

Promoting mother tongue in foreing families in Italy: an experience through children's book

Laura TRAVERSI¹

Abstract

In a city context of about 20,000 inhabitants, with an incidence of foreign European and non-European population of about 10%, the "Teatro Esteso" Project has contributed to promoting the mother tongue of foreign families in some institutional contexts such as the School and the Municipal Theater of the city.

A group of Moroccan women participated in expressive reading aloud workshops in order to promote reading in their mother tongue, thanks to the use of bilingual Arabic/Italian illustrated books for children and teenagers.

The readings took place within the classes where there has been a strong reality of multiculturalism for years and were also videotaped for the wider public of the web on a dedicated YouTube channel.

The Project has contributed to affirming the importance of the mother tongue for foreign children and their parents first of all for the learning of the Italian language L2, and not secondarily in response to deeper needs for belonging, identity and recognition in a culturally dominant context.

Keywords: mother tongue, bilingualism, identity, recognition, need to belong, illustrated books.

The paper

1. Introduction

Although the issue of immigration has been at the center of political and social attention for years, Italy can be considered a country with a new migratory phenomenon: policies and practicies of promotion and inclusion have yet to mature.

School for example is one of the institution that still have difficulties today: teachers tend to have, especially in rural area, an approach to bilingualism of a subtractive type: the language-culture of the host country is considered more "prestigious" and develops at the expense of the mother tongue, which is devalued and is subject to gradual and partial loss.

Foreing children day by day move away from their mother tongue (think about reading or writing competence) and live the dilemma of whether or not to identify with the dominant culture. The children themselves are naturally evaluated by the school for their performance in the study:

The teacher's judgment of the foreign pupil, initially suspended because of his visible linguistic difficulties, tends to move at this stage from the

¹ Social Worker and Italian Language Teacher, Studio PERCORSI, Piove di Sacco (PD), ITALY - E-mail: laura@percorsi.pd.it

language problem to individual learning problems, if the pupil fails to follow the teaching of the various subjects. (Favero, 1999).

This attitude also partly contaminates the family institution: parents are convinced that it is important for their children to learn the Italian language well and quickly in order not to be excluded and to be recognized as capable.

[Teatro Esteso Project](#) has intended to implement actions to contrast this attitude of progressive distancing from one's mother tongue, supported by some theoretical assumptions.

2. Theoretical frames

Researches confirm the relationship between the socio-cultural characteristics of the minority groups that struggle most in learning second language at school; the foreigner who faces the tasks of adaptation in the new country with a sense of inferiority or with a fragile awareness of his own cultural identity, will tend not to have high aspirations; in this sense, part of the great value that bilingual education has for the scholastic progress of foreign students lies precisely in the recognition of their cultural identity.

2.1. Additive bilingualism by Jim Cummins

Jim Cummins, a professor and a researcher in bilingual education, provides the new theoretical frame of reference of additive bilingualism: using the mother tongue at home does not subtract anything from the possibilities of acquiring the second language and the cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism concern students who have continued to develop their linguistic competence in mother tongue while learning a second language; in the case of students belonging to a linguistic minority, a certain level of competence in the mother tongue facilitates the achievement of good academic results; on the contrary, if the child finds himself learning the second language before possessing this competence or without being provided with adequate support for the maintenance of the mother tongue, it is possible that his skills regress or even disappear.

2.2. Language and identity

The question of identity interacts in an important way in the positive push to the process of maintaining / learning language competence. Language as a manifestation of symbolic culture, a special manifestation of the need for satisfied human interaction through the exchange of sounds, gestures, words. The task that any person has to face in front of a new language, different from his mother tongue, is complex precisely on the level of identity meanings.

As Lambert (1967) explains, there are four possible ways in which foreign children measure themselves, through their relationship with languages, with the two cultures, the one of origin and the host one:

1. they can identify with one and the other;
2. they can identify with the host culture and reject their own;
3. they can reject the host culture, to identify themselves only with their own culture of origin;
4. may not identify with either of them;

The success in learning second language therefore also depends on how much children and families are encouraged to be proud of their mother tongue: they are in fact linguistically competent and this

must be recognized, so as not to be considered always in need of help because they are not able to "function" in the school language, with what this means in order to the sense of self and self-esteem.

2.3. The need to belong

The need to belong responds to an innate tendency of man, which is to be together with others, within a family / social group able to ensure affection, intimacy and security.

The perception of the risk of being somehow excluded from the community in which one lives generates in many foreign families a state of anxiety, which is also reflected in attitudes towards the maintenance of the mother tongue, creating conditions of potential social exclusion. From the perspective of children and young people, especially second-generation foreigners, the theme of belonging is one of the most crucial: born in Italy but from foreign parents, they experience two cultures, struggling with the task of growing.

2.4. The need of recognition

The theme of recognition is closely intertwined with that of identity and multiculturalism. The thesis is that *"our identity is shaped, in part, by recognition or non-recognition or, often, by a misrecognition by other people, so that an individual or a group can suffer real damage, a real distortion, if the people or society around him give back, like a mirror, an image of himself that limits or belittles or humiliates the person. Non-recognition or misunderstanding can harm, it can be a form of oppression that imprisons a person in a false, distorted, and impoverished way of life"* (Taylor, 2005).

3. Teatro Esteso Project: an experience through childrens books

Within these theoretical frameworks, the Teatro Esteso project started in the town of Piove di Sacco, a 20.000 (twenty thousand) people in the North est Italy. The town has a 10% of total population being foreigners, and among these about a third is represented by Moroccan families. Another third comes from China and another 25% from Romania. Teatro Esteso was promoted thanks to a local Bank Foundation, the public town theatre and other partners interested in the matter.

The Project has chosen to focus on the target of Moroccan foreign families and in particular on women (see the groups on the left), living in the town, who with more difficulty still manage to integrate into the social context, also due to literacy problems and Italian Language learning. The construction of the group of women who participated in the project was quite simple, it all happened by word of mouth!

The Project aimed to promote reading aloud in the mother tongue in the schools and recording videos to share on line.

The Project has developed with the following phases and activities:

- ✓ Choice of texts for reading aloud: we choose several books from Gallucci-Kalimat, an editorial series of illustrated books in Arabic and Italian (picture 1);

- ✓ Promotion of a workshop in Italian dedicated to expressive reading aloud starting from the chosen illustrated books (picture 3);
- ✓ The collaboration with the primary and secondary schools in town to read in Arabic in some classes (picture 4);
- ✓ The video recording of aloud reading in Arabic in the town Theatre (picture 5 and 6).



1.

On the left some of the titles of the editorial serie published by Gallucci-Kalimat: it is the result of collaboration with the most prestigious and award-winning Arabic publishing house and with the most qualified linguistic mediators. It is a unique editorial proposal in the Italian scene, designed for foreign children who, at their first approach to the Italian language, can find a familiar imagination and their mother tongue.

It was important that for the first time those mothers were engaged outside the home in an activity dedicated exclusively to themselves; They used the Italian language as their main communication vehicle, allowing them to enhance their production and listening comprehension skills; they built the final product just thanks to their mother tongue, promoting its diffusion also in the school context to which their children belong.

3.1 The experience at school

The Project aimed to bring the readings aloud in the classes attended by the children of the mothers who participated to the same workshop above, even better we try to make sure that it was the student's mother the one to be reading.



3.

From the women readers' point of view, the idea of being able to read aloud at school in their own language had several meanings. At first it has enhanced them in their personal abilities: reading in front of an audience in an expressive way, using the voice and the body is not an easy thing! You are the center of attention, everyone is watching you and listening to you; secondary, it has valued the Arabic language in an institutional context - the school - that usually does not value the native language;

For Italian student listeners, the Arabic language has proved to be a language of new sounds, never heard, a sweet and musical language and particularly expressive.

The cultural aspects that emerged thanks to the reading books made everybody curious about: students and teachers asked women many questions and the communicative exchange left its mark;



4.



5.

Above are two moments of Arabic reading aloud in a primary school class.

3.2. The experience in the theatre

In order to make the two promotional videos, two of the participants in the workshop were selected on a voluntary basis; here it was a matter of addressing some new problems, such as the use of own image on the web and the reading in a different setting, without a real audience (with the presence of only audio / video operators). The final product was published and shared with schools and on the institutional channels of the Town Theatre; the same women shared the videos with their family members in Italy but especially in Morocco, receiving rewarding feedback and their interest!



5.



6.

Videos are available on the website <https://www.teatrofilarmonico.it/teatro-esteso>.

Some final reflections to return to the title of this Conference: working on the learning of the Italian language cannot ignore the enhancement of the mother tongue, to which values of recognition, identity and belonging are closely connected; the two languages help each other, not only at the didactic level, but also in terms of social recognition and the mother tongue emerges from a situation of invisibility to occupy cultural spaces in schools and theaters; the use of the mother tongue has also allowed foreign families to "feel authorized" to continue to let it live, in their homes, with their children; During the workshop it was necessary to counteract on several occasions the belief that it was not useful to talk to one's children in one's mother tongue because this would have meant making it more difficult for them to learn the Italian language; this shows how important it is to continue to raise awareness among families and other institutions to counter a subtractive approach to the mother tongue that no longer has a reason to exist.

Literature review

Bathnager, Joti (1980) *Linguistic Behavior and adjustment of immigrant children in French and English schools in Montreal*, International Journal of Applied Psychology, XXIX.

Roy. F. Baumeister e Mark R. Leary (1995), *The Need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation*, American Psychological Association, Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 117, n. 3, 497-529.

Cummins J., (1979) *Linguistic Interdependence and the Educational Development of Bilingual Children*, in *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 49, n. 2.

Cummins J. (1981), *The Role of Primary Language Development in Promoting Educational Success for Language Minority Students*, in California State Department of Education (a cura di), *Schooling and Language Minority Students. A Theoretical Framework, Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center*, California State University, Los Angeles.

Cummins J., Swain M. (1986), *Bilingualism in Education: aspect of theory, research and practice*, New York, Longman.

Favaro G., *Un giorno in classe è arrivato Karim... La scuola di fronte a nuovi bisogni didattici* in Favaro G. (a cura di) (1999) *Imparare l'italiano, imparare in italiano*, Milano, Ed. Guerini e Associati

Lambert W.E., (1967) *A social psychology of bilingualism* - Journal of Social Issue - Volume XXIII, number 2.

Remotti F. (1996), *Contro l'identità*, Bari, Editori Laterza.

Toukomaa, P e Skutnabb-Kangas T. (1977) *The intensive teaching of the mother tongue to migrant children of pre-school age and children in the lower level of comprehensive school*, Helsinki, The Finnish National Commission for Unesco.