature underscores (Cummins, 2021,

Helot 2014, Jessner & Allgäuer-Hackl 2022, Piccardo, 2016, Vertovec 2007) that teachers should be aware of the multifaceted reality due to the superdiverse linguistic repertoires.

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