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Bilingual Education as an Instrument of Ethnic Minority Protection: The Case of Italian L2 in the Slovene Littoral

The educational system is an essential form of institutional support to ethnolinguistic vitality. In the bilingual areas of the Slovene Littoral, Italian as minority language is offered in schools with Slovene as language of instruction as a compulsory subject with the aim of educating learners for interethnic and intercultural communication. The article discusses the relationships between social and individual factors in the development of communicative competence in the minority language. Data were collected by means of a Likert scale questionnaire. The results reveal the language behaviour of Slovene speakers as age related and strongly associated to the subjective relevance of Italian in their private life. Differences in contact with Italian were also observed, however they appear to be more related to levels of language proficiency than age.

Keywords: ethnolinguistic vitality, bilingual education, Slovene Littoral, Italian L2.

Dvojezično izobraževanje kot instrument varovanja narodnostnih manjšin: Primer italijanščine J2 v slovenski Istri

Sistem vzgoje in izobraževanja se uvršča med pomembne oblike institucionalne podpore zagotavljanju vitalnosti manjšinskih etničnih skupnosti. V slovenski Istri se na dvojezičnem območju italijanščina poučuje kot obvezen predmet tudi v šolah s slovenskim učnim jezikom s ciljem razvijanja sporazumevalne in medkulturne zmožnosti učecih. Prispevek se ukvarja z odnosi med dejavniki razvoja sporazumevalne zmožnosti v manjšinskem jeziku. Opravljena je bila raziskava, v kateri smo stališča vprašanih merili z Likertovo lestvico. Rezultati kažejo, da je raven dvojezičnosti pri slovenskih govoricah v tesni povezavi s starostjo in pomenom, ki ga ima italijanščina v njihovem zasebnem življenju. Pokazale so se razlike v stiku z italijanščino, vendar so te tesneje vezane na raven znanja jezika kot na starost.

Ključne besede: etnolingvistična vitalnost, dvojezično izobraževanje, Slovensko primorje, italijanščina J2.

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1. Introduction

The protection of linguistic diversity, and thus of minority languages, is one of the core principles of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Council of Europe (COE), and the European Union (EU). In the Republic of Slovenia, the right to preserve and develop the languages and cultures of historical ethnic communities is enshrined in the Constitution (1991) and regulated by laws and other documents, both at the national and local levels.

In Slovenia, the special rights of the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities include the right to education in their language (Constitution 1991, Art. 64). The language of instruction in minority schools in the Slovene Littoral is Italian, while in bilingual schools in the Prekmurje region the languages of instruction are Slovene and Hungarian. In schools in the Slovene Littoral situated in areas defined as bilingual (Statute of the Municipality of Koper 2000, Art. 7; Statute of the Municipality of Izola 2018, Art. 4, Par. 3; Statute of the Municipality of Piran 2014, Art. 3; Statute of the Municipality of Ankaran 2015, Art. 4, Par. 1), pupils (aged 6 to 15) and students (aged 15 to 19) in Slovene schools are offered compulsory learning of Italian while those in Italian schools learn Slovene (Basic School Act 1996, Art. 6; General Upper Secondary School Act 1996, Art. 8; Vocational Education Act 2006, Art. 6).

Access to education in the minority language is key for maintaining and developing its vitality. The inability to develop academic language skills in L1 is seen as a major risk factor for minority group assimilation (Giles et al. 1977; Harwood et al. 1994; UNESCO 2003; Ehala 2009; Bourhis & Landry 2012). In line with UNESCO, COE, EU, as well as national language policies, we argue that also fluency in L2 of the majority language speakers provides significant support in the effort to maintain and further enhance the ethnolinguistic vitality of minorities. The ability to interact in both languages facilitates communication in social environments shared by two linguistic communities and is a sign of respect as well as recognition of the right of the other ethnic group to use its L1, or two languages in case of native bilinguals. We thus argue that the “burden of bilingualism” should not be “borne entirely by one of the mother-tongue groups, while the other group expects to be addressed in its own language in all cases of inter-group communication” (Weinreich 1968, 89).

Starting from the assumption that learning the second language of the environment by majority L1 speakers is an important contribution to better intercultural communication and to minority L1 vitality, we suggest that a permanent monitoring of communicative competence and attitudes is needed, followed by a careful analysis of the trends in levels of competence, the identification of causes and correlations, as well as the search for plausible solutions to be tested in practice. Continuous change in social and thus linguistic and cultural contexts

of bilingual education requires constant adaptation in scientific research and in the professional study of the field.

2. Types and Degrees of Bilingualism in Areas of Linguistic Contact

Most studies on ethnolinguistic vitality of minorities discuss the role of education for minority children, arguing that those who receive instruction in the language of the majority are more likely to assimilate (Giles et al. 1977; Harwood et al. 1994; Ehala 2009; Bourhis & Landry 2012). Accessibility to materials for language education and literacy is a major evaluative factor of language vitality (UNESCO 2003, 7).

Landry and Allard (1992) studied factors in the development of different types and degrees of bilingualism in two linguistic communities that share the same social environment. According to the authors, different types and degrees of bilingualism develop in interactive and complementary processes between society and the individual. Ethnolinguistic vitality influences and is in turn influenced by an individual network of linguistic contacts (INLC), represented by interpersonal contacts, contacts through the media, and educational support. These then influence an individual's competence in L1 and L2 as well as their cognitive-affective willingness to learn the languages. Individual language behaviour depends, directly and indirectly, on all previously mentioned factors, and in turn

feeds back to the INLC since behaviour is always a part of the individual's network of linguistic contacts. Language behaviour is simultaneously a part of the INLC and a result of past experiences with the INLC [...]; the INLC refers to the network of opportunities provided to the individual to use the language whereas language behaviour is the actual use of the language within the network (Landry & Allard 1992, 230).

The result of the interplay between society and the individual is the development of either additive or subtractive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism results from any L2 experience that "complements L1 experience without jeopardizing the full development of L1" (Landry & Allard 1992, 226). When the development of L1 is compromised, for example by a lack of education in L1 that hinders the development of academic language skills, bilingualism is a subtractive process.

Relying on the model developed by Landry and Allard (1992), we argue that INLC for minority language L1 speakers is wider and more complex if the language is learned by majority language L1 speakers. According to curricula for elementary (Šečerov et al. 2011) and secondary education (Šečerov & Zorman 2008) in the Slovene Littoral, learning Italian as minority language aims at

developing proficiency in Italian at a level that allows Slovene speakers to interact with Italian ones, as well as at developing intercultural sensitivity and the ability to cohabitate in a social context characterised by language and culture contact. At the end of the nine-year elementary education (630 teaching hours) (Zudič Antonič & Zorman 2004), pupils should have developed a communicative competence in Italian L2 at the A2 level and at the B1 level at the end of the four-year general secondary education (420 teaching hours) (Zudič Antonič & Zorman 2004). After thirteen years of learning Italian at school, graduates should have achieved a sound fluency in the language and thus become highly proficient bilinguals.

Similar levels of proficiency in Italian are achieved along the Slovene-Italian border, from the Littoral, across Karst and in the Goriška region, where Italian enjoys a special status due to historically important relations within the region that continue to be frequent and intense. Although the area is not officially bilingual, a number of elementary and upper-secondary schools offer Italian as optional or additional subject, thus fostering the achievement of higher levels of communicative competence in Italian. The trends in proficiency and the problems discussed in this paper are most likely common to the whole western territory of Slovenia and would certainly deserve attention in future research. Here, however, we discuss levels of bilingualism in an ethnically mixed area as an important factor of maintaining and enhancing Italian minority vitality and will therefore not be able to consider areas along the Slovene-Italian border outside the Slovene Littoral.

The levels of bilingualism, theorised by Landry and Allard (1992) range from (1) monolingualism in L1, (2) bilingualism with predominate L1, (3) balanced bilingualism, (4) bilingualism with predominate L2, to (5) monolingualism in L2. In social environments shared by two linguistic communities it is highly unlikely to find L2 monolinguals or majority community members as bilingual with predominate L2, since the predominate presence of the majority language in society is bound to contaminate the individual's use of L1. We suggest that in social environments where INLC are determined by contacts with minority L2 at least in education, such as in the bilingual Slovene-Italian educational model in the Littoral, it should also be unlikely to find L1 monolinguals among the members of the majority community. The general opinion among the residents of the Slovene Littoral is that the area is no longer truly bilingual due to a decrease in proficiency in Italian L2 among the young. If language behaviour of Slovene L1 is indeed age related, we should be able to identify age related differences in contacts with Italian L2, as well as in the cognitive-affective attitude towards the language. We are nevertheless also interested in individuals' self-perception of fluency in Italian L2, of the role the language has in their life, and of their cognitive-affective attitude towards Italian culture.

3. Research Method

3.1 Design and Procedure

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To study the subjective evaluation of Italian L2 proficiency, language behaviour, and cognitive-affective attitude towards Italian language and culture, data were collected by means of a 32-item Likert scale questionnaire. Participants were addressed through mailing lists and social media using snowball sampling. The questionnaire was published online and was accessible from all types of electronic devices from 1 October to 31 December 2020. It was submitted in Slovene. Following the questionnaire, focus group discussions were also planned in order to obtain more in-depth data. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all human activity, including research, needed to be reorganised (Sorgo & Novak Lukanovič 2020) and the follow-up focus group discussions were postponed.

3.2 Participants

The participants sample consisted of 105 residents of the Slovene Littoral with Slovene as L1. 52 participants were male and 53 were female. 43 participants were aged 20 or younger, 26 belonged to the age range between 21 and 40, and 35 to the age range between 41 and 60. One participant was older than 60. The latter two age ranges were merged: they will be discussed as the group of participants aged 41 and older. All participants currently receiving education attend schools in bilingual settings with Italian as a compulsory subject. In order to enhance young respondents' participation to research projects, pupils and secondary education students are usually addressed through cooperation networks between schools, the National Institute of Education, and universities. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all participants were addressed electronically, using the snowball sampling method. Consequently, the number of respondents is lower than expected and corresponds to approximately 1.5 % of the whole secondary school population, including students who learn Italian as L2 and students from parts of the Slovene Littoral that are not declared as bilingual, students from other parts of Slovenia, immigrants, and foreigners who learn Italian as a foreign language. According to a report issued by the Slovene Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (Černoša & Rački 2020), in the school year 2018/2019, 953 students were enrolled in secondary schools and 1903 in vocational schools in the Littoral. The number of participants and a general lack of data on the matter addressed in this article definitely call for further research on a larger scale.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed through basic statistic and correlation coefficient calculations.

4. Results and Discussion

200 4.1 Italian L2 Proficiency

The respondents were asked to evaluate their proficiency in Italian as L2 on a five-level scale with 1 corresponding to the lowest and 5 to the highest value. The results, expressed in the frequency and percentage of answers, are shown in Table 1: the rows show data for individual age groups and the columns present data on individual levels of proficiency in Italian L2.

Table 1: Proficiency (f/%) in Italian in individual age groups

		Proficiency in Italian L2											
		no		basic		average		good		excellent		TOTAL	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Age	< 20	8	18.6	19	44.2	10	23.2	3	7.0	3	7.0	43	100
	20–40	2	7.7	7	26.9	6	23.1	5	19.2	6	23.1	26	100
	> 40	0	0.0	2	5.6	7	19.4	14	38.9	13	36.1	36	100
	TOTAL	10	9.5	28	26.6	23	21.9	22	21.0	22	21.0	105	100

Source: Own editing.

The results in Table 1 show that more than half of the youngest respondents declared to have no (18.6%) or basic (44.2%) proficiency in Italian, while merely one seventh evaluate their proficiency as good (7.0%) or excellent (7.0%). In contrast, three-fourths of the oldest respondents consider their proficiency in Italian as good (38.9%) or excellent (36.1%). The results clearly suggest an age-related decrease in levels of proficiency in Italian L2 on the Slovene Littoral: the younger the respondent, the lower the language proficiency.

Based on the results in Table 1, an emerging group of monolingual Slovene L1 can be observed despite the constant contact with Italian in schools. The trend towards an increase of majority monolingual speakers calls for further analysis aiming at clarifying whether INLC in education is truly insufficient for the development of at least basic fluency in Italian L2 or whether the results in Table 1 can be ascribed to some other factor, for example, comparison of fluency in Italian and other languages spoken, excessive self-criticism, or simply unreliability of answers given by the respondents.

Should bilingual education in schools with Slovene as language of instruction prove to be insufficient, immediate intervention didactics is required, both at research and teaching levels. Due to a continuous decrease in proficiency in Italian L2 observed in the last decades, such intervention is probably needed in any case. In the discussion below, some potential shortcomings in the current didactics in Italian L2 will be presented, together with suggestions for their improvement.

According to teachers and parents, the decrease of proficiency in Italian L2 among children and youth is in inverse correlation with the proficiency in English. To investigate the validity of the observation, all respondents were asked to evaluate their proficiency in English as well. Results are presented in Table 2: rows show data on the average proficiency in individual age groups, while data in columns are related to the two languages under consideration.

Table 2: Average (M) proficiency in Italian and English in individual age groups

		Proficiency					
		Italian		English		TOTAL	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	N
Age	< 20	2.40	1.09	4.19	0.76	3.30	43
	20–40	3.04	1.26	4.39	0.66	3.72	26
	> 40	4.03	0.84	3.26	0.78	3.65	36
	TOTAL	3.16	1.28	3.95	0.89	3.56	105

Source: Own editing.

The results support teachers' and parents' observations. With the youngest respondents, the difference between the average value in Italian ($M = 2.40$) and English proficiency ($M = 4.19$) is 1.79 points in favour of proficiency in English. In the medium age group, the same trend can be observed: the average proficiency in English is higher than in Italian, but the difference decreases to 0.99 points. In the oldest age group, the difference in language proficiency is even smaller (0.77), however only in this age group the proficiency is higher in Italian than in English. The correlation between age and language proficiency observed proved to be significant: between age and proficiency in English, the correlation is medium $r = -.457$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 , while the correlation between age and proficiency in Italian is strong $r = .549$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 .

The results in Table 2 suggest that proficiency in English, although it decreases with age, is relatively high across all age groups. The phenomenon can certainly be ascribed to globalisation, communication technologies, and the status of English as lingua franca in professional and private life worldwide.

Although supporting teachers' and parent's observations on the relationship between the proficiency in the two languages, English is hardly to blame as a cause for the decrease in proficiency in Italian. The two variables are in a negative correlation, but this is extremely weak and not statistically significant $r = -.169$, p (two-tailed) > 0.05 .

Results in Table 1 and Table 2 distinctly prove that the mere contact with a language, in this case Italian as L2, either in school or in the social environment, does not result in spontaneous language learning. The same was proved for literacy acquisition, where in the past children were supposed to learn to read

and write while being exposed to the written language and learn a language by listening to songs in that language. Research shows that these expectations are realistic for a handful of learners, while the majority need explicit instruction to learn the code (written language) or to be able to transcode a linguistic variety, such as lyrics language, to the variety of language used in communication. The above results seem to suggest that the teaching of Italian L2 in the Slovene Littoral is somehow not able to meet the objectives stated in the curricula.

4.2 Frequency and Variety of Contact with Italian as L2

The respondents were asked to evaluate the frequency of their contact with Italian, namely through TV programmes in Italian (TV), TV programmes in Italian with subtitles in Slovene or some other language (TVsub), radio (R), Internet sites in Italian (I), Internet sites in Italian with a dictionary or a translator (Itrans), active listening to music (M), for example, by singing along or listening and looking at lyrics, accidental contact with an Italian speaker (S), for example in the street, official institutions (O), and in their private life (P). Table 3 shows correlations between various potential sources of contact with Italian (rows) and respondents' age and fluency in Italian (columns).

Table 3: Correlations between individual networks of language contacts (INLC), age and fluency in Italian

	Age	Fluency in Italian
TV	.435**	.573**
TVsub	.138	.282**
R	.468**	.293**
I	.530**	.644**
Itrans	.051	.153
M	.395**	.439**
S	.260**	.435**
O	.306**	.306**
P	.365**	.526**

Source: Own editing.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

As expected, the correlation was found to be statistically significant between age/fluency in Italian and the respondents' contact with Italian through television programmes in Italian (TV), radio (R), Internet (I), music (M), and accidental (S), official (O) and private (P) interactions. The strongest correlation appears to be between Internet, age $r = .530$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 and fluency in Italian $r = .644$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 . A strong correlation is also found between fluency

in Italian and TV programmes in Italian without subtitles $r = .573$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 and respondents' private life $r = .526$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 . Data in Table 3 suggest that contact with Italian is more closely linked to fluency in the language than to age. The higher the fluency in Italian, the more frequent and various the contact with the language. To these respondents INLC represents a network of opportunities to use Italian L2, and they benefit most of all respondents from the opportunities provided by the network.

If language behaviour in relation to TV programmes, radio, Internet, and interactions in private life largely depends on the individuals themselves, the participants' subjective perception of the frequency of casual contacts with Italian speakers is quite interesting. This is in a medium correlation with the respondents' fluency in Italian $r = .435$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 and in a weak correlation with their age $r = .260$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 , suggesting that older respondents and particularly those who are more fluent in Italian are far more likely to come into contact with an unknown Italian speaker. Whether this is evidence of a different language behaviour, with less fluent speakers avoiding contact with Italians, or evidence of a different perception of the social environment is a question that is certainly worth investigating. Answers would then direct intervention in specific areas of education and language policy. The level of perception of the linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Gorter 2013) in a bilingual or a plurilingual setting, namely of the language use in road signs, street names, commercial signs and signs on public buildings, or even in the spoken communication, is evidence of the individuals' cognitive-affective attitude toward their social environment. Adequate intervention could raise the individuals' awareness of ethnolinguistic diversity in their social context and educate them to interact appropriately with members of all ethnic groups that share that same social environment.

4.3 Relevance of Italian as L2

Learning can take place if the language is a part of learners' identity or is somehow considered relevant to their life. To be able to establish a correlation between levels of proficiency in Italian L2 and the level of relevance attributed to the language by respondents, these were asked to state to what extent Italian L2 is significant in their private life (P) given the bilingual environment in which they live (E) and for their future (F).

Results in Table 4 suggest a consistent correlation between age (A), level of proficiency in Italian (PI) and the significance of the language in respondents' private life (P), due to its presence in the area (E) and for their future (F). Namely, the older the respondent, the higher their level of competence in Italian, as well as the significance of the language, particularly in their private life and due to the cohabitation with the Italian ethnic group in their environment. Individual language behaviour is thus closely related to cognitive attitude toward

language: the perception of Italian as insignificant in their private life (34.9 %) among the young certainly does not promote the learning of the language. Although the young do recognise the significance of Italian as language of their social environment (27.9 % stated that it is slightly important, 23.2 % that it is of medium importance and 23.2 % that it is rather important) and the relevance of the language for their future (27.9 % declared it is of medium and 27.9 % that it is of high importance), learning does not take place because Italian as L2 is not a part of their identity. They associate the active Slovene-Italian bilingualism to their parents' generation, rather than to their own.

Table 4: Correlations between respondents' age, level of proficiency in Italian and English, and relevance of Italian L2

	A	PI	PE	P	E	F
A						
CI	.549**					
CE	-.457**	-.232*				
PI	.419**	.610**	-.290**			
EI	.280**	.381**	-.112	.569**		
FI	.202*	.380**	-.032	.471**	.486**	

Source: Own editing.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

A positive cognitive-affective attitude is the major driving force in L2 learning. When the motivation for L2 learning comes from the environment, for example, as a compulsory subject in the school system or parents' choice, or when it is instrumental, for example during a study exchange, it is temporary, not pervasive, and content-restricted to an individual learning experience. When that experience comes to an end, L2 learning usually ceases. A permanent lifelong and permeative L2 learning always derives from emotion and is thus internally motivated. In the Slovene Littoral, in the 1970s and 1980s Slovene speakers, particularly the young, learned Italian due to a massive input they received from the media, mainly television, and due to compulsory learning in school that supported learners in organising that input in coherent categories and systems. A relatively sound communicative competence in Italian in time became an important aspect of these bilingual speakers' identity that in turn became a motivation to maintaining and furthering their proficiency. In contrast, children and youngsters today learn English much like their parents learned Italian. English is the part of their identity that distinguishes them from their parents, whose levels of proficiency in English is generally lower. In the young generation's mind, Italian is associated to older generations and has less bearing on their lives.

In truth, the varieties of languages that cohabit in the same area for as long as Slovene and Italian have in the Slovene Littoral share many features that distinguish them from other varieties of those languages. In ethnically and linguistically mixed areas languages influence each other, softening boundaries between them. Raising awareness of the traits that the Slovene coastal variety shares with Italian, particularly lexical, phonological but also syntactical ones, could generate a shift in the young people's perspective on their identity, an identity that integrates the Italian feature already present in their environment.

In addition, a shift in the perception of the second language acquisition (SLA) and its objective is also needed if we are to aspire to a reversal in the current trend in Italian L2 proficiency levels. Traditionally, a second language (L2) learner has been seen "as somebody who aims at becoming a native speaker [...] making progress along a never-ending road and as being inferior to the native speaker" (Cenoz & Gorter 2019, 131). This view is still strongly held by teachers in different contexts of L2 acquisition, including in the Slovene Littoral. As Cenoz and Gorter (2019) suggest, the focus should shift from an unreachable goal, such as becoming a perfect native speaker, to real people "who are not deficient speakers but multilinguals or emergent multilinguals who can be native speakers of other language(s)" (Cenoz & Gorter 2019, 131). Teaching languages should thus "move from the didactics of a specific language to the didactics of languages, or the didactics of multilingualism" (Zudič Antonič 2018, 92).

Today, in a globalised world, children come to school with a rich and dynamic variety of linguistic repertoires that inevitably influence their L2 learning. Two decades ago, Cummins (2000) pointed out that the level of linguistic and communicative competence a learner achieves in L2 is partially in function of the competence level he had achieved in his L1 before he was intensively exposed to L2. Today we are aware all language learning is affected not only by L1, but all languages a speaker uses, has learned/has been learning, namely their entire linguistic repertoire. Raising the awareness on commonalities shared by Italian and English or some other language in their repertoire could generate a shift in the cognitive-affective attitude towards Italian L2 and promote its learning. Highlighting the commonalities shared by languages allows students not only to enhance their motivation, but also to benefit in the learning process itself by leaning on their multilingual repertoire (Cenoz & Gorter 2019).

With the idealised native speaker as a point of reference, a multitude of variables that influence the outcome of L2 learning are ignored, such as a learner's motivation, learning needs, objectives, fundamental inclination to language learning, as well as the attitude towards L2.

5. Conclusions

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Potential contacts with a language, or INLC, and language behaviour of individual speakers are interrelated and their development is mutually interactive, on the condition that the cognitive-affective attitude towards the language and its learning is positive. A wide INLC provides a variety of opportunity for contacts with a language, and if these are psychologically acceptable by learners, they foster learning, which in turn widens the INLC offering an even larger and more complex variety of opportunities for (further) learning. At the base of promoting a positive cognitive-affective attitude towards learning a language is therefore a carefully knit INLC to be offered to learners.

In social environments where INLC is determined by contacts with minority as L2 at least in education, such as in the bilingual Slovene-Italian educational model in the Littoral, it should be unlikely to find L1 monolinguals among members of the majority community. The results of our research show that the emergence of Slovene L1 monolinguals in the Slovene Littoral is a reasonable future prospect. In our research almost one fifth of the respondents aged 20 or younger declared to have no fluency in Italian. The problem is certainly partly aggravated by a continuous flow of immigration to the Littoral since the 1980s: first from former Yugoslav republics for economic reasons, during and after the war in the former Yugoslavia, and in most recent decades from other countries. These families come from various linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds and have little or no relationship to the local bilingual reality. The potential emergence of truly monolingual speakers should be further examined. In any case, the result presented here is evidence of a trend that should be closely monitored and hopefully reversed by focused intervention.

The general opinion among the residents of the Slovene Littoral is that the area is no longer truly bilingual, due to a decrease in proficiency in Italian L2 among the young. Our research confirmed that language behaviour of Slovene L1 speakers in the Slovene Littoral is indeed age related. The younger the respondents, the lower the level of their proficiency in Italian, the less frequent and varied their contact with Italian, and the lower the relevance they ascribe to the language, particularly with respect to their private life.

The current legal and formal regulation has been to a large extent inherited from the previous Socialist Republic of Slovenia. Despite a long-lasting and stable regulation of protection of Italian minority in the Littoral, a significant drop in proficiency in Italian as minority language can be observed in the last two decades. Similar tendencies emerge in other European areas, characterised by a similar historically important imprint of Italian language and culture, but with a significantly lower institutional support as compared to that of the Slovene Littoral (Kazazi & Laçej 2020; Lika 2020; Drakouli & Milioni 2020).

Since INLC of the young seems to rely strongly on the educational system, we should try to find out what kind of language input is appropriate and how it should be offered in schools. Textbooks' language and culture contents are designed to reach the largest range of users possible, and as such cannot meet specific communication needs of a single user or even of a single group of users. Education systems rarely address learners about their interest, hobbies, ambitions, plans for the future and/or expectations related to individual subjects. All young respondents interviewed in our research, except one, named at least one field of interest related to Italian culture, chosen from the following: cuisine, fashion and design, sports, architecture, figurative art, performing arts, literature, history, science, traditions and customs, politics, religion. Differentiating work in class by topics would increase learners' motivation for the study. Emotion is the driving force in learning, and motivation is closely related to learning success. The more positive the perception of the learning process, the stronger the motivation for further learning. Appropriate language input combined with the relevant tasks is critical in learning. Further on, the idea of the learning process and its outcome should be revised. A strict purist idea of a perfect speaker ought to be replaced by the more realistic idea of a plurilingual speaker who relies on and benefits from all past experience in learning languages. Translanguaging teaching and communicative strategies allow learners and teachers to use languages in their repertoire as an integrated communication system and thus to resort to previous knowledge in their repertoire to gain new knowledge in the language learned and taught.

Finally, a reference should be made to the social context of the bilingual education in the Slovene Littoral. The presence of Italian speakers and institutions, including schools at all levels except the tertiary level, represents a live laboratory for learning Italian L2. Currently, familiarising learners with the peculiarities of their environment, which is shared by two historical ethnolinguistic groups, is mostly limited to individual schools' participation in research projects and to the initiative, ingenuity and, most of all, intercultural sensitivity of individual teachers (Zorman & Zudič Antonič 2019). If pupils and students attending schools with Slovene as language of instruction in the Littoral perceive Italian language as irrelevant it is because they are not able to actualise its use in their lives. Whoever is involved in their education should be committed to contributing to the development of a positive cognitive-affective attitude of the young towards the Italian language and culture, towards a language and a culture that are closely related to and actually inherent to the Slovene Littoral diatopic variety through interference and the historical contact between the two languages and cultures.

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