The BEI-IBI Project:
A Study on the Best Practices
in Integrating Language
and Content Learning in Primary Schools

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1. Introduction

The rapid spread of globalisation, multilingual and multicultural encounters has made an early approach to second language acquisition increasingly important. The Italian education system has been responding to this need by developing different projects and by offering bilingual education programmes even before the coming into force of the Ministerial Decree in 2010 [1] (Coonan 2002; Lucietto and Rasom 2011) Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is aimed at students aged 17-18, thus leaving aside earlier stages of education. A potential solution to filling this gap is represented by the BEI-IBI project, a pilot project 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 (Dobson et al. 2010). The BEI-IBI (Bilingual Education Italy – Insegnamento Bilingue Italia) project involved 6 classes in 6 primary schools across Lombardy, for a period of 5 scholastic years between 2010 and 2015. The project entailed the teaching of three subjects (i.e. Science, Geography, Art) to be delivered in English, which

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[1] DM nr. 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].

was also to be the language for class interaction, to provide a fully immersive educational environment. This chapter aims at presenting the data collected during a monitoring activity on the project completed between January and April 2014 (Bondi et al. 2014) and to 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 BEI-IBI 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. We will then describe the methodologies which have guided the monitoring activity, presenting the subjects involved, the developmental steps of the study, and the analytical tools used in the investigation. Results will focus on motivations, concerns and on the various perspectives emerging from the contributions of the parties involved (i.e. parents, children and teachers). Our conclusions aim at reconciling the outcomes of the monitoring activity with the suggestions for future development of the project arising from the study.

1.1. *The BEI-IBI project: an overview*

The BEI-IBI project is a pilot project for bilingual education in primary schools enacted by the Italian Ministry of Education, the USR Lombardia and the British Council Italy [2]. The project involves 6 schools in Lombardy selected from among 42 schools that had applied:
• Istituto Comprensivo Como Lora-Lipomo (Como);
• Istituto Comprensivo Fermi (Villasanta, Monza Brianza);
• Istituto Comprensivo Ciresola (Milano);
• Istituto Comprensivo Diaz (Milano);
• Istituto Comprensivo via Cialdini Meda (Meda, Monza Brianza);
• Istituto Comprensivo Copernico (Corsico, Milano).
   The BEI-IBI project was devised so as to cover a time span of 5 scholastic years, from 2010/2011 to 2014/2015, in order to guarantee continuity for the entire five-years of primary school for children beginning bilingual education in the first year.

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   [2] *Protocollo d'Intesa tra l'Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per la Lombardia, il Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca - Direzione Generale per gli Ordinamenti e per l'Autonomia Scolastica, e British Council, Italia, in relazione ad un progetto pilota per l'insegnamento bilingue (25/02/2010).* [10/11/2014]. http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/alfresco/d/d/workspace/ SpacesStore/1a0bd00b-e20a-407d-8ed2-996ceb052d03/protocollo_di_intesa_bei.pdf.

The core principle guiding the educational framework of the project was that 25% of the curriculum was to be taught in English, with at least two non-linguistic subjects to be selected from Art, Geography and Science in addition to English Language Literacy, which was already part of the traditional curriculum. The subjects taught in English ranged from 6 to 7 hours of bilingual education per week, thus engaging the children in an immersive learning environment. This ambitious project required teachers to have a mastery of English at least to level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages of the Council of Europe.

2. Plurilingualism and multilingualism: the European context

2.1. *Language policies in the European Union: an overview*

The European Union is founded on the belief of the importance of being "united in diversity", and multingualism is seen as a core aspect of European development. The centrality of issues of multilingualism to the European context is further confirmed by the relevance they were given in both the core 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). Both treaties give prominence to the role of the EU in "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)]"[3].

In particular, the policies of the EU point towards the so-called "Mother Tongue+2" objective, presented in the European Commission's *White Paper on Teaching and Learning, Towards the Learning Society* (1995) and further expanded in the European Commission's communication to the Council *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan* (European Commission 2004). 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

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[3] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_5.13.6.html [10/11/2014].

to be taught two foreign languages at school from an early age (Ruiz de Zarobe 2008, cf. also Egger and Lechner 2012).

EU Member States have thus been encouraged to take on educational programmes which would respond to this need for widespread linguistic proficiency in more than one language, and CLIL methodologies seem to be the most widespread ones. CLIL methodologies are considered a "flexible system which responds to a very wide range of situational and contextual demands" (Coyle 2005, 23). In the next section, an overview 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 pilot project that is the object of our study.

2.2. *Educational approaches to multilingualism*

A wide variety of educational approaches has 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 contributed significantly to increasing language knowledge and awareness by engaging students from an early stage of their education.

2.2.1. CLIL: content and language integrated learning

The widespread incorporation of CLIL in curricula pertaining to different educational systems can be ascribed to its qualities of flexibility and transferability across countries, continents and type of schools (Coyle et al. 2010). CLIL has been variously defined: Coyle et al. (2010, 1) claim that CLIL is a "dual-focused educational approach" constantly balancing attention on content and language, without systematically privileging one over the other. They argue for the role of CLIL as "an alternative approach for using language to learn" (ibid., 35) and highlight how "using language to learn is as important as learning to use language" (ibidem).

The main characteristic 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, 2).

Among the strengths of CLIL approaches, Ruiz de Zarobe (2008) mentions the fact that they create conditions for naturalistic language learning, thus also improving communicative competence (cf. also Met 1998; Marsh and Langé 1999; Marsh and Marshland 1999). Moreover, she highlights that such approaches involve the learner in using the language of learning for learning and through learning (see also Coyle 2000; Coyle et al. 2010, 36-37). Moreover, she points out how CLIL approaches increase students' and teachers' motivation and interest levels (Grabe and Stoller 1997; Pavesi et al. 2001) by diversifying methods and forms of classroom teaching and learning.

2.2.2. Immersion programmes

Immersion programs 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, 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" (ibidem). Such programmes are thus quite different from CLIL ones, and involve a higher percentage of target language instruction than the BEI-IBI project. Nonetheless, they are similar to the BEI-IBI project in terms of their objective, i.e. to achieve a 'language bath', making the children thoroughly experience an immersive environment. In fact, the BEI-IBI project largely fulfils the requirements for immersive programs outlined by Johnson and Swain (1997) and quoted in Cummins (1998, 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, 86). 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 had 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 industrialised 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 in the search for employment (Artigal 1997, 134).

The most evident difference between the immersive programmes described above – set in bilingual contexts – and the BEI-IBI 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 BEI-IBI one.

2.3. *Bilingual education in Europe: Bilingual Education Project Spain*

Besides immersive programmes in the Catalan region, in Spain another important multilingual educational experience was introduced, namely, the BEP (Bilingual Education Project Spain). The BEP was developed in Spain by means of an agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science and the British Council in 1996. The aim 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 aims 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.

Moreover, the BEP was meant to facilitate the exchange of teachers and children as well as to encourage the use 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, 12). Among the innovative 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% of each week at school, allowing pupils to learn a number of subjects through English, such as Science, History and Geography, thus diverging from immersive programmes providing more than 50% of instruction in the target language. From the beginning, there was agreement with the secondary schools involved that when the BEP pupils entered secondary education, they would continue to receive bilingual instruction. The BEP was clearly what inspired the BEI-IBI project, but substantial differences exist between the two projects, as this analysis will point out.

In order to introduce Italian actors to the practices of 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. Subsequently, 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 note 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. The BEI-IBI monitoring research: methodological remarks

3.1. *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. Moreover, the team included a representative of the Italian Ministry of Education and a representative of the British Council Italy, who provided feedback and supervision.

3.1.1. Developmental stages and aims of the monitoring activity

The project was completed between January and April 2014, following different steps. To begin with, the UNIMORE research team developed a questionnaire on the basis of the one designed by the Ministry of Education targeted at CLIL teachers in Italian secondary schools. Secondly, a preliminary meeting with the teachers in charge of the project in the 6 schools was organised, so as to validate the questionnaire, which was subsequently implemented by the Ministry of Education and administered to the 46 teachers who were the focus of the study via the web-based platform SurveyMonkey. Thirdly, interviews were carried out by the UNIMORE research team with the 6 headmasters before proceeding to analyse the data provided by the questionnaire. Data gathering also included focus groups involving teachers, pupils and parents. The focus groups were conducted as semi-structured interviews by the members of the UNIMORE research team, following a set of questions aimed at encouraging 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 were aimed at testing both spoken and written abilities. The UNIMORE research team, under the supervision of both the Ministry and the British Council Italy completed the activity by drafting both a synthetic final report and an extended final report. In *Table 1* the tools mentioned above 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 designed to explore teachers' motivation, practices of curriculum and materials design and strategies for implementing bilingual education. Moreover, teachers' training needs and the impact of the BEI-IBI 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 tasks, both spoken and written, consisted of a structured picture description. The pictures provided were meant as stimuli for content communication in the foreign language, so as to test both content knowledge and language proficiency. The aim of the monitoring activity was to provide a comprehensive overview of the outcomes of the project so far, taking into account the manifold perspectives of the subjects involved, i.e. pupils, parents and teachers. Specifically, the monitoring activity was targeted at exploring their motivation and attitude towards bilingual education, focussing on best practices in teaching and on the integrated competence acquired by pupils through bilingual education. Moreover, the research sets out to suggest best practices and guidelines to implement similar bilingual education projects in primary schools beyond the limitations of the pilot experience.

3.2. *Online questionnaire results: focus on the teachers*

In the following sections we summarise some of the most relevant outcomes of the questionnaire, which was completed by 46 teachers. Our focus will be in particular on the 'prototypical' teacher's profile emerging from the answers we received.

3.2.1. The BEI-IBI teacher: a profile

To begin with, it is interesting to trace a profile of the teachers involved in the pilot project. They appear to be experienced professionals with an average age ranging from 46 to 55 (46% of the respondents) and a length of service ranging, on average, from 21 to 30 years (24%). They have taught in the same classes with a certain degree of continuity during the four years of the project (67%). The majority of them holds a Master's degree (54%), of which 20% in Foreign Languages. International certifications of language proficiency are quite common, with 76% of the teachers claiming to have one. The minimum required level of proficiency for the teachers as established by the Ministry of

Education is B2 [4]. However, only 38% of the teachers possesses a B2 certification, while another 38% possesses a certification for the B1 level. 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.

3.2.2. Resources and materials

BEI-IBI teachers have been asked to describe the resources and materials available in their schools for them to use in their everyday activities. Interestingly, a central role in the project is played by the classroom itself, considered more than just a room, but rather a comprehensive learning environment. Across the six schools the situation differs according to space availability and number of children involved, but teachers have stated that either a lab or a special classroom are dedicated to BEI-IBI instruction or, in some cases, the classroom is set up to become the core of the immersive learning experience. For example, posters and flash cards are hung on the classroom walls to form a permanent learning support. Interestingly, 50% of the teachers claimed to have increased their use of visual supports in order to create an immersive environment. In addition, IT technologies play a key role in the class: the interactive whiteboard is extensively exploited, granting valuable access to multimedia resources (e.g. slideshow presentations, audio files, online teaching resources).

The immersive environment is further reinforced by the presence of the mother tongue language assistant, who is present in the classroom 12 hours per week. It is important to signal that only 2 schools out of the 6 involved have been assigned a language assistant from the Ministry. As a consequence, in order to offer the same learning opportunity to their students, other schools have asked for the collaboration of English speaking parents, COMENIUS exchange trainees and non-profit organisations promoting language learning.

3.2.3. Teachers instructional design and mode of implementation

In order to investigate the practices of instructional design and of the implementation of the bilingual education framework, teachers were requested to provide information on curriculum and materials design, as well as on preferred classroom activities. As far as curriculum design is

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[4] DM nr. 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]

concerned, they claimed that a significant portion of it 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 BEI-IBI team. Only 14% of the teachers stated that curriculum design was usually accomplished in the context of general meetings, organised by the USR Lombardia. Materials development emerged as one of the major challenges they faced, as no textbooks are available for this kind of programme. Therefore, they are compelled to find alternatives in order to convey the disciplinary content pertaining to their specific subject.

The questionnaire shed light on the creative process, highlighting different possibilities, which were not mutually exclusive. *Figure 1*, below, shows how in the majority of cases, teachers personally develop original materials, in order to fit the school curriculum (25%). At the same time, 23% of teachers claimed that they are sometimes able to adapt existing resources to their needs, thus reducing the workload of lesson planning. Materials development in the context of the BEI-IBI school team, either from scratch or by adapting pre-existing resources, seems to be less frequent (18% in both cases). Teachers seem to benefit from materials developed by the regional project group (again, both in terms of original and adapted materials) to a limited extent (7% in both cases). Interestingly, only 2% of the teachers report having been able to use materials provided by colleagues from other schools involved in the project, thus suggesting a low level of networking. This datum was then discussed in the focus groups with the teachers, who mentioned, among the reasons for this low rate of cooperation, two main factors: first, a widespread reluctance to share materials with little likelihood that others will be eager to reciprocate, thus feelings of 'exploitation' and, secondly, the fact that the web-based platform that was made available was not working properly, which discouraged its use.

In class, teachers had the opportunity of collaborating with a mother tongue language assistant, either recruited from the Ministry of Education or, when not possible, by the school itself. Teachers indicated that the presence of the mother tongue language assistant was a significant contribution to the implementation of the project, and the majority of them reported close collaboration with and support from the language assistant.

There seems to be a tendency to favour modes of teaching aimed at directly engaging the pupils. Teachers claim to focus on oral language skills, foregrounding listening activities and interaction. *Figure 2*, below, depicts the range of activities teachers implement in their everyday classroom routines. The data confirm that activities based on oral skills have a prominent role in bilingual education.
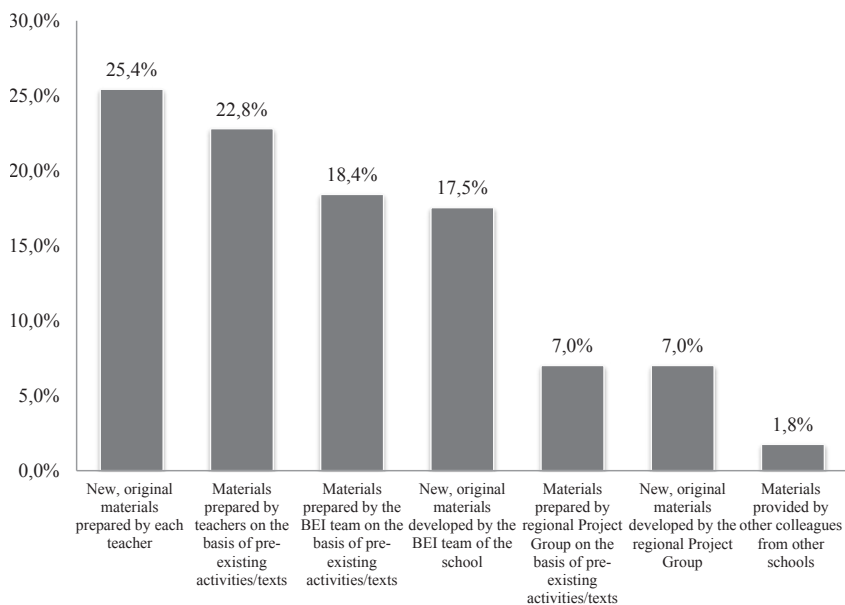
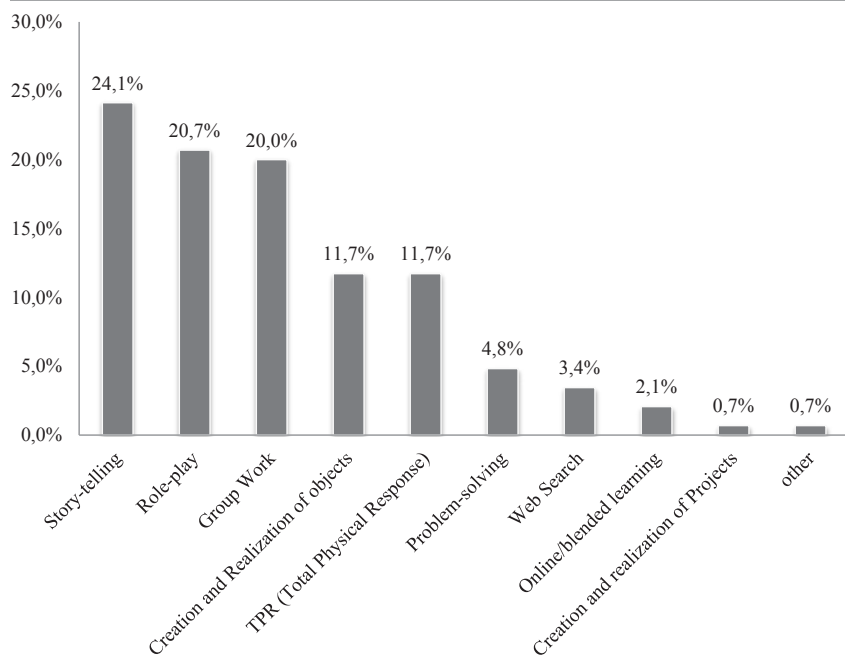*Figure 1. – Teaching materials production and design.*

Figure 2. – Modes of teaching and learning.

Storytelling seems to be the most widely used mode of teaching (24.1%), while role-play and group-work represent jointly the second most popular category of activities, and attest to the great importance of interaction in a bilingual education context. Children are thus personally engaged in the cooperative construction of disciplinary knowledge, while at the same time practicing the language. Pupil involvement in the classroom is realised not only by means of spoken interaction but also by asking them to realise objects and small craftworks (11.7%) or to take part in activities based on TPR (Total Physical Response) (11.7%). TPR activities are led by the teacher that associates words with movements the children are asked to reproduce. With reference to this, it is important to mention the *Jolly Phonics* method for teaching the sounds of the English language [5]. This method associates a movement to 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 is an important part of this pilot project, as teachers make extensive use (where possible) of interactive whiteboards, which can provide full multimedia support.

3.2.4. Teachers training

Both already existing activities aimed at training teachers in BEI-IBI teaching methodologies and perceived needs expressed by the interviewees in the questionnaire were investigated in the study. Teachers reported that an introductory training course (lasting 6 to 4 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 organises 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 has been provided by some schools to their teachers, but seems not to have been part of a more comprehensive initiative. Interestingly, language

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[5] Further information available at: http://www.jollylearning.co.uk/overview-about-jolly-phonics/.

training is one of the most requested of the envisaged training activities (as shown below in *Fig. 3*), with 19% of the interviewees expressing a preference for this kind of support.

The only training activities receiving more preferences than language training were workshops focusing on interaction and providing classroom-ready materials that 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 might be interpreted in relation to the stability of teachers who have been known to work with the same classes for long periods.
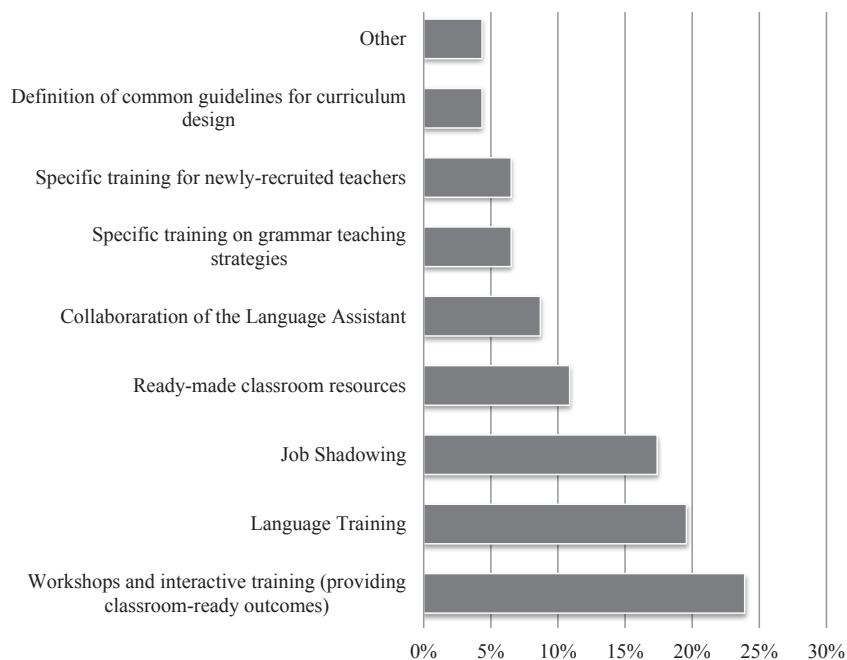

Figure 3. – Envisaged training activities.

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

This section discusses the outcomes of the semi-structured interviews that revealed the perspective of the different parties involved in the project (e.g. pupils, parents, teachers and headmasters). Specifically, it reports on their motivations for joining the project and on their concerns about it.

3.3.1. Concerns about the BEI-IBI project

All the participants in the study expressed their personal concerns about the project, according to their own degree of involvement. Pupils said that their initial concerns lay mainly with an increased study load and with a possible increased difficulty in learning a subject in a different language. The latter concern was also expressed by the parents, who also claimed they were worried about their 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 worried about not being able to help their children studying and doing homework. A second concern parents voiced was connected to Italian teachers using English in class: many feared that children might acquire incorrect pronunciation due to the influence of the teachers' non-native accent. Over the years, moreover, parents complained about the lack of a consistent approach towards grammar teaching, and that children were not taught a systematic study method, being thus potentially penalised in the following stages of their education. In addition, a lack of official textbooks was considered odd by the parents, who envisaged a clearer study reference for their children.

Teachers focussed on their difficulties with school colleagues working outside the project: they state that it may be advisable 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. Nonetheless, some pointed out a possible loss in the status of the traditional methodology brought about by such an immersive project as the BEI-IBI one.

3.3.2. Joining the BEI-IBI project: motivations

All the actors involved in the project seemed to share a positive opinion on the project, in terms of the advantages brought by early contact with

L2. Families were strongly motivated in that they saw the project as an opportunity for their children to begin learning a second language at an early age, thus acquiring a more open-minded perspective on the world. Teachers highlighted the benefits of bringing children into contact with L2 at an early age and in particular the benefits of an innovative teaching and learning methodology, such as the immersive environment that characterises the BEI-IBI project. On the other hand, headmasters widened the scope of the outcomes of the project to include local communities. In fact, the BEI-IBI project, promoting the use of English as a *Lingua Franca*, enabled schools located in suburbs or in difficult neighbourhoods to achieve greater integration of children with different linguistic backgrounds. The project helped to raise empathy among children with different nationalities, cultures and mother tongues, increasing equal learning opportunities, increasing schools' prestige, with a positive influence on the schools' surrounding areas as well.

Teachers highlighted aspects of personal and professional improvement, since the BEI-IBI experience has been perceived as a positive challenge by many and, interestingly, also by those who were approaching retirement when the project started. There seems to be a widespread sense among the teachers of feeling personally enriched and professionally empowered by the opportunity to take part in the project.

3.3.3. Pupils' perspective

The discussion with the children showed their extraordinary motivation and ability to clearly identify examples of acquired skills and of classroom activities. Children are aware of being part of a pilot project and are excited about this experience with English: they claimed they felt "lucky and privileged". During the study, pupils have been asked to describe the activities they do in class and they have demonstrated their ability to report on their everyday classroom experiences in Italian with no apparent lack of mastery of the disciplinary content and vocabulary and expressing themselves with ease in both languages. Moreover, they showed appreciation for the opportunity to share acquired skills during the focus groups, autonomously deciding to sing songs learned in class or to show the researcher their notebooks, drawings and materials.

Children reported various memorable and satisfactory activities for each discipline. Their answers highlighted their appreciation of practical activities such as experiments, group work, poster preparation, songs,

drawing, interactive activities in general and multimedia presentations (typically used in the context of Sciences, Geography and Arts teaching). They also liked more language-oriented tasks, frequent in the context of literacy teaching, such as storytelling, reading, grammar learning (which is perceived as useful for "constructing sentences"), together with the use of interactive methods such as 'matching cards'. Children (as well as their parents) confirmed that they generally do their homework alone, and only ask parents "who speak English" for help when they find it difficult. They claim to browse the Web and to use new technologies (e.g. tablets) autonomously, in the main using such tools to check the meaning of new words, even though traditional study tools (e.g. dictionaries) are also used.

4. Summing up

In general, the attitude of the parents towards the project is extremely positive 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 BEI-IBI 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 concern expressed by all teachers, pupils, parents and headmasters lies with 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 to a regression. Moreover, the traditional teaching methodologies children might encounter in further educational stages may lead to a loss of interest on the part of pupils used to the BEI-IBI teaching approach. In general, the need to define guidelines for the transition to higher stages of education was highlighted by all the parties.

4.1. *Educational outcomes*

A written and spoken task were submitted to the children. In both cases, children were shown a picture and asked to describe it by means of a guided, semi-structured set of questions (see Appendixes 1 and 2).

The investigation of the links between our results and the previous studies focussing on interlanguage and second language acquisition in

children (cf. Selinker et al. 1975) goes beyond the scope of the present chapter. Further research will shed light on the acquisition processes emerging from the data collected during this study.

4.1.1. Written task: strengths and weaknesses

The analysis of the tasks has shown that children are able to provide simple and direct information adding some notes of personal characterisation. Any formal errors do not affect the clarity of the message, putting the pupils' language proficiency as level A2 CEFR (Basic/Waystage). Furthermore, pupils tend to use visual aids not for decorative purposes, but to better illustrate their point in answering the question, with the intent to summarise or to exemplify. *Figure 4* shows this process in action: the child, in order to demonstrate her knowledge of the morphology of the volcano, has drawn the volcano itself, with arrows connecting the names of the different parts to the drawing. Moreover, before listing the various types of volcanoes she knows, she draws them so as to better reinforce her argument and provide evidence for her claims. In the end, she describes the different animals and vegetation that characterise the volcano, distinguishing different zones both in writing and in drawing.

A certain degree of linguistic creativity emerges from the written tasks, specifically in the creation of words such as 'versant' for the Italian *versante*. Nonetheless, all pupils (including the less proficient ones) showed an ability to draft a text, characterised by elements of cohesion combined with simple sequences articulated thematically. As can also be seen in in *Figure 4*, there seems to be a widespread tendency towards generalisation, with pupils consistently omitting plural markers (e.g. "I can see fox, deer squirrel and woods") and third person singular markers in the present tense, thus adopting a single verb form for all people (e.g. "magma push up"). On the other hand, phenomena of overcorrection, e.g. the presence of the 3rd person singular 's' with plural subjects or with the verb in its base form have been noticed across a range of tasks (e.g. "Inside this there is magma that can erupts on the earth's crust called lava"). The analysis also revealed deviations in spelling, such as words written by trying to reproduce their sound, as shown in *Figure 5*, where the child wrote *togheder* instead of 'together' and *roch* instead of 'rock'.
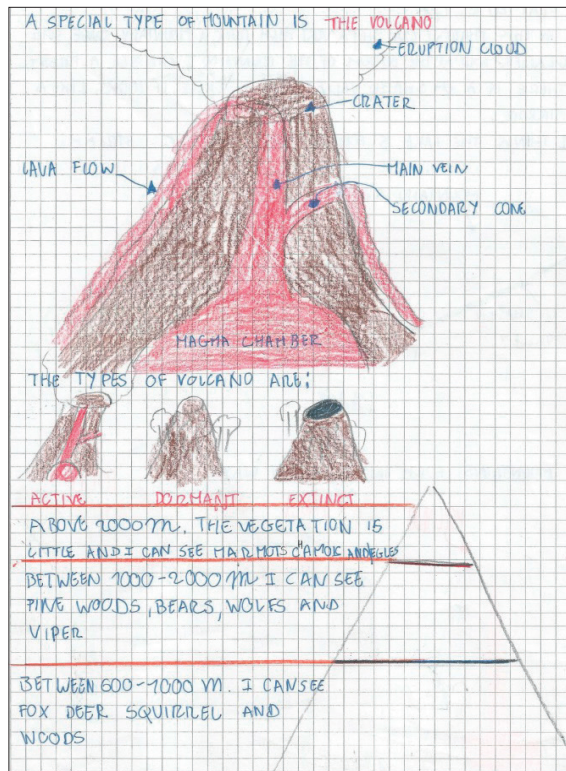
Figure 4. – Example of a written task.

Figure 5. – Example of a written task/2.

4.1.2. Oral task: strengths and weaknesses

In general, pupils are able to pronounce the sounds of English correctly and accurately, even though fluency prevails over accuracy. Let us consider, for example, pupil A in the flowing example. She manages to point out the elements in the picture (river, mountains, water), but with inaccuracies at the level of syntax ("[...] a river and mountains landscape"). Moreover, she answers the teacher's question "What can you see in this picture?" by focusing on the element of water which she describes in detail, adding pre-existing geographical knowledge but repeatedly using the same introductory sentence and evaluative lexicon ("[...] is very important"):

> [Teacher] What can you see in this picture?
> [Pupil A] In this picture I can see a river and mountains landscape. The water for agriculture.
> [T: for agriculture] Is very important [...] is very important for vegetables needs water for grow.
> [T: to grow] The water is very important for a farmer of the world.
> [T:] Of the world. Ok, thank you.

As shown in the transcript above, phrases and sentences appropriate to the situation emerge from the oral task sample. However, this oral production is characterised by frequent repetitions, with limited attempts at personalising speech. Sentences are limited in length, but the pupil is, nonetheless, able to make connections between her previous knowledge and the new information she can retrieve from the picture.

4.1.3. Overall considerations

All pupils possess a good command of the subject content. Even children with special educational needs (BES) participated and were able to express themselves, describing the images briefly and concisely. Nevertheless, a need to integrate fluency and accuracy emerged from the study of the tasks, together with a need to include elements of awareness and meta-linguistic reflection, with a special reference to the structure of sentences. It is important to notice that the level of competence shown by the majority of the samples is A2. This is significant, since the goal for primary school pupils of the same age is usually level A1[6].

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[6] A detailed description of the language structures used by pupils in the samples is provided in Bondi et al. 2014, 62.

5. Conclusions

The increasingly multicultural environment we experience nowadays and the pervasiveness of globalisation have had a significant impact on the educational environment, which has in turn 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. From an educational point of view, this 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 requirements of a global linguistic environment, and bilingual education programmes are seeking to provide an answer to this growing demand. The BEI-IBI project sets out to prepare children to face the challenge of internationalisation, 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, all of whom expressed their concern that a valuable initiative may risk being a one-off experience. As a consequence, in order to address the misgivings of 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 fostered by such an immersive experience. It can be said, therefore, that the project has not only changed the teaching practices and materials used in the classes involved, but also encouraged a rethink of the entire curriculum of the schools involved. Nonetheless, a number of problems have arisen, such as the difficulty in finding classroom-ready materials for the implementation of the project, resulting in an increased workload for teachers who need to devise their own materials. Moreover, teachers stressed the importance of constant development of their own communicative competence by implementing new forms of teacher training. In order to improve the sustainability of the project and, possibly, to

promote its extension, it seems that two core issues need to be addressed: 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 by supporting initiatives of lifelong learning.

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Appendix 1 – Written task

Look at the picture and describe what you see. You can write about:
• the origins of mountain;
• the types of mountains you know;
• any special type of mountain;
• the animals and plants you can find in the mountains.

Appendix 2 – Spoken task

Look at the picture and describe what you see. You can talk about:
• where the water you can see in the picture comes from;
• where it goes;
• the important role this water plays in our daily lives.

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