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IRENE MICALI

Teaching Minority Languages to Educate Linguistic and Cultural Diversity. A *language Awareness* Perspective

Abstract

This paper examines the teaching of minority languages in Italy from the perspective of Language Awareness. It provides an overview of the current school models used in different regions - including integral bilingualism in Valle d'Aosta, parity approaches in Ladin education in Bolzano, and implementations under Law 482/1999 - highlighting both the resources available and the challenges faced in the minority language education landscape. Drawing on a wide range of literature, the study identifies critical issues such as the lack of a language standard, the scarcity of methodologically sound teaching materials, and inadequacies in teacher training programs. In response, the paper argues for the integration of Language Awareness into teacher professional development as a tool with a dual purpose: to enhance both communicative and linguistic competence and to promote a deeper understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Keywords

Language teaching, Language education, Minority languages, Language awareness.

1. Minority Languages: Resources and Challenges

In Italy the linguistic diversity is the result of historical and sociolinguistic dynamics that have shaped language use across the national territory. The Italian linguistic space is characterized as a rich plurilingualism, comprising the national language, regional dialects, and both officially recognized and non-recognized minority languages (De Mauro 2006). The study of minority languages (Toso 2008, Fiorentini 2022) is characterized by significant terminological complexity, with multiple definitions and overlapping concepts contributing to an intricate research landscape (Fusco 2006). As noted by Toso (2008), the very definition of a minority language remains problematic, as it is influenced by legal, historical, and sociolinguistic factors rather than purely linguistic criteria. In scholarly discourse, the concept of a linguistic minority has traditionally been associated with national identity and state boundaries (Fishman 1991). However, the growing recognition of linguistic diversity has raised the imperative to focus on the valorization and preservation of minority languages through language policy and planning actions (Dell'Aquila, Iannaccaro 2004).

Although Law 482/1999 has filled the normative gap of Article 6 of the Constitution by protecting minority languages, it has shown limitations and problems from the outset (Savoia 2001), configuring itself as a list of twelve languages¹ (Toso 2008) that includes only two regional languages - Friulian and Sardinian - and excludes languages based on the territorial criteria, such as *Romanes*.

Dealing with language education issues related to minority languages can be complex (Micali 2023). No doubt teaching minority languages can contribute to strengthening multilingualism and enriching learners' linguistic heritage from an intercultural perspective. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that a multitude of challenges, to varying extents, are often encountered by minority languages within the Italian school context (Luise, Vicario 2021). These challenges encompass issues such as language-culture teaching, inadequate teaching materials, and insufficient teacher training (Iannaccaro 2010, Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021). Despite some similarities, the teaching of minority languages (LM) differs in terms of theory and methodology from the teaching of mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (L2). Additionally, the lack of consistent school models in the language education literature (Santipolo 2022, Luise 2023) limits the development of concrete and effective educational linguistic and language policy actions.

The present contribution seeks to elucidate the teaching of minority languages by presenting the current school models utilized within the Italian context (see paragraph 2), and discussing the main challenges encountered by teachers, which necessitate a deep reevaluation of their competencies and training (see paragraph 3). In light of these considerations, it is recommended that the professional development of minority language teachers include the integration of "Language Awareness" as a methodological and didactic instrument. This approach is designed to achieve two primary objectives: first, to cultivate communicative and linguistic competencies, and second, to promote an understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity (see paragraph 4).

2. School Models in Italian Context

Following the main European Recommendation² and the provisions of Law 482/1999, the teaching of minority languages must be included in the school curriculum, and the autonomy of the educational proposal may allow for consideration of the linguistic and sociolinguistic specificity of each community. The current "school models" are quite diverse among themselves (Piergigli 2021), just as

¹ The languages protected by the law are Albanian, Catalan, German, Greek, Slovenian, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladino, Occitan, and Sardinian <www.miur.gov.it/lingue-di-minoranza-in-italia> (last accessed December 17, 2024).

² Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages <[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(02\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02))> (last accessed December 17, 2024).

the conditions for implementing national laws and local provisions vary greatly in reality.

Regulations on linguistic minorities are exclusively governed by Law 482 in regions with ordinary statutes. In contrast, regions with special statutes provide greater opportunities for teaching additional languages beyond Italian, due to specific regulations (Iannaccaro 2010).

In Valle d'Aosta, for example, a model of integral bilingualism is adopted. This reflects the condition of *mono-community bilingualism* (Berruto 1995) and provides for the vehicular use of both French and Italian. An equal number of hours are devoted to the teaching of both languages.

In the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, the Ladin school also relies on a parity model that ensures the adoption of Ladin as a curricular subject and vehicular language, particularly in the early years of schooling. Italian and German are introduced later on an equal basis. In Alto Adige and Venezia Giulia, on the other hand, the existence of *bicommunal bilingualism* (Dal Negro, Iannaccaro 2003) corresponds to linguistic separatism: it is possible to attend school in Italian or in German or in Slovenian but it remains compulsory to be taught in Italian or the other co-official language³.

In other minority communities throughout Italy, which are characterized by *dialectal*, *diglossic*, or *dilalic* linguistic repertoires (Iannaccaro, Dell'Acquila 2011), school teaching follows the rules established by Law 482/1999. According to this law, the minority language can be used alongside the standard language in kindergarten and can be taught as both a curricular subject and a vehicle language in primary and secondary schools, based on parental request.

One of the most important issues in teaching minority languages is distinguishing between vehicular and formal teaching. This involves deciding whether to focus on *teaching the* minority language (formal) or *teaching in* the minority language (vehicular). As early as 2006, the European Commission proposed adopting the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology for using regional or minority languages as vehicular language (Eurydice 2006). An example of good practice is the pilot study carried out by D'Angelo (2023), which utilized innovative digital resources to teach Cimbrian, a minority language spoken in the province of Trento. The study employed an approach to *Intercomprehension* between related languages (English and German) and CLIL methodology. Obviously, to apply such a method, which involves teaching curricular subjects through the vehicular use of language, the minority language must have an appropriate status and linguistic tools, such as the use of a standard, norm and specialized language, which are not always easy to identify.

³ In Trentino Alto Adige, Slovenian is not a co-official language, unlike German. However, the special statute of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region "supports measures for education in the Slovenian mother tongue and provides grants to state and parochial schools with Slovenian language instruction" (Piergigli 2021, 16).

It is easy to imagine that while the lack of a language standard, and thus the possibility of configuring as vehicular languages, may not affect national languages such as French, Slovenian or German⁴, its application will be more difficult for those linguistic communities (such as Franco-Provençal and Occitan)⁵ that are configured as true enclaves, characterized by a strong territorial and linguistic detachment from the “mother country,” found in the absence of a *Dachsprache* both inside and outside national borders (Kloss 1978).

A further critical issue is the fact that minority languages primarily have an oral tradition and lack writing standards. Therefore, introducing teaching during curricular hours, (whether optional or compulsory), could have repercussions on the prestige of the language. It may deprive the language “of its characteristic as an *in-group* code of students, in opposition to teachers and the institution”, making it “unwelcome, imposed, or avoided.” (Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021, 49).

The quality of minority language teaching then depends on the availability of appropriate and methodologically sound teaching materials. Even in communities with more virtuous school models, there are grammars and dictionaries, but often no manuals in the minority languages⁶. The use of translations, photocopies, and worksheets provided by teachers is common. However, studying and learning a language using unstructured materials may once again harm its prestige.

3. *Skills and Training of Teachers*

Despite educational programs related to minority languages, introduced by Law 482/1999 and in line with the main European recommendations, teaching proposals vary and often lack continuity (Micali 2023) due to well-known problems: (i) the absence of a language standard (Dal Negro, Guerini, Iannaccaro 2015); (ii) the language-culture teaching; (iii) the lack of teaching training (Bier 2021) and the production of valid and codified teaching materials (Iannaccaro 2010, Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021).

⁴ For Luserna Cimbrian, for example, “the choice has been made to draw on standard German as the *Dachsprache* for the formation of neologisms, which conditions, for example, the rendering in Cimbrian of institutional documents, as well as literary works, and also language education materials that have already been developed or are being developed” (D’Angelo 2023, 79).

⁵ In situations like this, there is a risk of encountering “passive” vehicular use, where teachers use the minority code but learners respond exclusively in the standard language.

⁶ The following is an exception: *Il libri di Maman*, a playful-didactic volume for elementary school used to support Friulian language lessons (Bier 2021, 85); *O libre meu, manuale didattico per l’insegnamento della lingua occitana di Guardia Piemontese, in Calabria* (Micali 2022). Additionally, valuable training materials have been produced for teaching Ladino in the province of Trento by OLFED (Ofize Ladin Formazion e Ennescida Didatica) and for teaching Ladino in the province of Bolzano (Iannaccaro, Fiorentini 2021).

Within minority contexts, the adoption of a language standard and the acceptance of the norm⁷ depend on the recognition of teachers' competence and the quality of educational programs. As Marra (2021, 214) argues, "[...] teachers of a minority language require both disciplinary and methodological preparation, in addition, of course, to adequate competence in the code that is the object and possibly the instrument of instruction." Additionally to the competence in the minority language, quality training must include knowledge of the culture and tradition of the minority linguistic community. However, in the interpretation of the language-culture pair, it is common that teaching practices are geared more toward the recovery and transmission of culture rather than actual language teaching. Instead, except for national languages, such as French and Slovenian, or languages with a wide territorial distribution and a strong sense of cohesion, such as Albanian in Calabria and Ladino in Trentino, it is generally the cultural dimension that prevails in most minority communities present in Italy (Rivoira 2018). Teaching culture emphasizes the essentiality of language as a factor of identity; it represents the recovery of ancient historical memory and traditions. But if this approach can be found in elementary school that is still strongly tied to the family, in secondary school this approach encounters obstacles related to the communicative needs of young speakers. They require the use of new stimuli and modern tools (Videsott, Fiorentini 2020). Furthermore, the complex dynamics of *in-group* and *out-group* identification typical of adolescents, who tend to conform and isolate diversity, need to be managed. The culture teaching should be better integrated in language teaching as well as respond to the pupils' present communicative needs.

A good model for multilingual and intercultural education that aims to enhance a minority language must also presuppose the teacher's ability "[...] to question how it is possible to 'make languages 'dialogue' in educational activities, just as they 'dialogue' internally with the bilingual person." (Daloiso 2022, 145). This competence comes first and foremost through the choice and use of teaching materials, which, as we have seen, is one of the most obvious critical issues in minority language teaching, but also and above all through the ability to integrate the minority language into a broader framework of promoting and developing multilingualism (Luise 2023, 141).

The delineation of the profile required for minority language teachers constitutes a pivotal step in teacher training, as it is imperative to ensure the quality of teaching and the certification of their competencies. Regarding this last aspect, we can also observe that the profound differences among the various minority communities in the country correspond to a considerable discrepancy among the existing proposals and projects for the selection, training and language certification of teachers. It is noteworthy that South Tyrol, Trentino, and Valle d'Aosta have

⁷ Providing a written form for languages that originate from an oral tradition should not be viewed as learning grammar, but rather as a tool for preserving and passing down the unique characteristics of one's language and enabling its use beyond the academic setting, such as in digital contexts (Quochi, Russo, Soria, 2017).

been identified as virtuous models in the field of minority language education. In contrast, the regional contexts of Calabria, Apulia, Sicily, Piedmont, and Veneto demonstrate shortcomings in this regard (Luise, Vicario 2021). There is also no lack of “intermediate” virtuous models, such as those related to the Friulian language, which, through a strong synergy between the Società Filologica Friulana, the Ca’ Foscari University, and the ARLeF (Agenzia Regionale della Lingua Friulana), offers free CLIL training and methodology courses, recognized and accredited by the Regional School Office for Friuli Venezia Giulia, valid for the registration on the regional list of Friulian language teachers (ARLeF, 2019). Similarly, for the Sardinian language, the FILS (Formazione Insegnanti Lingua Sarda) project was implemented between 2011 and 2013 by the University of Cagliari, which included *limba sarda comuna* in its training offer (RAS, 2014).

At this point, the main critical issues affecting the teaching of minority languages in the Italian school context become clear. Equally clear, however, is the need to combine a *top-down* model with a *bottom-up* approach, where the quality of minority language teaching is closely linked to the recognition of teachers’ skills, also from a regulatory point of view.

4. Building Language Awareness: A Resource for Teaching Minority Languages

Teacher education programs have long relied on a consistent number of reflections, recommendations, and pedagogical solutions. Starting from the need to take, as we have seen, into account the specificities and the sociolinguistic contexts in which the different minority languages are embedded, it is necessary to succeed in designing pedagogical and didactic paths through methodologies and approaches that aim, on the one hand, to develop the linguistic-communicative skills of the learners and, on the other hand, to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity. Considering the latter, it seems appropriate to refer to positions that argue for the importance of promoting in language education what James and Garret (1992, 8-12) define as Language Awareness⁸ (LA), refers to an individual’s conscious sensitivity to the nature of language and its role in human communication. This concept is not meant to replace language learning but rather to complement it. The benefits of LA extend across multiple domains, including emotional engagement, social interactions, power dynamics, cognitive development, and language performance.

As Balboni’s work indicates (1999, 20-21), the 1980s saw the emergence of the *Language Awareness* movement in Britain and the *Éveil aux langues*⁹ initiative

⁸ The *Association for Language Awareness* defines it: “as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use”. *Language Awareness* (published by Routledge), the official journal of the *Association for Language Awareness*, has an updated bibliography <www.languageawareness.org> (last accessed December 20, 2024).

⁹ In the *Cadre de Référence pour les Approches Plurielles* or CARAP (Candelier et al. 2012), *Language Awareness*, also known as *Éveil aux langues*, is the approach most oriented toward raising awareness of

in France. Both of these movements advocated for explicit linguistic awareness in education. In Italy, the equivalent term, *Consapevolezza Linguistica*, was adopted, emphasising the need to counterbalance the intuitive teaching methods of the communicative approach. It is important to note that Italy had already established the concept of language reflection in the 1970s, highlighting the role of linguistics and communicative awareness in cognitive development and autonomous learning (De Mauro 2018, GISCEL 1975).

Similar to the multilingual language education experiments conducted in the Italian school context (Andorno, Sordella 2017, 2018), educational activities in the LA perspective on minority languages, in addition to improving learners' language skills, may be able to foster the development of positive representations and attitudes, not only towards languages and their diversity but also to the speakers of these languages and their culture (and in this it is possible to find a point of contact with practices related to the *Intercultural Approach*). LA-oriented approaches aim to stimulate metalinguistic reflection by comparing multiple languages. "Reflecting on language means gaining awareness of the way it is language being used" (Andorno, Sordella 2017, 174). This tool is valuable for teachers as it facilitates the systematic design of teaching modalities with the dual aim of increasing awareness of individual multilingualism and promoting an understanding of the plurality of languages and cultures.

Observing languages and recognizing their diversity can stimulate learners' curiosity about the similarities and differences between different language systems. This can increase their awareness of linguistic phenomena and help them develop metalinguistic and metacognitive skills that are useful for learning. If a language is subject to linguistic reflection within the school context, it can positively impact its prestige, supporting the need to intervene in the perception and representation of minority languages and cultures.

At this point, it is evident that educational systems have the responsibility to implement language policy and language planning actions by adopting teaching practices and strategies that aim to revalue minority languages and reconstruct their *status* from an identity approach.

According to this perspective, *Language Awareness*, in its broadest sense, aligns with the concept of *identity* and is closely linked to it. The language education interventions on Sardinian, Friulian, and Ladino demonstrate the construction of identity and linguistic fidelity. This is essential for protecting languages in minority contexts.

The European Recommendations and Resolutions suggest that member states should "Apply comprehensive approaches to improve teaching and learning of languages at national, regional, local or school level"¹⁰, supporting the development

linguistic and cultural diversity.

¹⁰ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(02\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02)) (last accessed December 17, 2024).

of language policies that promote *Language Awareness* as an effective resource for multilingual learning and a tool for enhancing linguistic diversity. LA-related activities become, in this sense, a cross-curricular dimension of the school curriculum, an integral part of disciplinary teaching, not just language teaching (Santipolo 2018).

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