



## The Journal of Language and Teaching Technology

Plurilingualism, awareness, and inclusion. An identity text experience in an Italian school.

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Published by: Rutgers University, Department of Italian

Issue III, Dec. 2022

# Plurilingualism, awareness, and inclusion.

## An identity text experience in an Italian school

### ABSTRACT

In the recent years the linguistic diversity in Italian schools has been increasing due to a higher presence of students with a migration background. The Italian Ministry of Education sees the opportunities offered by this new plurilingualism, which found its place side by side with the traditional forms carried by the Italian historical minorities, however not all the schools are ready to introduce a plurilingual education. Since 2021, the Impact FVG project of University of Udine has been working in schools to test innovative strategies aimed at fostering a higher visibility of all the codes present in the classrooms, in order to promote a deeper awareness in all the students. Part of this field-testing phase resorted to a blended learning approach and invited the plurilingual students to participate to an inclusive project which involved the planning and writing of texts connected to linguistic biographies and identities.

### 1. Introduction

According to recent data from the Italian Ministry of Education, the number of students defined as *con cittadinanza non italiana* “without Italian citizenship” in the national school system has been constantly increasing since the early 1990s and reached in school year 2019/2020 the 10.3% of the total students’ population (MIS 8). As the document reports, most of these 877,000 students are actually born in Italy to foreign parents and are commonly referred to as ‘second generations’, which is a broad term and sometimes hides the complexity of the reality. At the moment different definitions are used, even in official sources, and this fluctuation is in a way already representative of a situation where changes are fast, boundaries and categories constantly risk to be inaccurate or to become a potential source of ambiguity. Many of these ways of labelling the representatives of this significant part of the Italian school population have in common a focus on one or the other between many different factors which characterize the complex and under definition identities of these students (Fusco 34-35). Whatever the choice is “second generations”, “students without Italian citizenship”, *nuovi arrive in Italia* “newly arrived to Italy”, “foreigners”, or other, the individuals are not always eager to accept it, as these students born in Italy to foreign parents often see themselves as Italian and try their best to blend in with their schoolmates and peers. In this contribution, these speakers will be mainly referred to as students with a migration background or as emerging bilinguals, either following the definition adopted by the Impact FVG project (§ 3), or focusing more on their linguistic background as in Cummins (410) respectively.

The origins of the families of this part of the student population well represent the distribution of foreign communities on the territory, which in Italy shows a high degree of heterogeneity at both a national and regional level (Idos). Data updated on July 2021 show that the province of Friuli Venezia Giulia – the region where this linguistic experimentation took place – with a higher statistical incidence of foreign population is Gorizia (10.7%), followed by Pordenone (10.3%), Trieste (9.3%) and Udine (7.4%), while the most represented countries of origins are in order Romania (23.4% of the total foreign population), Albania (8.6%), Serbia (5.3%), Ukraine (5.0%), and Bangladesh (4.8%) (Attanasio 373). Other factors need to be considered as well, however, as the characteristics of the territory, the stable settling of immigrant communities, or the presence clusters in some towns or cities like the well-known cases of Bangladeshi in Monfalcone, Ghanaians in greater Pordenone area, or Burkinabe in Spilimbergo (Quattrocchi et al. 2003, Altin 2009, Attanasio 2017, Baldo 2017). Another factor which exerts a significant influence on the presence of students with a migration background is the phase of the schooling process observed: if in school year 2019/2020 the average incidence reported by the Italian Ministry of Education in Friuli Venezia Giulia schools is 12.9% (2.6 points higher than the national average), the distribution varies significantly in different kinds of schools. The highest percentage of 15.8 is recorded in nursery schools, followed by the 15.0% in primaries, the 13.6% in “middle schools” (in Italian *scuola secondaria di primo grado*, commonly referred to as *scuola media*), while the lowest incidence of 8.8% is touched in secondary schools, also depicting a different degree of participation of the students with a migration background to the Italian school system as well (MIS 23).

## 2. Old and new plurilingualism in Friuli Venezia Giulia

The territory, both at a national and at a local level, is therefore plurilingual at an already structural level. This plurilingualism is not, however, a recent novelty, exclusively brought by the immigrants and by their families, as Italy and all its region acknowledge to be traditionally and historically plurilingual. The new languages and dialects, spoken by the students with a migration background, by their parents and relatives, are as a matter of facts finding their place side by side with the traditional Italo-Romance codes; as a consequence, the new *lingue immigrate* “immigrant languages” (Bagna et al.) can actually be considered more properly as a “new form of plurilingualism”, or *neoplurilinguismo* (Vedovelli and Casini). Friuli Venezia Giulia and its primary and secondary schools are well representatives of this rich and dynamic situation, where the new languages and dialects enter every day in direct contact with the historical ones and the endogenous codes spoken by the emerging bilingual students with a migration background are therefore becoming a potential source of linguistic contact, innovative uses, variation. On the one hand, Friuli Venezia Giulia is a region on the borders with the Slavic world to the East and with the German one to the North, and it can hence boast an unusually rich linguistic local repertoire which includes Friulian, together with many different languages and varieties, which mainly belong to the Romance, Slavic and German groups (Fusco § 1.1). On the other side, the new languages and dialects spoken by the students with migration background inside their families, spontaneously acquired during the primary socialization with their fathers, mothers, and sometimes siblings, are brought to school and to the plurilingual classrooms that nowadays already characterize it (Fusco 2021, 2022).

Periodically, the guidelines by the Italian Ministry of Education have pointed out the necessity to leave behind an approach which constantly sees the situation as an emergency, in order to find more feasible strategies and turn the new situation into an opportunity: “assumere la diversità come paradigma dell’identità stessa della scuola nel pluralismo, occasione per aprire l’intero sistema a tutte le differenze” (“assuming diversity as a paradigm of the very same identity of a pluralistic school, an opportunity to open the whole system to all diversity”, MIS, my trans.). Since the early 2000s national directives invite the teachers to take advantage of this new environment, often with specific references to plurilingualism and to plurilingual education, sometimes suggesting a number of broad strategies focused on giving a greater visibility to the languages and dialects spoken by the students with a migration background in the school landscape; on promoting the diversity and an exchange between different codes, also considering how the so defined “second generation” students are already starting to learn and use the Italo-Romance languages vital and spoken on the territory; eventually on inviting to increase the awareness and to empower whenever possible these emerging bilinguals, in order to foster the maintenance and transmission of the heritage languages to the future generations (MIUR 2014, 2015). In these guidelines to the school directors, teachers, and janitors, the Italian Ministry of Education is of course well aligned with the Language Division of the Council of Europe, which in the last decades offered both directions and an inventory of more practical strategies in order to promote in the future European citizens a balanced, yet in constant evolution, plurilingual and pluricultural competence (Beacco et al., Council of Europe 159-165)

Unluckily, notwithstanding these guidelines and the resources the scientific literature has put at their disposal (Cognigni), the Italian school system seem to be yet dominated by a monolingual vision of reality. Italian language is considered both a primary subject in the *curriculum*, and the only feasible media for the whole educational process, while little or no space seems to be left for different codes and for diverse communicative resources, like those spoken and brought to the class by the emerging bilingual students. In this setting, even foreign languages like English, French, German, and Spanish risk eventually to be studied and considered in a monoglossic perspective, as separate entities one from each other, therefore supporting an implicit awareness of a unrealistic separation in the speakers’ mind between the different codes (Piccardo 189-192). The assumption of the existence of these “solitudes” (Cummins 229-231), languages or dialects which are part of the speakers’ repertoire, nevertheless are rarely allowed to enter into contact and communicate one another, especially during the school time, however “has increasingly been called into question in recent years on the basis of both theoretical and empirical considerations” (Cummins 104).

### **3. The Impact FVG Project n. 2361**

Impact FVG is a project financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) 2014-2020, through Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, and aimed at the welcoming, inclusion, and educational orientation of students with a migration background, namely with at least a foreign parent, attending the local schools. Under the scientific supervision of Fabiana Fusco, the Department for Foreign Languages and Literatures, Society, and Communication (DILL) of University of Udine is a partner of the project since its early phases. Since October 2018, the main objectives of the research group have been at first gathering sociolinguistic data on the territory, using both a questionnaire and a set of interviews; subsequently, using the information and references in the bibliographic sources in order

to write a protocol to be introduced in the schools of the region with a relevant incidence of students with a migration background (Fusco). Thanks to the first phase of the study, it was possible to find up-to-date evidence of the plurilingualism existing both in the classes of the 46 primary and secondary schools visited by the research fellows, and in the linguistic repertoires of the individual speakers. According to these data (Fusco), mainly gathered through a sociolinguistic questionnaire modelled after the one used by Chini (363-369), Chini and Andorno (304-316), and subsequently by Fusco (219-225), the 1,081 students with migration background reached by the researchers declared a competence in over 80 codes which they defined as languages and in 113 dialects. Between these, Italian is already the most widely spoken, being known and used by the vast majority of the informants and present in the repertoires of their families, side by side with the heritage languages (Montrul 13-15, Polinsky 4); together with it, a vast number of codes, chosen according to interlocutors and situations, in a complex and dynamic system which can in the end be fully appreciated and understood only after an in-depth and almost individual, case by case, analysis (Baldo). In other words, the data show how plurilingualism is a reality at a very authentic and practical level in the everyday life of these students with a migration background, who can choose to use a code at home to talk to their parents, another one when communicating with their siblings or friends outside the family, sometimes with even more options at their disposal, according to contexts, situations, constellation of speakers, or other sociolinguistic variables, not even excluding the possibility of mixing or switching between the different resources in their repertoires.

This representation of these plurilingual students and classes, which is already well acknowledged by the academic research (Fiorentini et al.), seems to be somehow different and separate from the monolingual framework which still dominates the Italian school, as it was traditionally conceived and considered (§ 2). Therefore, during the testing phase of Impact FVG project, in school year 2021/2022, the research group of University of Udine decided to direct some of their actions and activities to fostering a better awareness of this plurilingualism in all the students met in the classes of nursery, primary and secondary schools of Friuli Venezia Giulia. This attempt to bridge the sometimes-existing gap between a monolingual prejudicial vision of education and the plurilingual reality lived by these emerging bilingual students, as well as by their classmates and peers, took advantage of some successful experiences and practices already existing in plurilingual education. Nursery and primary school students were hence invited to draw and visually represent the codes in their repertoires on a silhouette representing their bodies (Prasad, Favaro, Collino and Tonelli), secondary school students and their teachers were on the other hand invited to focus their attention on their sociolinguistic autobiographies (D'Agostino) and especially on writing identity texts (Cummins and Early), where “their identities are reflected back in a positive light” (3). One of these latter practices, which according to the on the field research observations and to the direct feedbacks received from the participants showed to be particularly successful, involved a group of around 20 students attending the second year of “Liceo delle Scienze Applicate (LSA)” ‘High school for Applied Sciences’ at “Arturo Malignani” secondary school of Udine.

#### 4. The experience on the field

Between December 2021 and January 2022, four groups of students from three different technical schools located in Udine and Gemona del Friuli agreed to participate to the testing phase of Impact FVG project; between them around 20 students attending the LSA section of “Arturo Malignani” institute of Udine. According to data from the secretary office of the school, at the moment of the research the students with a migration background attending “Arturo Malignani” secondary school were 214, around 8.4% of the total student population, 57.5% of which born in Italy to at least one foreign parent. Between the over 40 nationalities recorded, the first five most represented are Romania (25.9% of the total non native students), Albania (13.6%), China (9.8%), Serbia (6.1%), and Ukraine (5.6%). In line with these general data, only 6 of the students from 2 LSA who participated to the identity text experience described in these pages have a migration background, and all of them were born in Italy to Romanian, Czech, Polish, Slovak, or Spanish parents. The languages or dialects known and used by these students, as revealed by a language background questionnaire administered before the beginning of the activities, are Italian (for all the 20 informants), followed by Friulian (2), Romanian (2), Czech (1), Polish (1), Slovak (1), and Spanish (1). It is already important to notice how, before the beginning of the testing phase, most of these speakers seem to consider their individual repertoires to be almost monolingual, with considerably few exceptions, while after the experience significant differences and a much richer representation emerges (§ 6).

The first and main objective of the testing phase was to use the identity texts (§ 5) in order to develop in the speakers a more complete awareness of the communicative resources at their disposal, making therefore emerge some other codes probably known and a certain degree already used by the informants. As an instance, almost all the students at “Arturo Malignani” study English, side by side with at least a second European language, while in the afternoon the school offers to anyone interested free courses of a number of less commonly studied languages, like Russian or Chinese. However, the informants seemed in the beginning not too aware of this plurilingual competence, and two possible reasons are at first that probably many of these students identify the idea of “competence” with an almost “native speaker” level, more than with a simply plurilingual “multi-competence” (Piccardo 193); secondly, that actually in the school time Italian prevails and the other codes are usually confined in the boundaries of very specific moments, hours, classes, situations. According to Cummins and Early (3-4), identity texts can on the other hand effectively contribute to fostering in the speakers/writers “their awareness of the relationship between their home language (L1) and the school language (L2)” (4), this way helping some of the codes spoken by the informants at home or in other communicative domains to appear. According to the Impact FVG 2014-2020 experience, the participants were therefore initially asked to discuss the idea of plurilingualism, then to plan and share their ideas about a text in which they were allowed to resort freely to any communicative resource at their disposal, subsequently to write it down in the form and with the media they felt more at ease, eventually to revise their work together and give each other feedback.

On a more specific didactic level, also considering the limitations imposed by the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic at that time, the testing phase was structured as a blended learning experience, and could luckily count on the authentic interest and motivation of the Italian language and literature teacher of the group (Prof. Letizia Donnini), who decided to dedicate some extra hours to those which appear to be the most critical aspects of the process. The researchers therefore met the group on three occasions: first, at the very beginning of the experience, to administer a language background

questionnaire which was also used to introduce a discussion about plurilingual and pluricultural competence (Council of Europe 157-162), and to present a generic writing task which actually had the advantage of leaving to the students the freedom to choose both the theme and the media for their identity texts; then the group, assisted by their teacher, had a couple of weeks to reflect before meeting the research fellows again, and on this second occasion a cooperative learning approach (Johnson et al.) was used to foster an authentic discussion and to form some smaller writing teams to carry on the project; lastly, again after some time had passed, the Impact FVG group joined the 2 LSA to share, read together or listen to the works, eventually to celebrate the results and achievements (as most of the cooperative groups decided to create an online version of their texts, the direct links are listed in the Works-Cited section). Even if the students and the research fellows met in person three times only, the whole process was constantly followed and a quite active discussion arose on the Moodle course and forum dedicated to this writing task; therefore, all the participant could share online their ideas about their future texts, on the media to resort to, but most importantly on some of the aspects of the cognitive and social process of writing a text (§ 5).

## **5. The writing process and its reference framework**

The framework of this plurilingual education experience draws upon different fields of study and research. For what concerns the writing task and the choice of the information to present to the reader, the main references are the sociolinguistic autobiography (D'Agostino), and naturally the identity texts (Cummins and Early). During the first meeting with the research fellows and in the following weeks the students, together with their teacher, were asked to reflect upon each own's plurilingual competence and on the people, situations, and events that especially contribute and had a role in its formation. This preparation phase allowed the participant to the project to focus on themselves, on their linguistic biography, and were invited to consider the communicative resources in their repertoires under a different and eventually more positive light. The students were then offered the opportunity to plan and write an identity text, and therefore received some direct instructions and were shown some models and good practices from previous successful experiences, like the Multiliteracies<sup>1</sup> and the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Reinvented LINCIRE<sup>2</sup> projects. However, the participant to the study were given a considerably high degree of freedom both on the theme chosen for they writing, and on the media to be used. Deciding what to write on was not always an easy task, and required both time, and directions, as for most of the students the idea of being allowed to use more than one code, including dialects, and to freely switch and change from one to another was completely new and went in a different direction if compared to the school activity they were used to, which apparently are most of the time dominated by Italian.

For none, however, there was much of a doubt when choosing the media, and all the groups almost immediately discarded pen and paper to opt for the online notice boards or website building interfaces

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.multiliteracies.ca/> (last accessed on 11/09/2022).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lincireproject.org/> (last accessed on 11/09/2022).

more familiar to them: Padlet<sup>3</sup> and WiX<sup>4</sup> respectively, which both allow to create hypertexts, and to include external links, images, animations, or videos. The use of technology was also important to overcome a second difficulty experienced by some of the participants to the project, namely the necessity of being supported and sustained during all the phases of the process and to receive constant feedback, even when at home and therefore outside the school time and environment. To overcome this obstacle and to answer to this need, it was fortunately possible to resort to the Moodle platform of the school, already well known and used by the students and by some of their teachers. A new course was open, together with a forum accessible to both the groups, their teacher, and the research fellows, and this way it was much easier for everyone to express their doubts and perplexities, to receive advice and suggestions, at any time and phase of the process. During the creation of this tool and in the strategies chosen to introduce the materials and support the online discussion, an important reference is represented by the previous experience of Wrilab2<sup>5</sup>, a European project carried out between 2014 and 2016 by a group of university and school institutions lead by University of Udine and aimed at the creation of a Moodle based portal for the enhancement of writing proficiency in Czech, German, Italian and Slovenian as foreign or second languages (Perissutti et al.). The previous experience of Wrilab2 argumentative and creative writing on line laboratories showed to be also relevant in order to give a proper and more defined instructions first, as well as in effectively guiding and supporting the writing process, later.

Perhaps one of the most significant obstacles faced by the students was indeed in having to self-regulate and organize themselves, as individual writers and as cooperative working groups, in order to plan, structure and carry out the writing process of their identity texts. According to both the first field observations by the research fellows, and to the discussion with the teacher of Italian language and literature of 2 LSA, the idea of writing a text for almost all the student was mainly focused on the practical skills needed, mostly identified within a generic and broad category of ‘grammar’, and the results were rarely considered as an actual form of communication, with potential readers and a topic to develop. On the other hand, since the very first phase, the reference model introduced for this experience is the cognitive one by Flower and Hayes, lately revised and adapted to the Italian school environment by Cisotto and Gruppo RDL. Within this framework, a great importance is given to the planning phase, when the linguistic awareness and the information stored in the authors’ long-term memory (LTM) are accessed in order to plan the future text and to decide upon a structure, also depending on variables like the potential public, the text genre (Lavinio), and the linguistic register. Constantly and consciously drawing the attention of the students on these aspects, which in the end can strongly contribute to the quality of the outcome of the process, showed to be very useful and had a positive impact on both overcoming some of the obstacles, and on the final results. The revision phase, which is often skipped by inexperienced writers, also received a great deal of attention, in order to familiarize the students to this part of the process and to show them in a very practical and situated

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<sup>3</sup> <https://padlet.com/maddalenagaddi/qv1vyj14krwrjzg5> (last accessed on 11/09/2022).

<sup>4</sup> <https://tvumatteo.wixsite.com/website> (last accessed on 11/09/2022).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wrilab2.eu/> (last accessed on 11/09/2022).



way how this moment in the process can affect the final results in an extremely practical and authentic way. During both these phases, an important role was played by Moodle, which allowed a more effective blended learning experience to take place and gave the opportunity for a constant feedback, support, and direction, even outside the school time. The internal forum provided by the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) was also used in order to draw the attention on the social component of the writing process, starting discussions with peers and in cooperative learning groups on the internal forum resource provided by the platform (Johnson et al.). The strategies introduced during all the phases of the blended learning experience were therefore aimed at developing in the students a different view both of the text, and of the writing process; all the participants were invited to leave behind them a “concezione strumentale, per la quale il testo è un prodotto che si impone con la sua fisicità linguistica” (“instrumental conception, according to which the text is a considered merely a product and imposes itself by its linguistic physicality”, Cisotto and Gruppo RDL 33, my trans.), and they were eventually prompted to cooperate, to share their ideas, and to consider writing more as a social process, where a text is actually intended as a mean to communicate a message to a reader in a specific and well defined environment.

## **6. Some results and conclusive remarks**

On the third meeting in person with the research fellows, the 2 LSA group and their teacher participated to a focus group where they were invited to share the results of their work, reading aloud and providing reciprocal feedback to each others' identity texts, expressing individual comments, but also reflecting upon the whole process and experience. During this conclusive phase, both non-linguistic and linguistic considerations were introduced. For what concerns the first order of thoughts, both the students and their teacher admitted that working in cooperative groups, mutually agreeing on decisions, assigning each other roles and tasks, as well as eventually having a deadline to meet, was in the beginning not easy, but it constituted in the end a real added value to the experience. On the other hand, in a more linguistic perspective, several changes were admitted to happen. As Cummins and Early point out when describing the Multiliteracies project in Canadian schools, the students participating to the identity text testing phase at “Arturo Malignani” school of Udine also were able “to produce more accomplished literacy work in the school language” (4), and according to the teacher this achievement was due mainly to the instruction received about the cognitive approach to the process (Flower and Hayes), and to the opportunity the students were given of writing an authentic and situated text, about a theme the authors really felt a reason and a need to communicate about. This also allowed the informants to scratch the surface of the text, previously considered merely as the product of an almost mechanical activity, in order to activate and access deeper levels of their knowledge and memory, therefore making the whole process more significant, meaningful, and in the end effective, at a very individual level (Cisotto and Gruppo RDL 15-16). During the final discussion and comment of their identity texts, students were also invited to contribute sharing their thoughts about their use of the languages and dialects at their disposal, and especially about the choices that can lead them to switch between the different communicative resources existing in their sociolinguistic repertoires. The hypotheses here being tested were, again, strictly related to the impact of the creation of identity texts as described by Cummins and Early in their work, and more specifically some of the statements left by the participants to the Italian

experience actually confirmed a conscious process of self-affirmation of the identities “as intelligent, imaginative and linguistically talented” and an increased awareness “of the relationships between [the] home language (L1) and the school language (L2)” (4). On the one hand some of the informants, who in the beginning of the testing phase seemed to struggle to find their role with peers, as they lacked the same control and proficiency in Italian language, were empowered (Cummins and Early 12-13) by the experience and started to be considered in a different way when they were encouraged to resort to all the different codes at their disposal and they were allowed to use them freely and intuitively. On the other hand, when after the conclusion of the testing phase the participants were questioned again about the codes and resources existing in their linguistic repertoires (§ 4), most of them admitted that if competence was not necessarily to be considered strictly as “native like”, as they were previously often led to believe, then plurilingualism was actually a very common situation in the classroom and outside of it (Piccardo). Most of the students discovered to dispose themselves of many different resources, and of being able to switch between them effectively while writing a text, both in the different phases of the planning and information retrieval process, and during the actual transcription of their ideas and thoughts. This kind of plurilingual form of education, hence seems to invite the teachers and their students to challenge the existing relations and the balance of roles established in the classroom in an innovative and positive way, as writing an identity text allows to make eventually more visible and to turn into an authentic resource the heritage languages and all the codes known by the participants. The linguistic and cultural capital at disposal of some of the students received subsequently a different degree of appreciation, they found their way inside the classroom, an environment previously mostly dominated by an Italian monolingualism, and this way the speakers were empowered in a very practical and situated way, beyond any stereotypes and oversimplified conceptions of promotion of immigrant languages and cultures (Cummins and Early 30-31). Considered in this latter perspective, and in line with the recommendations of the recent *CEFR Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 157-162), the identity texts also seem to offer the advantage of fostering a new awareness in the speakers about their plurilingual and plurilingual competences, a result which in parallel is believed to lead to different attitudes towards the heritage speakers and their home culture, and to promote an authentic and spontaneous curiosity for diversity, which is in the end considered to be one of the most important traits of the future European citizens (Piccardo 2, Council of Europe 158).

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