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CHIARA FACCIANI

English through a multilingual lens: teachers' practices and perceived impact on students

Abstract

This article investigates the implementation of multilingual pedagogy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Italian public schools. Drawing on classroom video recordings and semi-structured interviews with teachers, the study examines educators' strategies, activities, and perceptions related to the implementation of multilingual pedagogy. The findings emphasise the central role of teachers in utilising students' prior linguistic knowledge to acquire English, particularly through oral and lexicon-related activities that promote multilingual awareness. Additionally, the study highlights teachers' positive perceptions of the benefits of adopting a multilingual approach to EFL teaching.

Keywords

Multilingual pedagogy; English as a Foreign Language; multilingual students; teachers' role

1. Introduction

In today's globalised and heterogenous society, classrooms around the world mirror the linguistic diversity that characterises our communities. Consequently, educators find themselves teaching in multilingual environments, where local dialects and minority languages coexist within the same educational space. This linguistic classroom ecology puts educators in front of a unique challenge and opportunity to develop teaching strategies that embrace this diversity. In doing so, teachers play a vital role in shaping pupils' learning processes and in creating an inclusive pedagogy that extends beyond the classroom walls.

This article examines the role of educators in the multilingual classroom by paying attention to teachers' interactional strategies as well as their beliefs regarding the implementation of multilingual pedagogies in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. The findings contribute insights to the ongoing discourse on language education in diverse and multilingual classrooms with a focus on the role of teachers and on foreign language learning.

2. *Theoretical framework*

As language classrooms worldwide become increasingly diverse and multilingual, supported by studies on bilingualism (e.g., Cummins' interdependence hypothesis 1979), the classroom's linguistic environment has gradually shifted towards integrating learners' languages into the learning process. The instructional approaches and strategies that draw on students' entire linguistic repertoires to support their learning process and create linguistically inclusive classroom environments are known as multilingual pedagogies. This term encompasses both translanguaging pedagogy (García et al. 2017) and pluralistic approaches developed by the Council of Europe (2012). Research highlights the transformative potential of multilingual pedagogies, showing that they enhance students' ability to engage with language critically and analytically (Leonet et al. 2020). They also play a vital role in boosting literacy development among emergent bilinguals (Velasco & García 2014; Ascenzi-Moreno & Espinosa 2018; Carbonara et al. 2023) and in cultivating inclusive educational spaces that embrace linguistic and cultural diversity (Wei 2024; Aleksić & García 2024). In the domain of EFL education, multilingual pedagogies challenge traditional monolingual English-only approaches to language learning and view learners' languages as useful tools that can support the learning process of the target language. Previous studies on multilingual pedagogies in EFL settings focused on learners' writing skills (Turnbull 2019), grammar acquisition (Hopp & Thoma 2021) and questioned the roles of the majority and minority languages for EFL learning (Beiler 2020). As reported by Huang and Chalmers (2023) in their systematic review, studies on pedagogical translanguaging in EFL classrooms have been conducted in different geographical areas (East Asia, North Africa, Mainland Europe, and the Middle East) and included a variety of languages (Albanian, Arabic, German, Greek, Kurdish, and Japanese). In the Italian context, the topic has been explored to some extent in the forthcoming work of Facciani and Carbonara.

As suggested by Borg (2006), understanding teachers' beliefs is necessary for improving their teaching practices. Within the domain of foreign language teaching, educators play a crucial role in scaffolding students' prior linguistic knowledge and in supporting them in acquiring the target language (Azkarai & Mayo García 2015; Shin et al. 2021; Neokleous et al. 2022; Källkvist et al. 2022). Furthermore, in the context of multilingual classrooms, educators serve as facilitators, supporting the development of their learners' linguistic repertoires into valuable resources for meaning making (García & Wei 2014). Within this scenario, understanding teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards multilingual pedagogies is necessary, as they play a crucial role in shaping classroom activities (Haukås 2016). Research on teachers' beliefs has expanded significantly and examined teachers' beliefs about multilingualism and multilingual pedagogies (De Angelis 2011; Haukås 2016; Otwinowska 2014). Yet, current literature mainly addressed general aspects of multilingual education, overlooking a detailed exploration of teachers' beliefs and practices in EFL domain. Doing so would allow to analyse the potential benefits and challenges of implementing a more inclusive language education approach.

3. *Study design and participant overview*

The data discussed in this paper forms part of a broader exploratory study investigating the implementation of multilingual pedagogies in EFL teaching and learning (Facciani & Carbonara 2025). This research was conducted within the framework of the action-research (García & Kleyn 2016) project L'AltRoparlante (Carbonara & Scibetta 2021), a network of Italian public schools integrating multilingual pedagogies into their curricular practices. Drawing from previous studies on language education (De Mauro 2018) and multilingual pedagogies (e.g., CUNY-NYSIEB 2020; Council of Europe 2012; Cummins & Early 2006), the project spans six schools, each characterised by notable superdiversity due to the substantial presence of emergent bilingual students with migratory backgrounds. The participants of this study are seven EFL teachers that are involved in the project, five of them work in a primary school, whereas two teach in secondary schools. Their experience in school ranges from five to twenty years, one teacher has a bachelor diploma while the rest have a master's degree. All the teachers have been attending teachers' training courses organised as part of the project every year.

For this study, the data collection was divided into two phases. The first one included video recordings of teachers' EFL classes. These were recorded from January to June 2023 comprising a total of 15 hours of material. This set of data was transcribed following Jefferson's transcription conventions (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1999) and analysed following a Conversation Analysis approach (Kasper & Wagner 2014). The second phase included semi-structured interviews with the teachers, using the stimulation recall strategy through the display of short videos of the teachers' own teaching. This second set of data was entirely transcribed and analysed adopting a qualitative content analysis framework (Mayring 2000) with the support of the Nvivo 14 software.

The analysis of the two datasets presented in this paper aimed at answering two research questions. Firstly, how do teachers implement multilingual pedagogies in their EFL class (e.g., types of activities and strategies)? Secondly, what are teachers' beliefs regarding the impact of multilingual pedagogy for EFL learning on students?

4. *Findings*

The qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) of the semi-structured interviews identified six main categories (recurring themes or topics) in teachers' discourse on multilingual pedagogies in the EFL classroom. Two of these categories, "Types of teaching activities" and "Impact", are central to the research questions explored in this study and are presented in the sections below. A comprehensive analysis of the remaining categories identified through this analysis is available in another publication (Facciani & Carbonara 2025).

4.1 Teachers' strategies in the classroom

In the corpus, which includes all interviews with participants regarding the implementation of multilingual pedagogy in EFL classrooms, the category "Types of teaching activities" refers to all instances that describe the activities planned and implemented by the teachers during the classroom sessions. These activities specifically involve the use of students' languages to support EFL learning. This category encompasses various teaching practices where the inclusion of students' first languages is used as a tool to facilitate English language acquisition and enhance the learning experience. Among these, vocabulary-related activities emerge as the most frequently mentioned in teachers' discourse. These activities, centred on the acquisition of the English lexicon, incorporate the diverse languages brought to the class by emergent bilingual students. Generally, teachers agreed that including other languages during the learning process of English vocabulary is a straightforward practice, as T1 states.

Excerpt 1:

> T1: Especially at the first and second elementary levels, when working extensively on oral skills, it becomes straightforward to introduce words in English and then ask the children if they know how to say them in their mother tongue.

Apart from vocabulary-related activities, T1 stressed that multilingual activities were adopted at oral level. The same is stated by T3 who explained that she tends to mainly design oral activities.

Excerpt 2:

> T3: So, sometimes the multilingual work focuses more on the oral aspect.

Furthermore, with regard to the strategies, teachers explained that implementing multilingual activities in the EFL class can support a metalinguistic reflection, i.e., students' conscious reflection on the nature of language and on language similarities and differences. In Excerpt 3, T2 emphasizes that these considerations hold significant importance as they enable an examination of language hierarchies and seek to challenge them by helping students comprehend the value of each language which, in the context of EFL, is particularly relevant.

Excerpt 3:

> T2: It's an opportunity to make children reflect on the vast variety of languages in the world, on the fact that every language is important, focusing on these fundamental aspects and on being open to all languages.

The activities described by the teachers in the interviews were corroborated through the video recordings of classroom interactions. To illustrate this point, Excerpt 4 below shows T2 implementing a multilingual activity that involves both students' speaking and reading skills. The teacher introduces an exercise based on the comparison of vocabulary and set phrases across the various languages spoken by the

students, namely English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French and German. The main language of the interaction is Italian, yet many turns are in other languages since the teacher invites the students to draw on their mother tongues. To make this visible to the reader, the original turns are provided together with a literal translation (in italics). Languages other than Italian are underlined in Excerpt 5 below.

Excerpt 4

| 1 | T2 | Quindi la capite questa in inglese giusto? <u>His name is</u> |
| | | *So do you understand this in English right? <u>His name is</u>* |

| 2 | All | Dante |
| | | *Dante* |

| 3 | T2 | Come si dice il suo nome in un'altra lingua? |
| | | *How do you say his name in another language?* |

| 4 | S1 | <u>Il s'appelle</u> |
| | | *<u>He is called</u>[1]* |

| 5 | T2 | <u>Il s'appelle</u> (.) altre idee? (.) Sì? |
| | | *<u>He is called</u> (.) more ideas? (.) Yes?* |

| 6 | S2 | <u>Ele se chama</u> |
| | | *He is called* |

| 7 | T2 | <u>Ele se chama</u> |
| | | *He is called* |

| 8 | S3 | <u>Se llama</u> |
| | | *He is called* |

| 9 | T2 | <u>Se llama</u> (.) ok (.) tutti d'accordo che questo vuol dire il suo nome? |
| | | *<u>He is called</u> (.) do you all agree that this means his name?* |

| 10 | S1 | Si chiama |
| | | *He is called* |

11	T2	Vuol dire si chiama? (.) Quindi non è il suo nome (.) giusto? (.)
		<u>Se llama</u> e <u>se</u> <u>chama</u> vuol dire?
		What does his name is mean? (.) So this is not his name is (.) right? (.)
		<u>what</u> <u>does he is called</u> and <u>he is called mean?</u>

| 12 | Many | Si chiama |
| | | *He is called* |

| 13 | T2 | E in francese come sarà? Si chiama o il suo nome? |
| | | *And in French how would it be? His name is or he is called?* |

| 14 | S4 | Il suo nome |
| | | *His name is* |

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[1] To emphasize that the teacher wants students to reflect on the different structure of the expression 'his name' in other languages, the English literal translation 'he is called' has been preserved.

15 S5   Si chiama
          He is called

16 Many Si chiama
          He is called

17 T2   Si chiama (.) lui si chiama (.) vedete qui non c'è il lui (.) è come in italiano (.)
          si può non mettere il pronome (.) perché questo lo possiamo fare? (.) Perché
          posso dire mi chiamo senza dire io mi chiamo?
          He is called (.) he is called (.) see here there is no he (.) it is the same as Italian
          (.) you can omit the pronoun (.) why can we do this? (.) Why can I say I am
          called without saying I?

18 S5   Perché cambia
          Because it changes

19 T2   Che cosa cambia?
          What changes?

20 S5   Il finale
          The ending

21 T2   Il finale del verbo
          The ending of the verb

The excerpt highlights T2's emphasis on translation across languages. By prompting students to translate the expression "his name is" into other languages, T2 initiates a reflection on the understanding that this expression may lack a literal translation in all languages, emphasising the diversity and similarities among different linguistic structures. Therefore, T2 leverages students' pre-existing linguistic knowledge to initiate a reflection on linguistic diversity. This approach not only acknowledges and values the linguistic diversity within the classroom but also encourages students to engage with the subject matter more personally. The interaction in Excerpt 4 aligns with the findings from the interview's excerpts presented above as it shows the teacher implementing an EFL oral activity with a focus on multilingual awareness carried out by including a reflection of students' mother tongues.

4.2 Teachers' perceived impact on students

The analysis of corpus of interviews to the teachers allowed to identify the participants' perceptions and beliefs on the impact of multilingual pedagogy on students with specific reference to EFL.

One of the impacts that emerged in teachers' discourse is "phonological awareness", i.e., the development of learners' skills in distinguishing phonemes. For instance, T6 declares in Excerpt 5 that through multilingual pedagogies in the EFL she noticed students' development of metalinguistic phonological competence.

Excerpt 5

> T6: Perhaps the major impact on the English language is a better metalinguistic phonological competence they can develop. This is due to their exposure to multiple languages, allowing them to significantly broaden their knowledge of phonemes.

Similarly, T1 also describes an impact on monolingual Italian students in terms of sound discrimination.

Excerpt 6

> T1: And Italian children who listen to them and learn them still can become familiar with different words or sounds (…) this helps them refine their ear as well. Because a difficulty that Italian children still have in learning English is the challenge of listening, listening well to the sounds, and then reproducing them.

Likewise, T2 explains that the impact is also on the pronunciation.

Excerpt 7

> T2: The advantages, in my opinion, are incredible because, more often than not, the comparison helps children memorise the different pronunciations.

While the mention to phonological awareness was referred by teachers to all the students, on some cases, teachers revealed noticing a stronger impact on emergent bilinguals. T7 in Excerpt 8 explains that through these activities emergent bilinguals can avoid the filter of Italian language and directly translate from English to their mother tongue and vice versa, while T6 in Excerpt 9 declares that it allows students to master the language more effectively.

Excerpt 8

> T7: Thinking about it, English is a way to facilitate learning because, in any case, in this situation, the student can self-translate the word into English in their mother tongue. Therefore, they don't have to go through the filter of the Italian language.

Excerpt 9

> T6: It can be useful because if they improve their ability to express themselves in other languages, there is automatically a positive impact on the English language as well. I believe that the impact is always positive on the foreign language, especially English, as it helps them reflect on the differences and similarities between languages, allowing them to master the language more effectively.

5. *Conclusions*

This paper investigated teachers' interactional strategies and their beliefs regarding the incorporation of multilingual pedagogies within the context of EFL instruction in Italian public schools. The analysis of classroom activities revealed two signif-

icant aspects of teachers' practices. First, teachers predominantly integrate multilingual pedagogies through lexicon-related and oral activities. This choice may reflect students' limited proficiency in their home languages, but it also highlights the inherent flexibility of oral tasks. Such activities allow for spontaneous responses to emerging moments in the lesson, making them adaptable to varied classroom contexts. Second, the strategies teachers adopt are centred on fostering multilingual awareness, a fundamental principle of multilingual pedagogy that extends beyond language classes to influence broader educational practices. These findings also connect to the teachers' perceived impact of multilingual approaches. Teachers are more likely to embrace such methods when they recognise clear, positive outcomes in their classrooms. The analysis of teachers' discourse allowed to understand their positive perceptions in terms of adopting these pedagogies in the EFL class. This is in line with previous studies on multilingual pedagogies in EFL classrooms that emphasised the central role of students' mother tongues when it comes to produce EFL written assignments (Turnbull 2019) and stressed the beneficial effect on learners' engagement in EFL endeavours when adopting a multilingual perspective on teaching (Cutrim Schmid 2023).

Despite its exploratory nature and inherent limitations, this study offers valuable insights into how multilingual pedagogies are enacted in EFL settings. A more detailed discussion of additional findings is provided in Facciani and Carbonara (2025). This work highlights the need for continued research to further explore how multilingual approaches can enhance language teaching and learning while supporting more inclusive and flexible educational environments. Future research could further explore the role of teachers in implementing multilingual pedagogies in the EFL classroom, with a particular focus on the centrality of teachers' agency. As this study has highlighted, teachers' beliefs and strategies are crucial for integrating multilingual approaches effectively.

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