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THE IBI/BEI PROJECT: MONITORING BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Abstract: This paper tackles an example of bilingual education in primary education presenting a project carried out at primary school level on the teaching of three subjects (i.e. Science, Geography, Art) delivered in English, which was also the language for class interaction, to provide a fully immersive educational environment. The project, called IBI/BEI (Insegnamento Bilingue Italia-Bilingue Education Italy), was developed by the Italian Ministry of Education, the British Council Italy and the USR Lombardia (the Regional Education Office of Lombardy) on the basis of a project implemented in Spain in 1996. This study provides the data collected during a monitoring activity on the project and reflects on the best practices for promoting bilingual education in the early stages of learning. Results demonstrate that the IBI/BEI project set out to prepare children to face the challenge of internationalization, but also showed a major limitation, as it did not continue in the subsequent stages of education. This drawback was mentioned by all the actors involved in the study, who expressed their concern towards such a valuable initiative being a one-off experience

Keywords: bilingual education, CLIL, Italy, primary school.

1. Introduction

The importance of multilingual and multicultural encounters due to globalization has highlighted the fundamental role of an early approach to second language acquisition. However, this topic has also been the center of much controversy especially when dealing with contexts with a high presence of immigrant children. In most cases, immigrant children acquire English as an L3 and an early approach to it could result in a delay also in the learning of the L2 of their new country of adoption. As argued by Griva and Chostelidou (2017), CLIL experiences in early stages of education should take into consideration the diverse cultural contexts of the immigrant students within the multicultural classroom and should build bridges across languages and cultures. Consequently, different teaching modes should be adopted, and every effort should be made so that the teaching strategies employed are tailored to involve immigrant children's needs and interests.

Dealing with the Italian context, different projects have been promoted to spread bilingual education programmes even before the coming into force of the Ministerial Decree in 2010 (Coonan, 2002; Lucietto and Rasom, 2011).¹ The decree, however, proposed the so-called Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) which is aimed at students aged 17-18, thus leaving aside the earlier stages of education. A potential solution to fill this normative gap is represented by the IBI/BEI project, a pilot project developed by the Italian Ministry of Education, the British Council Italy and the USR Lombardia (the Regional

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¹ DM_10_092010_n.249 art 2 comma 4a,

http://www.miur.it/Documenti/universita/Offerta_formativa/Formazione_iniziale_insegnanti_corsi_uni/DM_10_092010_n.249.pdf. [10/11/2014]

Education Office of Lombardy) on the basis of a project implemented in Spain in 1996 (Dobson et al., 2010). The IBI/BEI (Insegnamento Bilingue Italia-Bilingual Education Italy) project was implemented in 6 classes of 6 different primary schools across Lombardy, for a period of 5 scholastic years between 2010 and 2015. The project establishes the teaching of three subjects (i.e. Science, Geography, Art) to be delivered in English.

Moreover, to provide a complete linguistic immersion, pupils and teachers communicated using English in all class interactions. This paper aims at presenting the data collected during a monitoring activity on the project carried out between January and April 2014 (Bondi et al., 2014) and to briefly discuss the best practices to be followed in order to promote bilingual education in early stages of learning beyond the span of this pilot project. We will first introduce the IBI/BEI project and the different policies for multilingual education implemented at European level, both in terms of communitarian language policies and of bilingual education projects across Europe. Secondly, we will focus on the methodologies that have guided the monitoring activity, presenting the subjects involved, the developmental steps of the study and the analytical tools used in investigation. The results section will present motivations, concerns and comments on the various perspectives emerging from the contributions of the parties participating in the project (i.e. parents, children and teachers). The conclusions section will describe some outcomes of the monitoring activity in connection with suggestions for the future development of the project arising from the study.

2. Multilingualism in Europe

2.1. Language policies in the European Union: an overview

As the European Union is founded on the motto “united in diversity”, multilingualism has always been perceived as a central aspect of European development. The relevance of multilingualism in Europe is to a greater extent confirmed by the pivotal role it was given in both functional treaties of the Union, i.e. the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (Rome, 1957 and further modified in Lisbon 2009) and the Maastricht Treaty (Treaty on European Union or TEU, 1992). In both treaties, the role of the EU is described as that “of supporting and supplementing action by the Member States aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States (Article 165(2)), while fully respecting cultural and linguistic diversity (Article 165(1))”.²

Specifically, the policies of the EU pursue the so-called ‘Mother Tongue+2’ goal, detailed in the European Commission’s *White Paper on Teaching and Learning, Towards the Learning society* (1995) and further developed in the European Commission’s communication to the Council *Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: an Action plan* (2003). This principle strongly supports the mastery, by every European citizen, of two languages in addition to their mother tongue. Importantly, to achieve this objective, children are to be taught two foreign languages at school from an early age (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008; cfr. also Egger and Lechner, 2012).

EU Member States have thus been encouraged to promote educational programmes which would respond to this need for broadening linguistic proficiency in more than one language, and CLIL methodologies seem to be the most extensive. CLIL methodologies have been described as a “flexible system which responds to a very wide range of situational and contextual demands” (Coyle, 2005, p. 23). In the next section, an outline of the different educational approaches to multilingualism, which have been developed and implemented across Europe, will be provided, and each approach will be discussed in relation to the IBI/BEI Pilot Project which is the object of this paper.

² Cfr http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_5.13.6.html. [10/09/2018].

2.2. Educational approaches to multilingualism

A significant number of educational approaches have been developed in order to meet the requirements of the ‘mother tongue+2’ objective in schools across Europe. The most famous is probably CLIL, but also immersive and bilingual language programmes have shown to contribute significantly to increase language knowledge and awareness by engaging pupils from an early stage of their education.

2.2.1. CLIL: Content and language integrated learning

The ample incorporation of CLIL in the curricula of different educational systems can be ascribed to its qualities of flexibility and transferability across countries, continents and type of schools (Coyle et al., 2010). Several definitions of CLIL has been provided: Coyle et al. (2010, p.1) maintain that CLIL is a “dual-focused educational approach” constantly balancing attention on content and language, without systematically privileging one over the other. They argue the importance of the CLIL educational perspective as “an alternative approach for using language to learn and point out how “using language to learn is as important as learning to use language” (ibid, p. 35).

The main feature of CLIL programmes is that they are part of the school’s curriculum and coexist with traditional education. In this kind of pedagogical approach, up to 50% of the subjects are taught in a foreign language, while the rest of the curriculum is taught in the pupils’ mother tongue. Additional foreign language education is also offered, so as to support the pupils’ language proficiency (Elsner and Keßler, 2013, p. 2). Dealing with the strengths of CLIL approaches, Ruiz de Zarobe (2008) claims that they create conditions for naturalistic language learning thus also improving communicative competence (Met, 1998; Marsh and Langé, 1999; Marsh and Marshland, 1999). Besides, she argues that such educational attitudes involve the learner in using the language of learning for learning and through learning (see also Coyle, 2000; Coyle et al., 2010). Moreover, she points out how CLIL approaches increase students’ and teachers’ motivation and interest levels (Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Pavese et al., 2001) by diversifying methods and forms of classroom teaching and learning.

2.2.2. Immersion programmes

Immersion programmes were first introduced in Canada in the early 1960s, and were aimed at an early contact of English speaking children with the French language. Cummins (1998, p. 34) lists three main types of such programmes: “early immersion starting in kindergarten or occasionally grade 1; middle immersion starting in grades 4 or 5; and late immersion starting in grade 7”. He states that these programmes are all “characterized by at least 50% instruction through the target language (French) in the early stages [...]” and that “By grades 5 and 6 the instructional time is divided equally between the two languages and usually the amount of time through French declines to about 40% in grades 7, 8 and 9 with further reduction at the high school level as a result of a greater variety of course offerings in English than in French.” (ibid, p. 34). Such programmes are thus quite different than CLIL ones, and involve a higher percentage of target language instruction than the IBI/BEI project. Nonetheless, they are similar to the IBI/BEI project in terms of their objective, i.e. to achieve a ‘language bath’, making the children thoroughly experience an immersive environment. In fact, the IBI/BEI project largely fulfils the requirements for immersive programs outlined by Johnson and Swain (1997) and quoted in Cummins (1998, p. 35):

- (1) The L2 is a medium of instruction;
- (2) The immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum;
- (3) Overt support exists for the L1;
- (4) The program aims for additive bilingualism;
- (5) Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom;
- (6) Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency;
- (7) The teachers are bilingual;

(8) The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community.

Following the Canadian experience, and on the basis of the Canadian model, other immersive programmes have been developed also in Europe, for example in Finland. Finnish schools started to propose Swedish immersion programs in the early 1990s as an answer to the increasing demand for bilingual education from bilingual families who raised their children teaching them both Swedish and Finnish (Bjorklund, 1997). Similarly to Canada, the bilingualism characterising the community was the main reason that boosted the development of such educational initiatives. Not surprisingly, even before that, immersive educational programmes were developed in another bilingual region, i.e. Cataluña in Spain. In Cataluña, since the promulgation of the Statute of Self-Government in 1978, children have to master both Spanish and Catalan, as the two languages have been attributed equal status. Immersive education became part of the curriculum in 1983, when a school in the industrialized area around Barcelona adopted such an educational approach. This area was specifically targeted as it hosted a great number of Spanish speaking children whose parents emigrated there from other areas of the country looking for employment (Artigal, 1997).

The most evident difference between the immersive programmes described above – set in bilingual contexts – and the IBI/BEI project is the fact that the Project was not developed as a consequence of a situation where the two languages used in education coexist in children's everyday life. In the next section we will discuss experiences of bilingual education emerging from a linguistic situation similar to the IBI/BEI one.

2.2.3. The Bilingual Education Project Spain

The BEP (Bilingual education project Spain) was developed in Spain by means of an agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science and the British Council in 1996. This project provided an alternative educational approach to the immersive programmes implemented in Cataluña. The main goal of the BEP was to introduce an integrated curriculum in Spanish state schools, and in particular it set out to provide bilingual education in 43 state schools, involving a total of about 1200 pupils. Since 1996 bilingual education has been introduced at every level of education from age 3 through 16 in the schools involved in the BEP. The objectives of the BEP were a promotion of the acquisition and learning of both English and Spanish through an integrated content-based curriculum, while encouraging awareness of the diversity of both cultures.

Furthermore, the BEP was meant to encourage the exchange of teachers and children as well as to facilitate the implementation of modern technologies in learning other languages. Where appropriate, the BEP envisaged to promote the certification of studies under both educational systems (Dobson et al., 2010). Among the novelty elements of the BEP it is important to mention that it was meant to operate in state schools and not in private or fee-paying schools, and that it was based on a whole-school approach, in order to ensure that all children had the same range of opportunities, regardless of socio-economic factors or other circumstances.

A significant amount of curricular time was allocated to the additional language (i.e. English), roughly equivalent to 40% per week at school, allowing pupils to learn a variety of subjects through English such as Science, History and Geography, thus distancing itself from immersive programmes providing more than 50% of instruction in the target language.

From the beginning there was agreement with the associated secondary schools that when the BEP pupils entered secondary education, they would continue to receive a bilingual instruction. The BEP was clearly what inspired the IBI/BEI project and, in order to introduce Italian participants to the experience, a delegation of Italian teachers was invited to visit Spanish bilingual schools (8-12 March 2010), where they attended a week-long training course. Afterwards, a group of headmasters visited the same schools (26-28

April 2010) and were able to come into contact with the guidelines already established by their Spanish counterparts.

Among the differences between the two experiences it is important to notice that in the Italian context, bilingual education is limited to a smaller number of schools and that the experience will be officially concluded at the end of the five years of primary school of the pilot classes.

3. Outline of the IBI/BEI project

The IBI/BEI project is a pilot project of bilingual education for primary school enacted by the Italian Ministry of Education, the USR Lombardia and the British Council Italy.³ The project addressed 6 schools in Lombardy, which, in the context of school autonomy, joined the five-year initiative (from the 2010-11 school year to 2014-15 school year). The schools involved in the project were the following:

- Istituto Comprensivo Como Lora-Lipomo (Como)
- Istituto Comprensivo Fermi (Villasanta, Monza Brianza) Istituto Comprensivo Ciresola (Milan)
- Istituto Comprensivo Diaz (Milan)
- Istituto Comprensivo via Cialdini Meda (Meda, Monza Brianza)
- Istituto Comprensivo Copernico (Corsico, Milan).

These schools were selected among 42, which had applied initially, since they respected the subsequent criteria: 1) they could guarantee continuity for the entire primary-school five-year period; 2) they had teachers of non-English disciplines who had a mastery of English at least at level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages of the Council of Europe; 3) they could offer at least two disciplines chosen among Art, Geography and Science taught in English.

The IBI/BEI project was designed so as to cover a time span of 5 scholastic terms and required that a significant part of the curriculum be taught in a foreign language, which is then learned by “immersion”. The pilot project proposed a 25% of the curriculum in English, i.e. the teaching of at least two disciplines chosen among Art, Geography and Science, with a weekly number of hours that varied from 6 to 7 hours, thus engaging the children in an immersive learning environment. Besides, Language Literacy was also offered as part of the traditional curriculum.

4. The IBI/BEI monitoring research: methodological remarks

4.1. The monitoring team

The monitoring team included two professors of English from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and two young researchers from the same university, who have been in charge of field research, data collection and data elaboration. The team also included a representative of the Italian Ministry of Education and a representative of the British Council Italy, who provided feedback and supervision.

³ The agreement is available at:
http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/1a0bd00b-e20a-407d-8ed2-996ceb052d03/protocollo_di_intesa_bei.pdf. [10/11/2014]

4.2. Methodological steps and aims of the monitoring activity

The monitoring activity was performed between January and April 2014 and it included different steps. To begin with, the UNIMORE research team developed a questionnaire on the basis of the one designed by the Ministry of Education and targeted at CLIL teachers in Italian secondary schools. Secondly, a preliminary meeting with the teachers in charge for the Project in the 6 schools was organized, so as to validate the questionnaire, which was subsequently implemented by the Ministry of Education and administered to the 46 teachers involved in the study via the web-based platform *SurveyMonkey*. Thirdly, the UNIMORE research team conducted interviews with the 6 headmasters before analysing the data gathered by the questionnaire. Data collection also included focus groups involving teachers, pupils and parents. The focus groups consisted of semi-structured interviews led by the members of the UNIMORE research team, using a set of questions aimed at raising debate among the participants. The last step of the monitoring activity was directed at testing pupils' language competence by means of the completion of a task, to be administered by their teachers. The tasks were homogenous for the 6 schools and their goal was to test both spoken and written abilities.

The UNIMORE research team, under the supervision of both the Ministry and of the British Council Italy, then finalized the activity by drafting both a synthetic and an extended final report. The reports are available on both websites of the USR Lombardia and of the British Council Italy.⁴ In Table 1 the tools used in the monitoring activity to gather data are listed, together with the subjects involved at each stage of the research activity.

Table 1. Tools for data collection

Online questionnaire	46 teachers
Semi-structured interviews & focus groups	6 headmasters 38 parents 17 teachers 46 pupils
Spoken task	60 pupils (10/school)
Written task	120 pupils (20/school)

The online questionnaire was devised to explore teachers' motivation, practices of curriculum and materials design and strategies of implementation of bilingual education. Moreover, teachers' training needs and the impact of the IBI/BEI experience on both school and community were assessed. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were aimed at unveiling motivation, attitudes, drawbacks and expectations of the subjects involved. The spoken and written tasks consisted of a structured picture description. The pictures in both tasks were meant as stimuli for content communication in the foreign language, so as to test both content knowledge and language proficiency.

The objective of the monitoring activity was to provide a framework that allows a reflection on the project taking into account the manifold perspectives of the subjects involved, i.e. pupils, parents and teachers. In particular, the monitoring activity was aimed at investigating their motivation and attitude towards bilingual education, focussing on best practices in teaching and on the integrated competence acquired by pupils through bilingual education. In addition, the research delineates some best practices and

⁴ <http://usr.istruzione.lombardia.gov.it/aree-tematiche/lingue-straniere-e-relazioni-internazionali/ibibe/>
https://www.britishcouncil.it/sites/default/files/final_sintesi.pdf

guidelines to develop similar bilingual education projects in primary schools overcoming the limitations of the pilot experience.

5. Online questionnaire results: the teachers

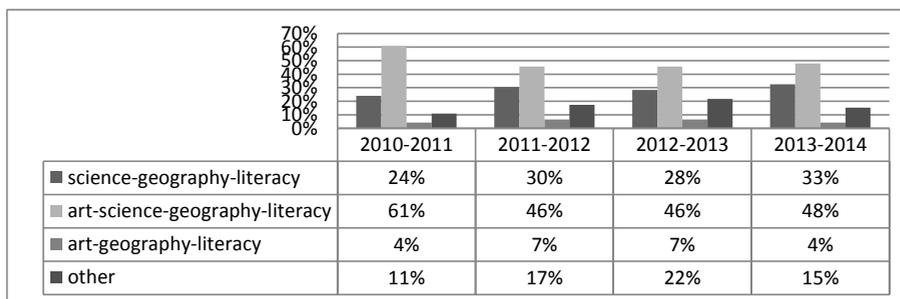
In the following sections we are going to outline some of the most relevant results of the questionnaire, which was completed by 46 teachers. Our focus will be in particular on the profile of the teacher emerging from the answers we received.

5.1. The 'prototypical' IBI/BEI teacher

As a first step, it is a good idea to trace a profile of the teachers involved in the pilot project. Results show that the majority of respondents are experienced schoolteachers aged from 46 to 55 (46% of the respondents) on average having a length of service ranging from 21 to 30 years (24%). They taught in the same classes with a certain degree of continuity during the four years of the project (67%).

Moreover, most of the teachers participating in the questionnaire hold a Master's degree (54%), 20% of whom in Foreign Languages. As for international certifications of language proficiency, 76% of the teachers claim to have one, i.e. 38% of the teachers possess a B2 certification, while another 38% possess a certification for the level B1.⁵ Higher levels of language proficiency are certified for a lower percentage of the teachers, with both levels C1 and C2 accounting for just 12% of the respondents. Among the respondents, there are 21 teachers that were part of the IBI / BEI project since the start. The number of teachers with a single class dropped, from an initial peak of 63% to 46%. All other teachers teach in two or more classes. Figure 1 illustrates the framework of the subjects involved in the project.

Figure 1. Teachers involved per discipline



⁵ The minimum required level of proficiency for the teachers as established by the Ministry of Education is B2. (DM_10_092010_n.249 art 2 comma 4a.

http://www.miur.it/Documenti/universita/Offerta_formativa/Formazione_iniziale_insegnanti_corsi_uni/DM_10_092010_n.249.pdf [12/09/2018]

5.2. Resources and materials for the Project

As a second point in the questionnaire, IBI/BEI teachers were asked to describe the resources and materials which are available in their schools for them to use in their everyday activities. Of a certain interest is the central role played by the classroom itself; teachers, in fact, seem to consider it more than just a room, but rather a comprehensive learning environment. Across the six schools the situation varies according to space availability and number of children involved, but teachers have stated that either a lab or a special classroom are allotted to IBI/BEI instruction. When no special space is dedicated to the activities of the Project, the classroom is arranged to become the center of the immersive learning experience. An example is represented by the fact that teachers are used to hanging posters and flash cards on the classroom walls as permanent learning supports. Interestingly, 50% of the teachers claim to have increased their use of visual supports in order to create an immersive environment. Moreover, they highlight the key role of IT technologies played in the class: the interactive whiteboard is extensively used for the implementation of useful multimedia resources (e.g. slideshow presentations, audio files, online teaching resources).

The immersive environment is further boosted by the presence of a mother-tongue language assistant, who is usually available in the classroom 12 hours per week. However, it is relevant to highlight that only 2 schools out of the 6 involved were assigned a language assistant from the Ministry. Consequently, to solve this problem and to offer the same learning opportunity to their students, other schools asked for the collaboration of English-speaking parents, Comenius exchange trainees and non-profit organizations promoting language learning.⁶

5.3. Teachers' didactic planning and teaching methods

In order to investigate the didactic planning and teaching methods of the bilingual education framework, teachers were asked to provide information on curriculum and materials design, as well as on preferred classroom activities. As far as didactic planning is concerned, they claimed that a meaningful part of curriculum design was carried out within the individual school (59% of the interviewees), by means of local meetings that saw the participation of the various teachers involved in the IBI/BEI team. Only 14% of the teachers reported that curriculum design was usually accomplished in the context of general meetings, organized by the USR Lombardia.

Materials development emerged as one of the major challenges they faced because of the lack of textbooks for bilingual education. Therefore, they express the necessity to find alternatives in order to convey the disciplinary content pertaining to their specific subject. Moreover, the questionnaire produced some results describing the creative process, highlighting different possibilities, which were not mutually exclusive.

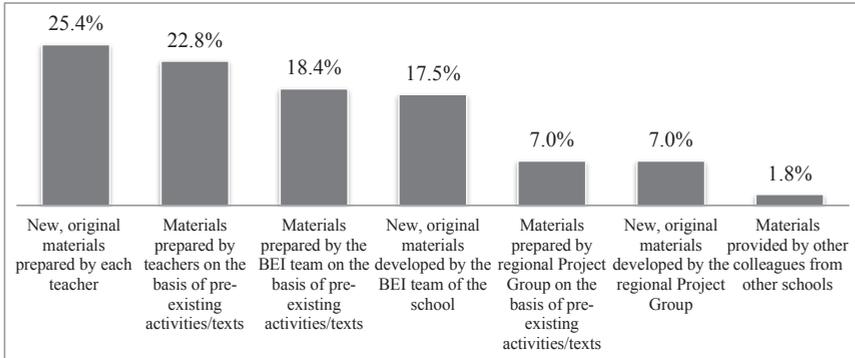
Figure 2 below shows, on the one hand, how most of the teachers personally develop original materials, in order to fit the school curriculum (25%). On the other hand, it highlights that 23% of teachers are sometimes able to adapt existing resources to their needs, thus reducing the workload of lesson planning. Materials development in the context of the IBI/BEI school team, either from scratch or by adapting pre-existing resources, seems to be less frequent (18% in both cases). Materials developed by the Regional project group (again, both in terms of original and adapted materials) seem to be used by teachers only to a limited extent (7% in both cases).

It is striking that only 2% of the teachers claim to have been able to use materials provided by colleagues from other schools living the same teaching experience, hence indicating a low level of collaboration and

⁶ The Comenius programme is a European Union educational project. It concerns school-level education, and is part of the EU's Erasmus + 2014-2020 Programme. It aims "to help young people and educational staff better understand the range of European cultures, languages and values". (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comenius_programme [12/09/2018]).

networking within the Project. Among the reasons for this low rate of cooperation, two main factors emerged subsequently from focus groups: first, teachers mentioned a high reluctance to share materials with scarce chances that others will be eager to reciprocate, thus feeling ‘exploited’ and, secondly, the fact that the web-based platform that was made available was not working properly and thus discouraging its use.

Figure 2. Teaching materials production and design

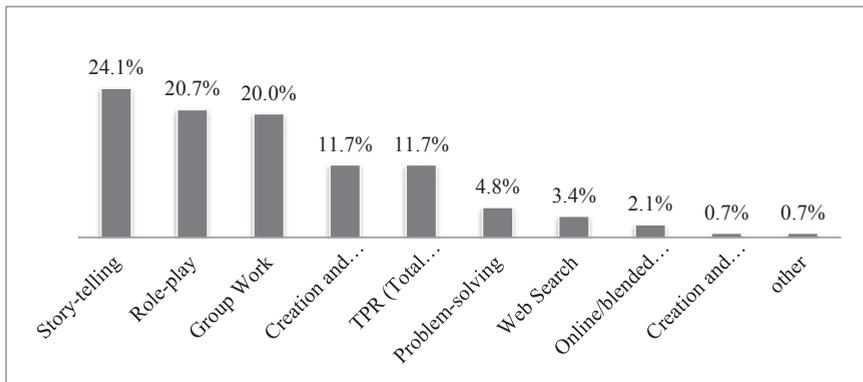


In class, teachers had the opportunity to collaborate with a mother-tongue language assistant, either recruited from the Ministry of Education or, when not possible, by the school itself. Teachers highlighted that the collaboration with the mother-tongue language assistant was fundamental in the implementation of the Project, and the majority of them indicates a close cooperation and support of the language assistant.

Among the different modes of teaching, teachers seem to favor those aimed at directly engaging the pupils. Indeed, they claim to focus on oral language skills, foregrounding listening activities and interaction.

Figure 3, below, depicts the range of activities teachers implement in their everyday classroom routines. Data confirms that activities based on oral skills have a prominent role in bilingual education.

Figure 3. Modes of teaching and learning



Storytelling seems to be frequently implemented in the classroom (24.1%), while role-play and group-work represent both the second most popular class of activities (20.7% and 20%, respectively). These results highlight the great importance of interaction in a bilingual education context. Children are thus personally involved in the cooperative construction of disciplinary knowledge, while at the same time practicing the language (Cavalieri and Stermieri, 2016). Children’s engagement is realized not only by means of spoken interaction but also by asking them to realize objects and little craftworks (11.7%) or to take part to activities based on TPR (total physical response) (11.7%). TPR activities are led by the teacher, who associates words with movements the children are asked to reproduce. Related to TPR activities it’s worth mentioning the *Jolly Phonics* method for the teaching of the sounds of the English language.⁷ This method associates a movement with each of the 42 sounds of the English alphabet. *Jolly Phonics* is used in particular with children in their first and second year of school, while it is less common in further educational stages.

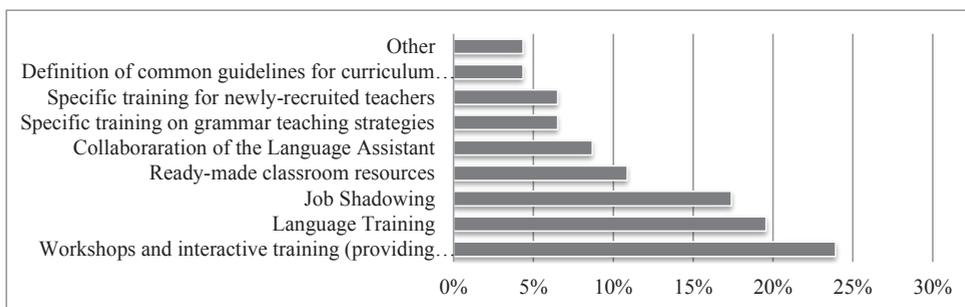
Computer-based tasks are not frequently part of classroom activity, as some schools do not have either the equipment or the space to do so on a regular basis. Nonetheless, technology still plays an important role in this pilot project, as teachers make extensive use (where possible) of interactive whiteboards which can provide a full multimedia support.

5.4. Teacher training

Both already existing activities aimed at training teachers in IBI/BEI teaching methodologies and perceived needs expressed by the interviewees in the questionnaire were tackled in the study. Teachers reported that an introductory training course (lasting 4 to days) was offered by the USR Lombardia, in collaboration with the British Council Italy, at the very beginning of the project in April 2010. This course included both in-presence and online-based activities. An important part of this course was the introduction to the *Jolly Phonics* method. The British Council Italy also organizes annual seminars, usually lasting 2 days in June and in September, and an expert from the British Council regularly visits the schools, holding a one-day workshop twice a year in each school. Language training was provided by some schools to their teachers, but seems not to have been part of a more comprehensive initiative.

Interestingly, results in Figure 4 show that there is a strong demand from teachers to rethink training courses, giving them a more practical cut, and giving less importance to the contribution of the participating teachers (24%).

Figure 4. Envisaged training activities



⁷Further information available at: www.jollylearning.co.uk/overview-about-jolly-phonics/.

Furthermore, teachers feel the need to pay greater attention to language training, which should be more targeted to the different levels of competence of the recipients (19%). The only training activities which have received more preferences than language training were workshops focusing on interaction and providing classroom-ready materials which the teachers could actually use in their everyday teaching (24%). The centrality of interaction and in-person engagement is also further confirmed by a widespread interest in job-shadowing experiences, possibly to be held in English-speaking countries (17%). Specific training for newly-recruited teachers was only mentioned by a small portion of the interviewees (6%). This datum may be interpreted in relation to the stability of teachers that resulted as working with the same classes for long periods.

6. Focus groups and interviews: concerns and motivations for joining the project

This section describes the outcomes of the semi-structured interviews that disclosed the perspective of the different parties involved in the project (e.g. pupils, parents, teachers and headmasters). Specifically, motivations for joining the Project and concerns about it are detailed.

6.1. Concerns about the IBI/BEI project

All the participants to the IBI/BEI project expressed their personal concerns with respect to the Project, according to their own degree of involvement. Pupils said that they initially feared to see an increase in their study load and to have more difficulties in learning a subject in a different language. This latter concern was also signalled by the parents, who also claimed to be afraid that their children would acquire a limited knowledge of both disciplinary content and vocabulary in Italian and a limited ability to discuss disciplinary topics in Italian.

Parents with basic to no knowledge of English were also concerned of not being able to help their children studying and doing homework. A second worry parents mentioned was related to Italian teachers using English in class: many of them highlighted the fact that children might acquire a wrong pronunciation due to the influence of the teachers' non-native accent.

On the long-term perspective, moreover, initial concerns were dispelled but they were replaced by some new concerns. Indeed, parents showed some remonstrance about the lack of a consistent approach towards grammar teaching, as well as the idea that children were not given a systematic study method, being thus potentially penalized in the following stages of their education. Furthermore, a lack of official textbooks was considered odd by the parents, who envisaged a clearer study reference for their children. Teachers, on the other hand, expressed their difficulties with colleagues working outside the Project: they argue that it may be desirable to raise awareness about the relevance of the project among the entire school staff, possibly in the context of a broader reflection on innovation and evaluation of educational experiences. However, some pointed at the possible loss of authority of the traditional methodology brought about by such an immersive project as the IBI/BEI.

6.2. Motivations to take part in the IBI/BEI project

The main advantage mentioned by all the actors of the project is the early contact with the L2 to which the children were exposed. In fact, on the one hand, parents were strongly motivated, since they saw the Project as an opportunity for their children to begin learning a second language at an early stage of their lives and thus acquiring a more open-minded perspective on the world. Teachers, on the other hand, highlighted the benefits of putting children in contact with an L2 at an early age and in particular the benefits

of an innovative teaching and learning methodology, such as the immersive environment that characterizes the IBI/BEI project. Headmasters included local communities in the advantages of taking part in the project. As a consequence of promoting the use of English as a *Lingua Franca*, the IBI/BEI project led schools located in suburbs or in difficult neighbourhoods to a greater integration of children with different linguistic backgrounds while at the same time increasing school prestige and thus having a positive influence on the school's surrounding areas as well.

Moreover, with respect to the children, the project seemed to increase equal learning opportunities and at the same time to raise empathy among children with different nationalities, culture and mother tongue. Thanks to the IBI/BEI project, teachers felt a personal and professional improvement. Indeed many of them, especially those who were approaching retirement when the project started, have perceived this experience as a positive challenge. There seems to be a widespread sense, among the teachers, of feeling personally enriched and professionally empowered by the opportunity to take part to the Project.

6.3. *Children's opinion*

The discussion with the children during the focus group showed their extraordinary motivation and their clear ability to identify examples of acquired skills and classroom activities. They described them both in English and in Italian, moving with ease from one language to the other. There were also moments when, in describing his experiences, a child switched spontaneously to the use of English. The semi-structured interview in the focus groups with children included questions such as:

- a) Do you know that your class is part of a project called IBI /BEI? Do you know what that means?
- b) Describe the activities you do in class. Imagine that I do not know anything about what you do. Can you tell me? Can you give me any examples of activities that you do in class?
- c) Think of the subjects you study in English: tell me three things that you learned to do in English in geography / science / arts?
- d) Can you also tell me three things that you learned to do in Italian in other subjects?
- e) What activities do you like in the subjects that you study in English? Everyone think of at least three.
- f) What activities don't you like in English? Everyone think of at least two.

The discussion was started with questions (in Italian) and continued by asking students to write down examples that they had thought of. This gave an opportunity to assess both the children's written and spoken English. Focus groups show that all pupils are aware of being part of a pilot project and are excited to have this experience in English: they feel "lucky and privileged" compared to the children who are not involved in the BEI/IBI project (S. says: "If I continue to do so, at the age of 16 I'll be bilingual."). The children naturally described the activities done in class and enjoyed this opportunity to share their experience. The types of activities that children consider the most memorable/enjoyable are the following:

- 1) science: experiments, designing posters in groups, songs (a group of children sang the song "the photosynthesis");
- 2) literacy: storytelling, reading booklets, explanations of grammar (which is perceived as useful for "constructing sentences"); use of hands-on activities such as, matching cards, acrostics, songs to learn pronunciation;
- 3) geography: explanations given with power point, description of maps;
- 4) arts: drawings, power point/posters about the lives of and techniques used by painters.

Children (as well as their parents) confirmed that they are generally autonomous in doing their homework, and usually ask for help from parents "who speak English" only when they find it difficult. Children described themselves as autonomous in browsing the Web and in using new technologies (e.g.

tablets). The main use for such tools is to check the meaning of new words, even though traditional study tools (e.g. dictionaries) are also used.

6.4. To sum up

In general, the monitoring activity recorded a positive attitude of the parents about the project and any concerns are largely balanced by the encouraging results obtained by the children. Teachers, headmasters and parents (many of whom were able to compare the IBI-BEI experience with that of their older children in traditional education) confirmed that knowledge of disciplinary content and mastering of the mother tongue were not affected by the early and intensive exposure to L2. The main worry expressed by all teachers, pupils, parents and headmasters is about the future of the children in the transition to junior high school, as a lack of continuity in the use of the language may lead them to a regression. Moreover, the traditional teaching methodologies children might encounter in further educational stages may lead to a lack of interest in children used to the IBI/BEI teaching approach. In general, the need to define guidelines for the transition to higher stages of education was highlighted by all the parties.

7. Conclusions

The increasingly multicultural world we live in and the pervasive role of globalisation have had a significant impact on the Italian educational system, which has, as a consequence, become multicultural and multilingual. In the schools involved in the pilot project, for example, in particular those located in Milan city centre, bilingualism was a common phenomenon frequently mentioned also as a motivation for joining the Project. English plays a key role in such a complex scenario and, as Marsh (2006) argues, English is turning from a foreign language into a second language, opening up new communicative possibilities among individuals belonging to different communities. However, it is important to mention that there has also been a long debate on learning English as L3 for immigrant children. One of the greatest problems that may arise in an early approach to learning English is the fact that it could result in a delay in the learning of the L2 of their new country of adoption. According to Griva and Chostelidou (2017), CLIL experiences in early stages of education should take into consideration the diverse cultural contexts of the immigrant students within the multicultural classroom and should build bridges across languages and cultures. Consequently, different teaching modes should be adopted, and every effort should be made so that the teaching strategies employed are tailored to involve immigrant children's needs and interests.

Nevertheless, from an educational point of view, CLIL has led to a need to learn English that goes beyond language training and points to a more comprehensive perspective based on a Functional Approach to language learning and teaching. Curricula need to respond to the pressing requests of a global linguistic environment and bilingual education programmes seek to provide an answer to this growing demand. The IBI/BEI project sets out to prepare children to face the challenge of internationalization, but has shown a major limitation, as it will not continue in the subsequent stages of education. This drawback has been mentioned by all the actors involved in the study, who expressed their concern towards such a valuable initiative being a one-off experience. As a consequence, in order to answer the questions of the families, it is considered advisable that the USR Lombardia, the Ministry of Education and the British Council Italy join efforts to devise possible solutions to this problem.

From the point of view of the impact the project has had, headmasters and teachers signalled that a positive effect could be noticed in students' language skills but also that the Project has had a direct influence on teaching modes, which appear to have benefited from the innovative methodologies brought about by such an immersive experience. As a consequence, the project has not only changed the teaching practices and materials used in the classes involved, but also encouraged a rethinking of the entire

curriculum of the schools involved. However, a number of problems have arisen, such as the difficulty in finding classroom-ready materials for the implementation of the project, resulting in increased workload for teachers who need to prepare their own materials. Furthermore, teachers highlighted the importance of constant development of their own communicative competence, implementing new forms of teacher training.

In order to improve the sustainability of the project and, possibly, to grant its extension, two seem to be the core issues: on the one hand, the development of a vertical curriculum, so as not to nullify the skills acquired by the children during these years; on the other, it seems important to enhance the skills of the teachers, supporting initiatives of lifelong learning.

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