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LITERACY SKILLS IN MINORITY LANGUAGE: THE CASE OF THE SLOVENE MINORITY IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT

Considering the new conception of literacy and functional literacy skills, the study investigates literacy skills in the minority language among the bilingual population of the Slovene minority in Italy. Due to its status as minority language and its limited public use, the members of the minority have less opportunity to develop their literacy skills in the minority language. Literacy skills in the minority language have been tested on a sample of high school students who are attending Slovene medium schools and factors related to literacy skills have been investigated.

Key words: literacy, functional literacy, minority language

COMPETENZE DI SCRITTURA IN LINGUA MINORITARIA: L'ESEMPIO DELLA MINORANZA SLOVENA IN ITALIA

SINTESI

In riferimento agli attuali concetti di alfabetizzazione e alfabetizzazione funzionale, la presente ricerca esamina le competenze di scrittura in lingua minoritaria, possedute dagli appartenenti bilingui alla minoranza slovena in Italia. A causa dello status di lingua minoritaria e delle limitate possibilità di uso pubblico della lingua slovena, gli appartenenti alla minoranza hanno minori opportunità di sviluppare competenze di scrittura nella lingua minoritaria. Le competenze di scrittura nella lingua minoritaria sono state testate su un campione di studenti di scuola media, frequentanti scuole con lingua d'insegnamento slovena. Nell'analisi è indagato l'effetto dei diversi fattori che influiscono sullo sviluppo delle competenze di scrittura in lingua minoritaria.

Parole chiave: alfabetizzazione, alfabetizzazione funzionale, lingua minoritaria

INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERACY CONCEPT AND TO THE FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

The definition of literacy and reading has changed in parallel with shifts in society, economy and culture. Today literacy skills are used in several different contexts of everyday life and for several different purposes and roles which individuals adopt in society. Baker (1996) has classified these uses in seven areas: literacy for survival (meaning the basic day to day use of written texts), literacy for learning, for citizenship and political empowerment, for personal relationships, for personal pleasure and creativity, for employment, and to empower the mind.

Functional literacy is a wider concept of literacy skills which go beyond the ability to read and write and includes all the knowledge and skills that are needed for individuals to act in their everyday lives, such as understanding, using and reflecting on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society (OECD, 1995; 1997; 2000; Tuijnman, 2001). These competences include a set of linguistic tools that are important for meeting the demands of modern societies. Among others, policy planners consider literacy skills as fundamental for success in education, in the workplace and as a basic skill for lifelong learning.

Early research on literacy has focused on skills and ignored the context of the acquisition and use of literacy. This reflects two different epistemological approaches to the study of literacy: the autonomous and the ideological models (Street, 1984). In the autonomous model, literacy is considered a neutral technology, independent of social context. On the other hand, in the ideological model, literacy is subject to cultural construction and social practice and it derives meaning from the situation in which it is embedded. Therefore the model recognises the variety »of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts« (Street, 1993, 7). For this reason functional literacy can even be considered a social phenomenon and a social practice, since it is not universal, but relative – it is related to the features of the rich cultural variation of the society in which it is taking place and the society has an important influence in determining it. From this derives the origin of the concept of local literacies (Street, 1993),

requiring an in-depth account of the cultural setting in which literacy occurs and is embedded.

Another important conceptual distinction, namely the one between literacy practice and event, was first defined by Heath (1983), who felt that a literacy event is represented by any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interaction and their interpretative processes (Heath, 1982, 93); while the concept of literacy practice includes social practices and conceptions of reading and writing (Street, 1984, 1) which individuals bring to bear upon these events and give meaning to (Street, 2003). The concept of literacy practice places literacy events and individual actions in a solidly social frame, contextualising the event culturally and describing the everyday uses and meanings of literacy.

Literacy practice occurs within and is based upon literacy domains which represent a patterned context within which literacy is used and learned (Barton, Hamilton, 2000). Considering the pluralisation, multimodality and multiplicity of communication channels in which literacy occurs in contemporary society, literacy genres and the ever increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, the concept of multiliteracy was recently introduced (Cope, Kalantzis, 2000). Much of the research done has involved investigating the literacy tasks that are transferred from one literacy function to the other, while less research has focused on tasks that are not transferable, but stable across context (Barlett, 2003).

Research on cross-linguistic transfer has registered positive relationships of literacy-related skills across languages.

THE CASE STUDY AND RESEARCH AIMS

This study investigates literacy skills in the minority language among the Slovene minority in Italy.¹ In Friuli Venezia Giulia,² the region where the minority is historically settled, the right to the public use of Slovene was, in theory, granted by international agreement.³ In 2001, the new Protection Law⁴ was approved, granting additional collective rights for the use of the minority language in public and with the local authorities,⁵ but in practice the law has only recently begun to be implemented and therefore the public use of the language is still very limited.

1 There are no official census data about the number of the Slovenes. From unofficial survey data, some estimates are available. In the whole region of the Friuli Venezia Giulia, there may be 95,000 people who identify themselves as Slovene.

2 The Friuli Venezia Giulia region is situated in the north-eastern part of Italy, bordering the Republic of Slovenia.

3 The international agreements are based on a post World War II agreement, the London Memorandum.

4 Law No. 38/2001 »Regulations of the Slovene linguistic minority in the Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia«.

5 More precisely, the new regulation relates to the use of Slovene in public administration, elected and collective bodies, communications by public authorities, official documents, toponymy and in communication with juridical bodies.

There is a network with a long tradition of Slovene medium schools⁶ at all levels (from kindergartens to high schools), in which the Slovene language is used as the exclusive language of instruction. In Italian medium schools the Slovene language is not taught (neither as an optional subject nor as a foreign language). In the last 15 years, the number of students coming from mixed and non-Slovene families has increased:⁷ nowadays 29% of the school population comes from Slovene families, 41% from mixed and 24% from non-Slovene families (SLORI, 2010).

Members of the Slovene minority are bilingual and biliterate, while Italians do not know Slovene and use Italian exclusively.

Due to the above-mentioned circumstances, Slovene has mostly been used in private life and only to a modest extent in public life. In most public situations the majority language is used. The minority language is mostly used as an in-group language: in the family, school context and in the associations and organisations that are part of the minority network (Kaučič Baša, 1998). The use of the Italian language in communication exceeds the use of Slovene as we move from the private towards the public sphere (Carli, 2002). The bilingualism of the members of the Slovene minority is characterised by a double diglossia (Pertot, 1996): i.e., a diglossic situation between the Italian and Slovene language and between the dialectal languages of each of them.

Within this framework the research hypothesis formulated is that the minority members have less opportunity to develop the functional literacy skills in the minority language, due to its minority status and its limited public use. Furthermore, several studies have shown that literacy skills decrease if not used, and therefore we face the problem of preserving literacy skills in the Slovene language after graduation from school.

The aim of the study was to investigate and assess the functional literacy skills which bilingual students have developed by the end of their formal schooling in the minority language. Are high school graduates capable of meeting some kind of external social demand placed on them which entails written information and documents? In these unbalanced language circumstances, what is the relation between literacy skills in the minority language and literacy skills in the majority language? What factors influence literacy skills in Slovene? Is it possible to formulate recommendations for the preservation and development of literacy skills in the minority language that could be incorporated into educational practice, considering that new opportunities for

the public use of Slovene may be expected to be a reality in a short time?

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

After a careful review of literature related to the above-mentioned research, first a feasibility study was carried out in order to collect information and data about local literacy practices, events and activities in the minority language in everyday life in the context under examination. For the aim of the present study, the following definition of literacy has been formulated: each individual is functionally literate in the Slovenian language, once s/he has developed such reading and writing skills in Slovenian, which allows him/her to use this language in all life contexts, anywhere, both in Slovenia and in the cross-border area, in the private and in the public sphere. Next, measurement instruments suitable for the definition of functional literacy and for a minority context were developed. These include three main components: a test booklet for the direct measurement of functional literacy skills, self-evaluation items regarding the balance of literacy skills in the two languages (majority and minority), and a background questionnaire for the collection of independent variables (demographical, sociolinguistic and sociocultural).

The test booklet was used for the direct measurement of functional literacy skills and was composed of 10 items with tasks and situations related to everyday possibilities for the use of Slovene which had been identified during the feasibility study. The test booklet focused on two main competence areas, reading and writing, each divided in two subareas. Reading refers to understanding and use of information embedded in various text and materials (documents) and understanding of vocabulary (vocabulary). Articles from the press were used related to different topics that include schedules and tables. The writing area included filling out forms (examples of forms used by local administrations and banks), and text production which involved locating, integrating and generating information (pragmatically oriented texts, such as an application for a job vacancy and a fax message for advertising in the local press).

The balance of literacy skills in the two languages was measured via proxy techniques, with questions related to individuals' ability to solve the same item in the majority language. The aim of the self-evaluation was to analyse whether or not there is a gap between the functional literacy skills in the majority and in the minority languages.

6 The network of Slovene medium schools dates back to the period of the Hapsburg Empire (18th century). During the Fascist period (from 1923) these schools were forbidden and were opened again after the World War II. Slovene medium schools exist in the province of Trieste and Gorizia, while in the province of Udine there is only one bilingual school (kindergarten, primary level and lower secondary level), where both Slovene and Italian are used as language of instruction.

7 Data refers to the school population in all three provinces at all levels of schooling.

The background questionnaire was used for the collection of variables related to language in everyday use in the private and public spheres of life. The analysis of these independent variables was useful for understanding which factors influence the development of functional literacy skills in the minority language.

Sample

The sample is composed of the whole population of high school graduates⁸ of Slovene medium schools in Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) (N=103). It was composed of 41.7% males and 58.3% females. The average age was 19. As for native language 82% declared their mother tongue to be Slovene, 13% not Slovene and 5% mixed.

High school represents the highest level of formal schooling available locally through the Slovene medium.

Results

Test scores are presented by the average percentage of correct answers. The self-evaluation marks are measured on a Likert scale, ranging from «easier in Italian» (1), «equal» (2), to «more difficult in Italian» (3):

As for test scores the mean percentage of correct answers is 63.94%. The percentage of correct answers ranges from 20% to 90%. As for the self-evaluation marks, the mean mark is in between the modality «easier in Italian» (1) and «same» (2) (m = 1.73). The values range between 1 and 3.

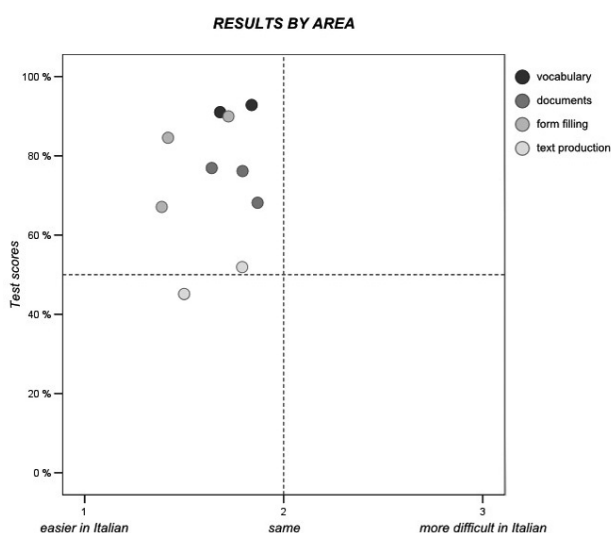


Fig. 1: Results by area.
Sl. 1: Rezultati po sklopih.

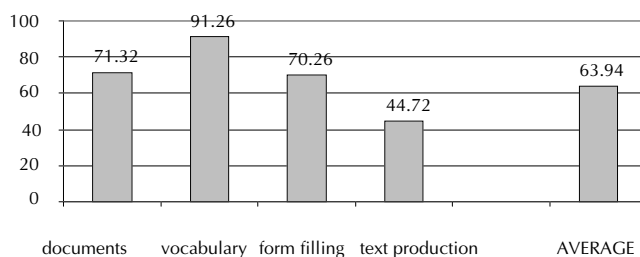


Fig. 2: Test scores by area.
Sl. 2: Testni rezultati po sklopih.

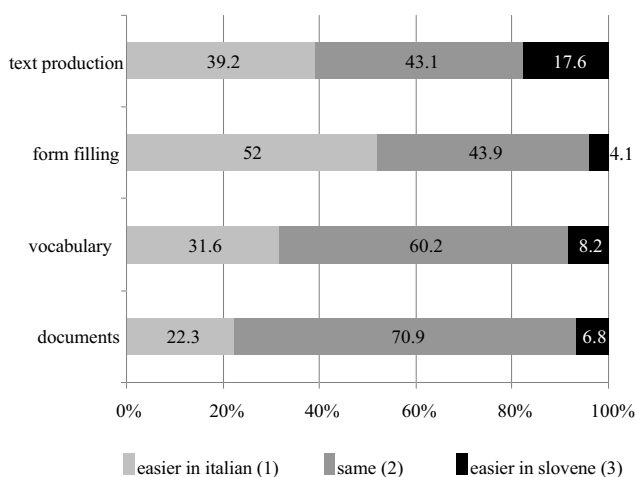


Fig. 3: Self-evaluation marks by area.
Sl. 3: Samoocenjevanje po sklopih.

Figure 1 represents the two dimensions examined: test scores and self-evaluation marks. On the graph the y-axis represents the test scores, the x the self-evaluation marks. It can be easily noticed that all the test scores are located above the x-axis except for the two exercises related to text production, in which students perform lower and the score is under 50%. Considering self-evaluation, we notice that none of the values crosses the y axis, so all the marks are located on the left side, leaning towards «easier in Italian».

In the test scores the best performance is registered for vocabulary items (m = 91.26%), followed by documents (m = 71.32%), filling out forms (m = 70.26%) and text production (m = 44.72%).

The self-evaluation marks show the highest score is registered for documents (m = 1.84), then text production (m = 1.78), vocabulary (m = 1.77), and filling out forms (m = 1.52).

8 School year 2004/2005.

Table 1: Self-evaluation marks: analysis of variance by independent variables.
Tabela 1: Samoocenjevanje: analiza variance po neodvisnih spremenljivkah.

Variable / Area	Documents			Vocabulary			Form filling			Text production		
	N	Mean	Sig.	N	Mean	Sig.	N	Mean	Sig.	N	Mean	Sig.
Students' native language												
Slovene	85	1.95	0.000	81	1.86	0.001	82	1.57	0.004	84	1.89	0.120
Not Slovene	13	1.31		12	1.25		11	1.27		13	1.31	
Mixed	5	1.4		5	1.4		5	1.2		5	1.2	
Home language												
Slovene	61	2.03	0.000	58	1.88	0.11	57	1.61	0.125	60	2	0.11
Not Slovene	9	1.22		8	1.25		8	1.25		9	1.33	
Mixed	33	1.67		32	1.69		33	1.42		33	1.52	
Parents' native language												
Slovene	58	2.02	0.000	55	1.93	0.001	55	1.62	0.161	57	1.98	0.003
Not Slovene	4	1.25		3	1		3	1.33		4	1.5	
Mixed	39	1.64		38	1.58		38	1.39		39	1.49	
Favourite language for reading												
Slovene	11	2.27	0.000	11	2	0.024	11	1.82	0.000	11	2.45	0.082
Italian	46	1.63		44	1.57		44	1.41		46	1.46	
Mixed	25	2.04		24	1.92		24	1.67		25	2	
Equal	11	1.84		19	1.89		19	1.42		20	1.9	
Favourite language for writing												
Slovene	24	2.21	0.000	23	2.17	0.000	23	1.78	0.022	24	2.33	0.000
Italian	37	1.46		35	1.46		35	1.31		37	1.3	
Mixed	19	2		18	1.83		19	1.58		19	1.84	
Equal	23	1.96		22	1.77		21	1.52		22	1.95	

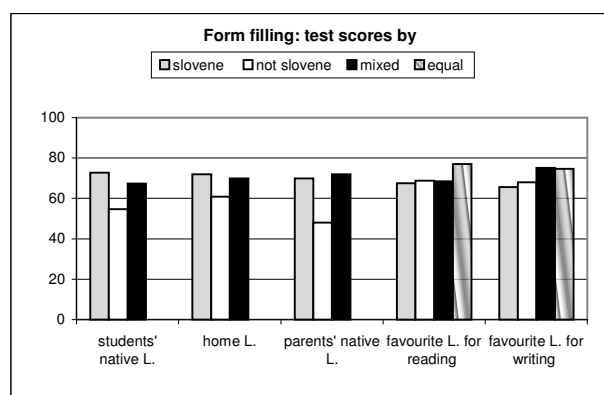
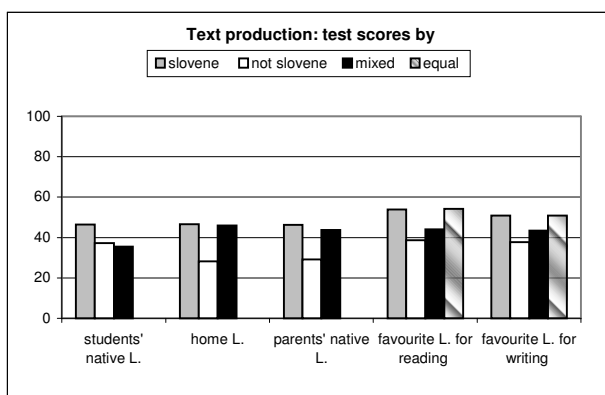
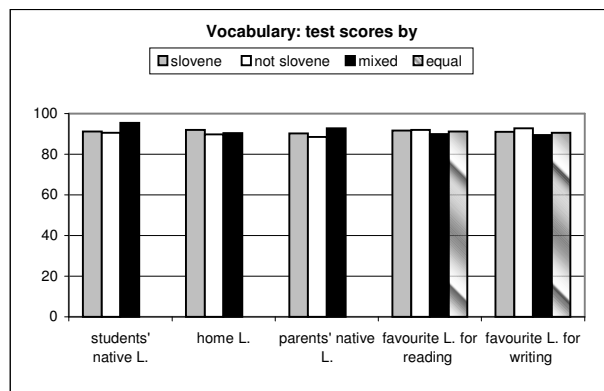
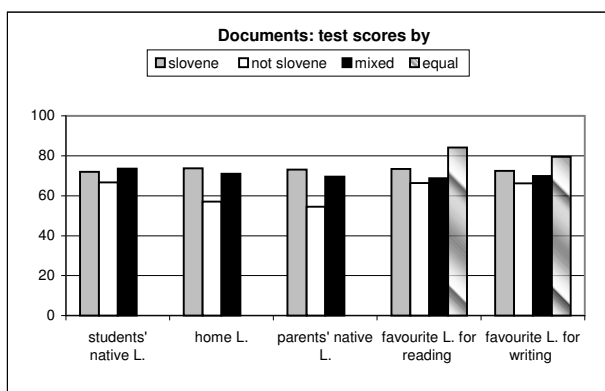


Fig. 4–7: Test scores by independent variables.
Sl. 4–7: Testni rezultati po neodvisnih spremenljivkah.

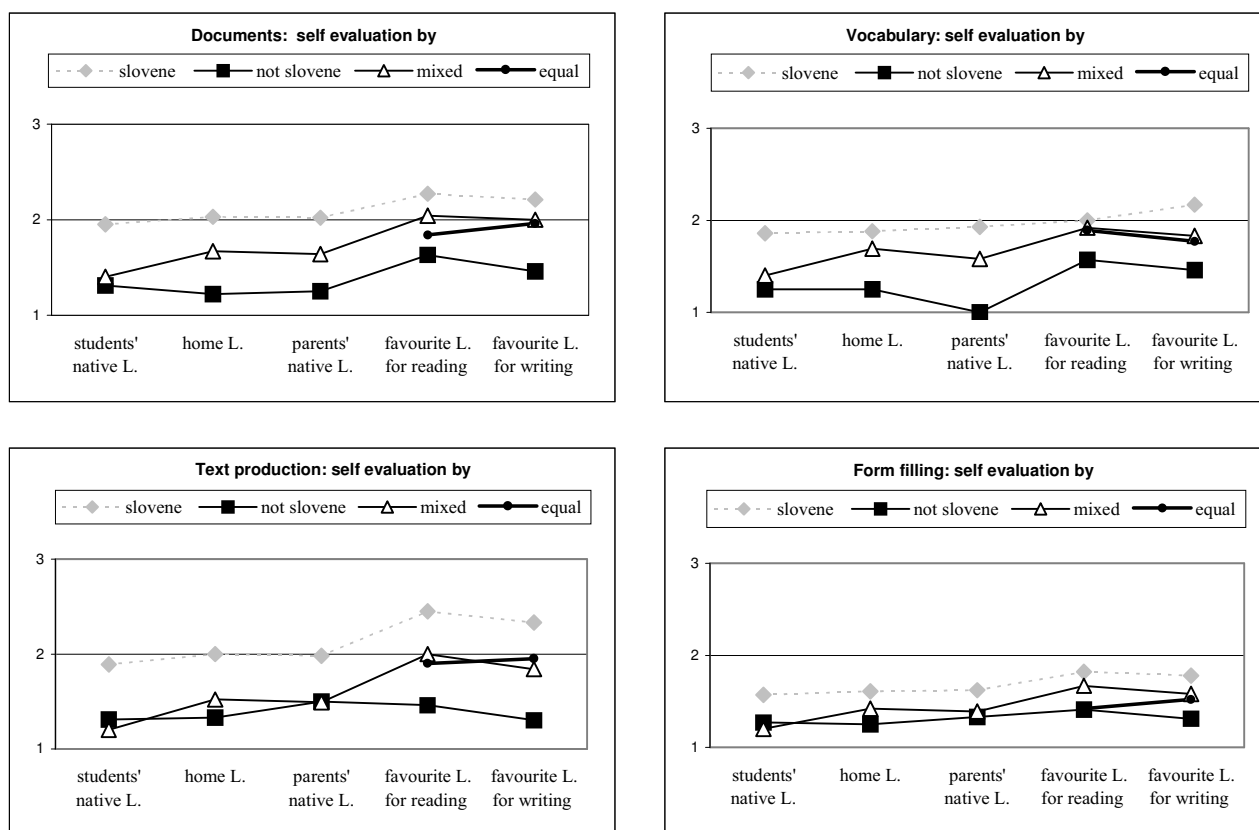


Fig. 8–11: Self evaluation by independent variables.
Sl. 8–11: Samoocenjevanje po neodvisnih spremenljivkah.

For each area an analysis of variance shows some statistically important difference in the results according to certain independent variables, such as: students' native language, parents' native language, language spoken at home, favourite language for reading, and favourite language for writing.

With respect to the test scores, among the scores for documents items there is a significant difference according to favourite language for reading (0.004). Students who read equally in both Slovene and Italian perform better (84.2%) than others. As for filling out forms, there is a statistically significant difference according to students' native language (0.048): students with Slovene as a native language perform better (72.8%). In text production there is a significant difference in accordance with favourite language for reading (0.029): students who would rather read in Slovene and equally in Slovene and Italian perform better. (See figures 4–7).

All the above listed variables seem to influence the self-evaluation marks (Figures 8–11). There is a recurrent trend in the distribution of the marks by values of the variables: when a Slovene value occurs, then the means

rank higher, towards the value 2 (equal), reflecting a more balanced bilingual competence (Table 1).

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

With respect to the output of the assessment and the competence areas analysed, in the test scores we recorded the worst performance for text composition items. We can presume that the students who attend Slovene medium schools have developed school and academic literacy (Cummins, 2000) skills in the Slovene language, but not the functional ones that are used for pragmatically oriented texts and tasks. Although the test scores differ by the variables examined, the differences are not statistically significant. The only significant difference is according to favourite language for reading in the documents score and native language in the task of filling out forms. The other variables seem to have no influence.

Variables such as the language spoken at home and native language seem unrelated to test results. Since test items are strongly related to the public use of Slovene,

from the results a first consideration is possible: the use of minority language as an in-group language has not much influence on the skills for public performance in the same language.

The second consideration regards the balance between Slovene and Italian. This is based on students' evaluation as to whether completing the same task in Italian would be easier or more difficult. The general trend is moving from »same« towards »easier in Italian«. Even students whose predominant language is Slovene in their everyday private lives (those with Slovene as native language, those with Slovene spoken at home, those who attend Slovene medium schools and who have parents with Slovene as a native language) do not lean towards »more difficult in Italian«, except with respect to the items related to understanding and use of information embedded in various texts and materials (documents items). None of these factors seems to be strong enough to strengthen the development of functional literacy skills in the minority language – neither to reach a balanced bilingual competence (the »same« value), nor to make students feel that it would be more difficult to perform the same task in Italian. The only two variables whose values exceed »same« and moving slightly towards »more difficult in Italian« are the favourite language for reading and writing.

From the perspective of language preservation and development we can assume that a Slovene background and home can not reverse the trend towards developing better functional literacy skills in the majority language, since functional literacy is a set of skills that are more part of the public than the private sphere. According to previous studies made among the Slovene minority members in Italy, Slovene is used as an in-group lan-

guage and mostly in the private sphere while Italian is used in the public domain. This may be the reason why the students tended to feel that they would perform more easily in Italian. In educational practice some useful considerations are possible: in the language contact area subject to investigation, the lack of exposure to the public use of Slovene does not facilitate a natural development of functional literacy skills in the minority language. Slovene predominance in the private sphere seems not to be enough for a balanced development of these skills in both languages. In educational practice it would be useful to enrich the teaching curriculum and incorporate developmental skills and abilities related to the public use of the language, in order to enable the next generation to effectively use Slovene even in situations such as those involving local governments and administrations. It may be worthwhile to reflect on the possibility of enriching the curriculum with materials, resources and tasks related to the competence areas and skills examined, although data from research carried out in other parts of the world are contradictory: on one hand, data suggest that schools alone are limited in their power to revitalise endangered languages (Fishman, 1991); on the other hand, achievement in the minority language is generally sensitive to the amount of instruction in that language, while majority language development is relatively insensitive to school exposure (Harley et al., 1990).

In due course, after the law protecting the public use of Slovene is completely implemented by the local authorities, it will be interesting to investigate longitudinally, whether there is a positive impact on the development of functional literacy skills in Slovene.

PISNE KOMPETENCE V MANJŠINJSKEM JEZIKU: PRIMER SLOVENSKE MANJŠINE V ITALIJI

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POVZETEK

Definicija pismenosti se spreminja vzporedno z družbenim, ekonomskim in kulturnim razvojem. Sodobno pojmovanje pismenosti presega zgolj obvladovanje spretnosti branja in pisanja. Zajema znanje in spretnosti, ki so posamezniku potrebne v vsakodnevem življenju, kot so razumevanje in uporaba pisnega gradiva za učinkovito delovanje, pridobivanje znanja, osebni razvoj in sodelovanje v družbenem življenju. Pisne kompetence se upoštevajo kot temeljne predpostavke za uspeh na šolskem področju, na delovnem mestu in kot osnova za vseživljenjsko izobraževanje.

Avtorica v prispevku preučuje pisne kompetence v manjšinskem jeziku med dvojezičnimi pripadniki slovenske manjšine v Italiji. Postavljena je hipoteza, da so pripadniki manjšine, posebno tisti, ki so dokončali šolo z manjšinskim učnim jezikom, usvojili določen jezikovni standard in stopnjo funkcionalne pismenosti v obeh jezikih, manjšinskem in večinskem. Vendar omejene možnosti uporabe slovenščine v javnosti in status manjšinskega jezika močno zavirajo uporabo in razvoj funkcionalne pismenosti v slovenskem jeziku v prid večinskemu italijanskemu jeziku. V javni sferi prevladuje raba italijanskega jezika, medtem ko je raba manjšinskega jezika omejena na družinsko okolje, šolo in manjšinske ustanove in organizacije. Številne študije obenem ugotavljajo, da pisne kompetence zaradi neuporabe okrnijo in postavlja se vprašanje ohranjanja pisnih kompetenc v slovenskem jeziku po zaključku šolanja.

Pisne kompetence v manjšinskem jeziku je avtorica testirala na vzorcu srednješolcev, ki obiskujejo šole s slovenskim učnim jezikom. Preučila je dejavnike, ki vplivajo na dinamike višanja oz. upadanja pismenosti. Ob upoštevanju definicije, da je posameznik funkcionalno pismen v slovenščini, ko je razvil tako raven branja in pisanja v slovenskem jeziku, da je sposoben uporabljati slovenščino v vseh življenjskih vlogah kjerkoli, v zasebni in javni sferi, predstavljajo raziskovalni izsledki pomembno izhodišče za razvoj strategij in predlogov za zviševanje stopnje funkcionalne pismenosti v slovenskem jeziku.

Ključne besede: pismenost, funkcionalna pismenost, manjšinski jezik

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