Benefits of English for Preschool Children.
The Case Study of a Bilingual School in Italy

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Abstract

The research aims at investigating the communicative abilities of Italian children in a bilingual (English-Italian) preschool, focusing on the benefits of bilingualism in children's cognitive, social, and cultural growth. After an introduction on the role of bilingual education in early childhood in promoting a child's life-long love of language and bilingual proficiency, through the support of some European documents and key studies in the field, the research design is presented. A variety of instruments were used, such as video recorded class observations, field notes and observation sheets, semi-structured interviews with L1 and L2 teachers and structured interviews with children, questionnaires for parents, as well as language knowledge tests for children and teachers. Children's lexicon development was taken into consideration, especially the frequency of use of English language, thus showing a significant growth of the perceptive and productive lexicon for the investigated age range. This provided evidence that the children in this study were still at the sensitive age for lexicon acquisition. The linguistic phenomena that, among the preschool children, were practised the most were: code-switching and code-mixing. This study provided new findings on the early acquisition of English language in bilingual children with the home language Italian. This language experience usually takes place along five dimensions: the materiality of language and its use, children's perceptions about them, beliefs about self and others in the speech community, emotional responses about language and about language users.

Keywords: Preschool children, bilingualism, English language learning, code-switching, code-mixing.

Introduction
Benefits of an early start. Cognitive, cultural and social resources.

As recent research on the benefits of an early start has shown (Pierce et al., 2015), bilingualism in children has positive repercussions on brain development. The brain, indeed, is perfectly able to manage two or more languages simultaneously right from birth, thanks to an innate predisposition that

allows children to learn languages without making any effort and to remember throughout their lives the languages listened to in their earliest childhood. It is well-known that knowledge is organised linguistically. The ability to think and intellectualise is inextricably linked with the ability to communicate ideas. Physiologically and cognitively, language has primacy in intellectual activity; the brain of bilingual children is, in fact, more open to the sounds of other languages with a consequent development of the areas dedicated to learning and problem solving. To put it with Lara J. Pierce et al. (2015),

"the most rapid pace of learning takes place during the first years of life and during this time of heightened neuroplasticity the brain is optimally predisposed to collect and store basic information about the world (for example, simple visual elements and basic units of sound). Hearing a language during this time tunes infants' brains to the sounds of that language, and neural representations of these sounds are established".[1]

In addition, neurocognitive processes have also been investigated in relation to the so-called "phonological working memory" (PWM), which is responsible for storing and manipulating incoming speech sounds in memory. In subjects who speak more than one language, it has been found that PWM is activated with a higher frequency. In general, in children who speak a language other than the official ones in their societies and education systems, and as the two languages develop to literate mastery, possible cognitive advantages ensue, such as enhanced meta-linguistic awareness that can also be considered as a cultural resource for the entire society. This can occur through a combination of understandings of anthropological (ways of life), and conventional culture, both in elite and popular forms. Language is, therefore, both a form of culture and its instrument.

Language can thus be thought of as a temporal link with culture, carrying the past into the present and forging the future from the here and now, to paraphrase the English social critic Raymond Williams (1976), who has expressed this idea of language forming the link between archaic, residual and emergent cultural expressions. Construed positively, and directed towards socially cohesive and productive ends, bilingualism can increase cultural capital and the number of cultural expressions and perspectives available to citizens. In this way, bilingualism can be represented as a preparation for globalisation, an instantiation in local communities of the external or extra-national world. Moreover, the benefits of bilingualism (and of an early start, in particular) can also be considered in terms of social resource, as most human encounters are communicative and many political, legal, personal, marital and familial problems reside in difficulties of communication. In this context, language diversity supports the expressive capabilities of all citizens, and citizenship engagement with society can be enhanced.

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[1] Pierce, L. J., Chen, J. K., Delcenserie, A., Genesee, F., & Klein, D. (2015). Past experience shapes ongoing neural patterns for language. Nature Communications, 6(1), 1-11.

European documents

Currently, the role of bilingual education in early childhood in promoting a child's life-long love for language and bilingual proficiency seems to be unquestionable. In this paper, "bilingual education" is used as an umbrella term to define an education system in which instructions are given in two languages, one of which is the home language of some or all the children (Schwartz, 2018, p. vii).

In 2011, the European Commission argued that not only is learning a second language an advantage, but also it has an enormous potential for the development of children's identity, values, empathy, and respect. The term 'second language' is often used to describe the language learned after a first language, in contexts where the language learner is a resident of an area where the second language is in general use. In contrast, a 'foreign language' is a language that is learned in an area and context where that language is not generally used. As a matter of fact, each European country has since developed its own strategies to reach the objective of children's linguistic development. In the official document of the European Commission (2011) we read:

> "Children should be exposed to the target language in meaningful and, if possible, authentic settings, in such a way that the language is spontaneously acquired rather than conscious learnt". [2] But in Italy, due to the lack of national bilingual programmes at preschool level, this type of education is only found in private school contexts, and play, of course, is the main learning tool".

Based on these premises, some reflections on the reasons why English is the second language in bilingual schools should be emphasised. Not only is English the *lingua franca,* but also the five tenets of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2010) must be considered:

-   "English is best taught monolingually
-   the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker
-   the earlier English is taught, the better the results
-   the more English is taught, the better the results
-   if other languages are taught, standards of English will drop".

The proposed educational process actively involves three stakeholders: parents, children, and teachers (Schwartz, 2018). Parents play a significant role in lobbying for preschool bilingual education as a part of their family language policy. As a matter of fact, many school programmes introduce a foreign language very early as a response to parental aspirations to secure better prospects for their children, for whom foreign language competence is seen as a key element (King et al. 2008; Schwartz & Verschik, 2013). Of course, children do not voluntarily choose either monolingual or bilingual kindergarten, but are subject to their parents' preferences. Finally, it is important to consider the three different components of the teaching act, i.e., the teacher, teaching

[2]   http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/language-policy/documents/early-language-learning-handbook_en.pdf

methodologies, and materials. These three components should be adapted to the learners' needs and interests, so to be successful when trying to promote a motivating environment in the classroom.

The present investigation concerning the communicative abilities of Italian children in a bilingual (English-Italian) pre-school follows a previous longitudinal study that had focused on spontaneous acquisition of English as a foreign language by pre-schoolers through videos and cartoons (Leotta, 2019; Leotta & Di Gregorio, 2020). Indeed, this research represents a further contribution to the issue of formal English language learning in a bilingual preschool, where English is the second language. [3] The main objective of the present investigation is to focus on the benefits of bilingualism in relation to children's cognitive, social, and cultural growth.

Methods
Research design

We will begin by demonstrating in what way is an early start learning of a second language an advantage. We will also refer to some European Union documents that emphasise the role of bilingual programmes within educational contexts. The research describes the sociolinguistic background of a bilingual preschool in the province of Catania, Italy. The investigation was carried out by our research group made up of linguists and psychologists, during the school year 2020-2021. The teaching strategies were examined, alongside the role of the teachers and parents in encouraging child motivation and attitude toward second language acquisition. Following on the method suggested by Prosic-Santovac & Radovic (2018), the data were obtained through class observation and child observation sheets, semi-structured interviews with teachers, a questionnaire for parents and a structured interview with children. A team of psychologists interpreted the data obtained, as well as children's interactions, their drawings, and their performance in general.

The research was performed in Catania, Italy, where, although English as a foreign language is widely taught, the official language of education is Italian. However, cases of bilingual education, such as ours, do exist. During the period of observation, qualitative methods were employed for data collection in order to enable triangulation. A variety of instruments were used (Prosic-Santovac, 2017), such as video recorded class observations, filed notes and observation sheets, semi-structured interviews with L1 and L2 teachers and structured interviews with children, questionnaires for parents, as well as language knowledge tests for children and teachers.

The characteristics of the teachers working in the classes under consideration and the related syllabi were evaluated. The final considerations focused on the frequency of use of the foreign language, the linguistic distortions typical of the case (code-switching and code-mixing) and the way in which the L2 was expressed, orally and in writing.

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[3] Italics mine

Participants

The investigation was carried out at the private preschool "*Sole Luna*", located in the province of Catania, Italy. The school includes a nursery school with three groups (0-3 years), and a kindergarten (3-6 years) with two sections, one "Italian" and one "English bilingual". A total of 30 boys and 30 girls participated in the study, as well as 60 parents (one per each participant) and three English native teachers. All children belonged to Italian families speaking Italian L1 daily, except for a trilingual child (Italian father, Austrian mother, speaking Italian (L1), Austrian German (L2) and English (L3) at home). In general, all the children had someone in their immediate linguistic environment who could speak English; indeed, they were exposed to English language daily, also outside school.

All parents spoke English to a greater or lesser degree, although their level of knowledge of English language was not specifically assessed. Only one parent per child was asked to fill in the questionnaire. It provided data on education, occupation, gender, marital status, social status of the families, and it yielded that the families mostly belonged to an upper social stratum. This was expected, considering that bilingual preschool education is not widely available in Italy, and only socio-economically advantaged families are more able to afford early English or other languages.

Procedure

The observation period lasted 9 months, from September 2020 to June 2021, which is a whole school year. The investigators visited the kindergarten twice a week during regular teaching sessions, and field notes were taken. Additionally, each teaching session was video recorded, and each video observation lasted approximately one hour.

Interviews, partially based on Prosic Santovac (2017), were obtained with children and teachers. Particularly, the children were interviewed using the well-known Berkeley Puppet Interview method (Measelle et al., 1998), while, semi-structured interviews were held with the teachers. The Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI) uses puppets to conduct structured and clinical interviews that assess children's perceptions of themselves, their families, and their school environments. This paper reports on the challenges faced, strategies used, and benefits enjoyed while using the tool of semi-structured interviews.

Teachers, instead, were asked questions related to five facets of student collaboration: intrinsic value, perceived value, noise, teacher intervention, and assessment. The interview responses were then used to create a dual perspective and to support data generated from a student survey. This approach helped researchers explore the potential of collaborative learning for sharing the cognitive load of the learning task. The beliefs of the teachers about bilingualism and early bilingual education, the role of parents in promoting bilingualism, literacy development in young children, and parental expectations were explored. Following the classroom observations, the teachers were asked about their own and their learners' language use in the classrooms, their language mediation strategies and the model of bilingual education that were adopted in their class.

They were also asked to describe what they considered to be effective language teaching and to comment on why they had used a strategy or another.

Results

In the preschool investigated in the present study, as soon as a new child arrives, his/her language needs are quickly taken into consideration, and appropriate support is organised. It might be that the child has some second language skills but needs in-class support to fully benefit from the class activities.

The learning objectives of the preschool program were: 1) counting from 1 to 10 (through the rhymes "*Five little ducks*", "*Five little monkeys jumping on the bed*", "*Ten in the bed**); 2) learning body parts (through the rhymes "*Head, shoulders, knees and toes*" and "*One little finger*"); 3) as well as playing active roles while speaking the L2; 4) dancing, walking, jumping, running while listening to "*If you're happy and you know it*", "*Make a circle*", "*Walking walking*", "*The wheels on the bus*", "*You are my sunshine*", "*Itsy bitsy spider*", "*Old MacDonald had a farm*" e "*Twinkle twinkle little star*". Furthermore, teachers provided adult guidance to what Vygotsky (1935) has defined as scaffolding, being "like a bridge used to build upon what students already know to arrive at something they do not know". They assisted children to complete a task or develop new understandings, so that they would later be able to complete similar tasks alone.

During the site visits, the linguistic phenomena that were observed among the preschool children were code-switching and code-mixing. Hymes (1974, p. 168) defines *code-switching* as a "common term for alternative use of two or more languages, varieties of a language or even speech styles" […]. In the words of Gumperz (1982, p. 59) - one of the pioneers in the field - "*conversational code-switching* can be defined as the juxtaposition, within the same speech exchange, of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems". Instead, code-mixing, also called lexical borrowing, can be defined as the mixing of two or more languages in the same sentence, and this was the case of questions and sentences belonging to our pre-schoolers, such as "*Possiamo andare upstairs?*" (Can we go upstairs?), "*Ho catturato una butterfly*" (I have captured a butterfly), "*Can I have the colori a matita, please?*" (Can I have the coloured pencils?).

As far as grammar use was concerned, data derived from this study evidenced that those preschool children often deleted modal verbs (i.e. I take/drink my water, please?) and made mistakes with possessives (they repeat what teachers say, i.e.: Please, go and brush your teeth" > May I brush your teeth, please?). In terms of spelling, children learned how to connect phonemes to graphemes and they often asked teachers how to write "I love you" and "Happy Birthday", as a caption to a drawing or any other gifts. Concerning listening comprehension activities, an e-book was regularly read along by a teacher, and children were encouraged to recognize the speaker's accent (usually American), whereas the teacher's one was British. In this context, children were asked to listen to a story and provide a drawing on what they understood.

Interestingly, the analysis of the questionnaire administered to the parents evidenced that children often act as mediators between family and school, and they sometimes even teach English to their parents. In other cases, instead, parents are responsible for guiding their children to deepen their knowledge of L2 even at home, thus contributing to the development of their bilingualism. As a matter of fact, the parents considered bilingualism as a resource and a tool to help children become open-minded, to be aware that differences are a potentiality, and to modify their point of view on the world.

The team of psychologists from our research group interpreted the observation sheets, the semi-structured interviews with L1 and L2 teachers and the structured interviews with children, the questionnaires for parents, as well as the language knowledge tests for children and teachers. The quantitative data resulting from such interpretation is beyond the aims of the present paper. However, a significant growth of the perceptive and productive lexicon for the investigated age range was evident, thus confirming what Lara J. Pierce et al. (2015) had already shown, that is that child's brain, when exposed early to additional languages, develops faster and better. As a matter of fact, in bilingual classes, children's lexicon development takes on a special importance, especially the frequency of use of the English language in peer interaction, and in our case study it showed a significant growth, for the investigated age range, in perceptive and productive tasks. Probably, this result was obtained through the constant monitoring of children's motivation – that is one of the keys to language learning, as children found themselves playing and forging friendships that transcended what would have been language barriers.

A pivotal role was played by the bilingual teacher, as she acted as a mediator, translating whenever children needed it. It is well-known that translation is a natural and inevitable process in second language learning, as it facilitates literacy development in young children, and promotes learner autonomy and self-confidence. Macaro (2009, p. 49) even claims that "some items of vocabulary might be better learnt through a teacher providing first-language equivalents, because this triggers deeper semantic processing than might occur by providing second-language definitions or paraphrases". In addition, translation is indeed a type of communication – not only interlingual, but also intercultural- that contributes to the development of social skills, i.e., through the process of welcoming someone to the group and helping the new arrival to feel at home, whatever language gaps there might be.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provided new findings on the early acquisition of English language in bilingual children with the home language Italian. This language experience usually takes place along five dimensions: the materiality of language and its use, children's perceptions about them, beliefs about self and others in the speech community, and emotional responses about language and about language users. All in all, the bilingual classrooms are inspiring places. Just seeing children's school-work on display, with captions and labels exhibiting proficiency in two languages, is mind expanding. However, this does not happen

by itself and the pure quality of instruction is critical – every child must feel happy and confident to be open to the challenges as well as to the benefits of learning bilingually. This is the reason why research into the bilingual brain is strictly linked to the guidance of teaching methods.

Following on our class observation, the sample of our children used both languages to make sense of the world; they were very adaptive, deepening their understanding of the first language while acquiring the second, and improved in cognitive growth, such as attention management. Taken together, this target bilingual model, together with the teachers' and parents' agency, had a largely positive influence on children's knowledge, motivation and attitude towards language learning. Such attributes are good for the individuals involved and crucially helpful towards that elusive goal of international harmony, as bilinguals act as bridge builders, the go-betweens who can explain one culture to members of the other and act as intermediaries between the two.

Nonetheless, our research investigated a very narrow spectrum of literacy activities only, which were practiced with and by children in early childhood and systematically related to their vocabulary knowledge and/or development. Future steps in the study of the acquisition of English across bilingual children should include an investigation of morpho-syntax, where due to its language-specificity, more variation is expected among various groups of bilinguals.

Declarations

Funding statement

Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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