

# *The European, International, Intercultural and Pluri-Linguistic Component of Quality in Education: A “Generational” Right to Education*

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## **Discussant for the talks given by Rosemary Salomone and Gisella Langé**

My contribution focuses on three main topics presented in the two talks given by Salomone and Langé. I propose them again under three general questions that I will structure in more parts, trying to suggest some traces for possible answers.

### **1. Are all languages equal (or are some languages more equal than others)?**

All languages are equal in documents (or in rhetoric, as Salomone said), but not in reality (or in documents' application). Despite increased efforts to promote multilingualism at all levels throughout Europe, there is a constant growth in the use of English as *lingua franca*, at the expense of other languages.

A relevant loss is evident in the scientific area. The influence of English in science's language extends beyond what is printed on the page of a research paper. With English as a "guardian" of scientific discourse, scientists of other cultural backgrounds risk to lose their unique ways of communicating ideas.

Moreover, the position of English L2 is becoming stronger and stronger in schools and in universities and there is a danger that the EU formula "mother tongue plus two" is replaced by "mother tongue plus a language and a half", or "mother tongue plus a language", since some learners feel that the other language is less important when English has been learned.

A deeply rooted hierarchy of languages is evident in the EU linguistic policy, according to one of the documents mentioned by Salomone, the *Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism. Policy Recommendations for the Promotion of Multilingualism in the European Union*. This document, published in 2011 during the Orban Presidency of the EU Commission. Suzanne Romaine (2013, 115) recognizes the *Platform* as "the most far-reaching and ambitious policy document issued by the European Commission".

In presenting my remarks I will give a particular emphasis to this document. I start quoting one of the many paragraphs of the *Platform* (p. 6), where the equal importance of all languages is expressed clearly:

All languages that are in regular use by a community, whether territorial or Diaspora, are important and should be included in language policy; not just the official working languages of the European Union. This includes among others less-widely used languages, languages of immigrant communities, minority

languages. This will help guarantee Europe's cultural diversity as well as the basic human rights of all citizens.

Diversity is difficult to combine with unity: therefore a key issue is how to balance the needs of efficient communication with the need to protect and promote cultural and linguistic diversity. Such problem can be dealt with, as the *Platform* proposes, only under an organic, common, systematic EU language plan (p. 15):

Language policy is and should remain a competence of national and regional bodies in the first place, but there is a need for complementary tasks and coordination on a European level.

Although many recommendations on multilingualism exist, they do not form a "coherent legally binding language policy for the EU". Salomone notices that EU policies have been vague and lack enforcement power; to put it metaphorically: "many ingredients are present, but there is no recipe." (*Platform*, p. 16)

In order to promote the interest for languages other than English, the *Platform* (p. 9) recommends a coordinated public information campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of multilingualism throughout the EU Member States. This information campaign should particularly focus on information on the benefits of multilingualism, which are extended to learning all languages, especially at an early age. The functional learning from a very young age of intercultural and multilingual competences should be promoted not only in school curricula, but also in preschool programs. Parents, teachers, and pupils need to be informed that early learners are much more likely to develop multilingual competences. They need to be informed that Early Language Learning (ELL) helps children develop language awareness, which is also the base for a good "academic language".

Recent research has also illustrated the cognitive advantages of bilingualism for children regularly exposed to two languages and motivated to use them. These advantages include better results at abstract reasoning and a better control on attention (in other terms: easier inhibition of irrelevant information and misleading stimuli). Since these cognitive benefits are possible when children are bilingual, and not when they simply learn another language, they represent a good reason to attribute greater value to local, regional and home languages.

Given the importance of ELL, language teachers working with young children must have special qualifications and they should be prepared to teach to young and very young learners. Teacher training is a very important challenge for kindergarten educators because many of the differences between advantaged and non-advantaged learners have their roots in the preschool period.

In order to support and promote languages and cultures brought into the classroom by each single pupil, a transformation is needed to turn classes where languages are simply taught into multilingual classes, whereby every language becomes an opportunity and linguistic diversity

becomes a crucial part of curricula.

## 2. Is it possible to combine linguistic diversity with high levels of school performances?

In this section I focus on a specific example of linguistic diversity, which is represented by the nearly 200 languages spoken in Europe by students with migrant families. During the school year 2013-14, 803.059 SMF attended Italian schools. 283.233 of them were I generation migrants; 415.182 (51,7%) were II generation migrants born in Italy. The most highly represented countries were Romania, Albania, Morocco, China (<http://www.ismu.org/2014/11/come-e-cambiata-la-nostra-scuola/>)

The school achievements of these students are sharply lower than those of native Italian students, as fig. 1 and fig. 2 show.

Fig. 1. School failures; [http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/Miur\\_2012\\_2013.pdf](http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/Miur_2012_2013.pdf)

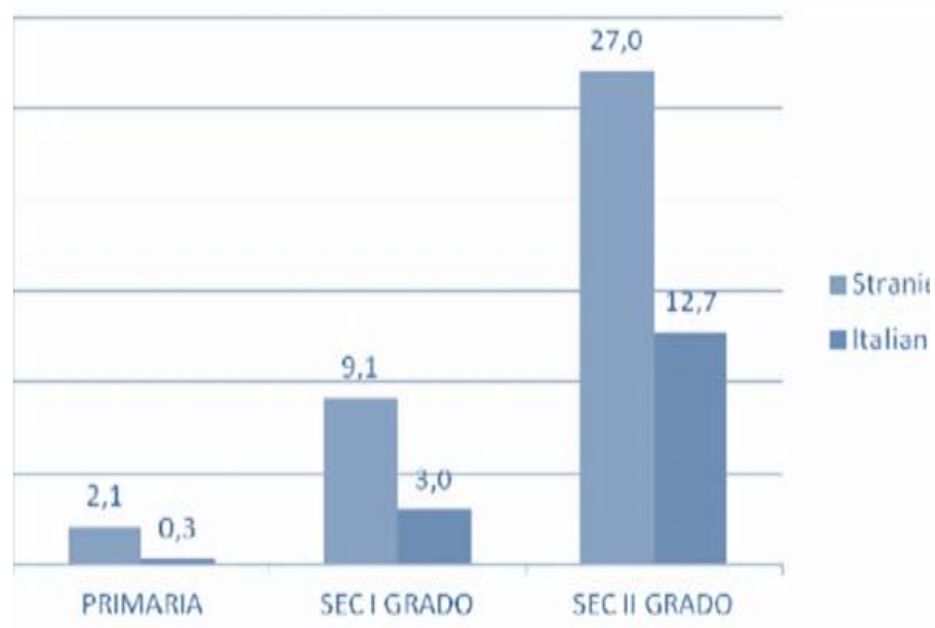
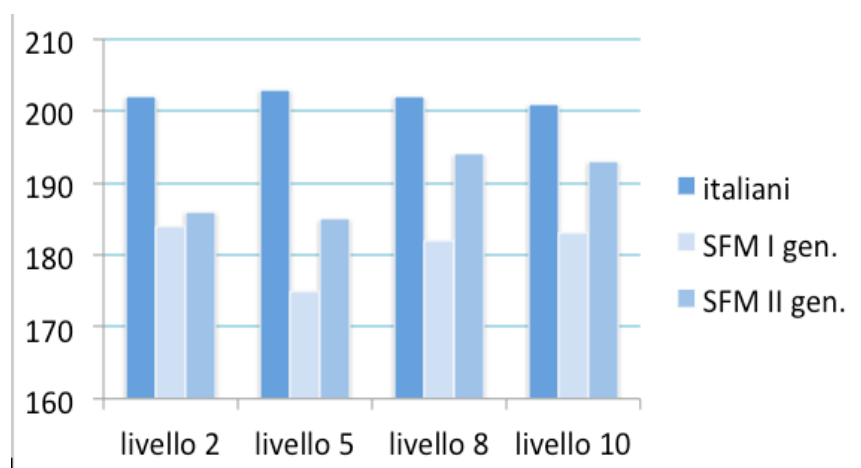


Fig. 2 Invalsi- reading task results (2013-14) Invalsi, *Ocse-Pisa 2012, Rapporto nazionale*, [http://www.invalsi.it/areaprove/rapporti/Rapporto\\_Rilevazioni\\_Nazionali\\_2014.pdf](http://www.invalsi.it/areaprove/rapporti/Rapporto_Rilevazioni_Nazionali_2014.pdf)



The differences shown in the two figures can only partially be explained by social, cultural and economical reasons. Linguistic diversity plays a relevant role, since bilingual speakers of heritage languages in most cases do not have a stable and balanced bilingualism: their original language grammar presents changes, variation and gaps at any level. Heritage languages tend to simplify, and the linguistic acquisition is rarely complete. This is mainly because of a limited linguistic input, which remains under the minimum threshold. (Montrul 2013).

When the first language does not develop, the development of the second language is equally impossible. For this reason I am not sure about the effectiveness of the timing proposed by Salomone for the gradual introduction of three languages in the curriculum of migrant pupils: first the host country language, second English, third the home language. As a matter of fact, a limited development of L1 blocks the development of any other language.

The balance between the preservation of migrants' mother tongues and the learning of the language of the majority is a very crucial and delicate point. There is a need for clear and fair language policies for immigrant languages, so that immigrants are helped to integrate by learning the languages of their host societies, but also to give value and to transmit their mother tongues within their families. In this regard, the special role of literacy, including also passive reading, should be recalled. This helps achieving a more complete linguistic development of young migrant children.

Also giving correct and complete information is crucial. A recent report from the Netherlands (OECD 2010) suggests the following guidelines:

- A. parents must be informed on the role that ELL plays on higher performance in school;
- B. parents need to know which schools offer which pathways for their children and what are the strengths and weaknesses of alternative schools. Municipalities should provide to all parents clear and timely information on school choice and enrolment. Such information should be available in selected foreign languages as well as in the language of the host country, and

should be accessible to parents with limited literacy. In Austria, for instance, the Ministry for Education created a DVD, which informs parents on different issues about their child's schooling and importantly how to get involved with other parents and existing initiatives. The Ministry also publishes information folders on school in different languages and sends these to school boards.

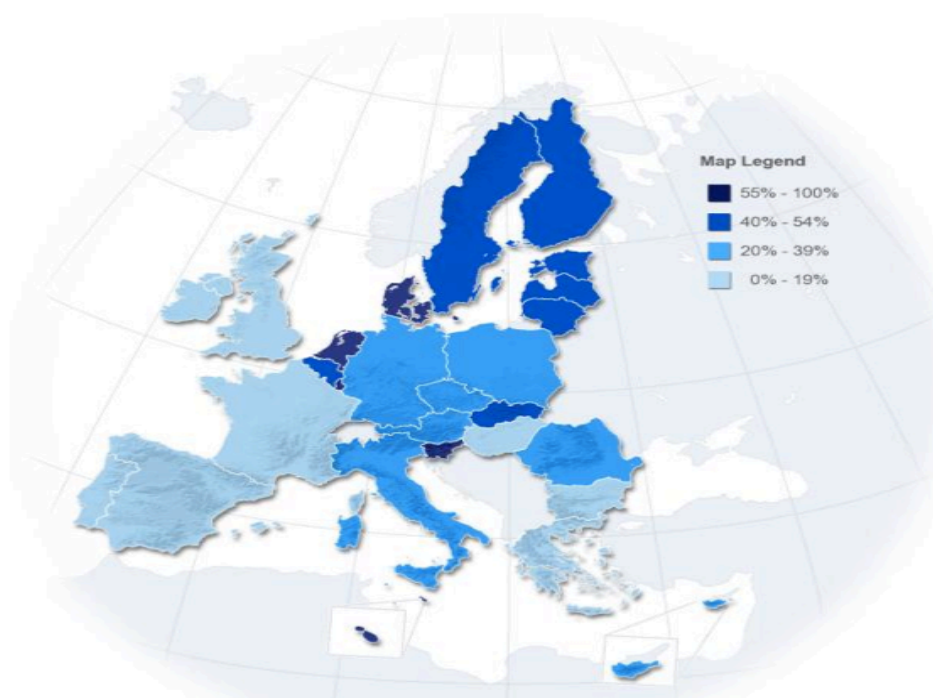
I would also add a third point:

C. when children with a migrant family enter school, monitoring their linguistic uses is necessary. This knowledge is the first step towards proposing effective instruments and helping learners to improve their competence.

### 3. How much input is required for a good level in L2?

We have heard by Salomone about the data reported by the Eurobarometer statistics of 2012. These data show the low level of competence for languages other than L1 in Europe. A synthesis of these data is represented in the following map (*Special Eurobarometer 386*).

Question: D48T2. Languages that you speak well enough in order to be able to have a conversation - TOTAL  
Answers: At least 2



Considering the general lack of a communicative competence in languages other than L1, I wish to focus my last remarks on the role of linguistic input. Bilingualism requires a minimum quantity of input (not less than 25%) and a minimum quality of input (variation in exposition to language, in communicative contexts, in language registers...). Similarly, learning a second language requires some conditions on input quantity and input quality. For this reason languages cannot be taught only at school: civil society, public services and the media can and should be involved in the implementation of language policy.

Table 1 How often do you use your (FIRST OTHER LANGUAGE)?





























	Every day/almost every day	Often but not on a daily basis	Occasionally	Don't know
 EU27	24%	23%	50%	3%
 BE	29%	27%	44%	0%
 BG	18%	29%	49%	4%
 CZ	10%	29%	60%	1%
 DK	41%	25%	33%	1%
 DE	26%	22%	50%	2%
 EE	34%	30%	34%	2%
 IE	22%	21%	51%	6%
 EL	15%	31%	54%	0%
 ES	44%	21%	32%	3%
 FR	19%	24%	55%	2%
 IT	9%	26%	61%	4%
 CY	39%	26%	35%	0%
 LV	44%	24%	31%	1%
 LT	22%	25%	49%	4%
 LU	67%	17%	16%	0%
 HU	15%	27%	57%	1%
 MT	49%	23%	28%	0%
 NL	31%	32%	37%	0%
 AT	12%	24%	58%	6%
 PL	11%	24%	59%	6%
 PT	7%	23%	68%	2%
 RO	20%	25%	51%	4%
 SI	23%	27%	49%	1%
 SK	18%	29%	51%	2%
 FI	33%	24%	42%	1%
 SE	38%	23%	39%	0%
 UK	28%	10%	60%	2%

Table 1 (*Special Eurobarometer 386*) reports the percentage of the replies to the question "How often do you use your first other language?" in EU countries. Twenty-four is the average percentage for the reply "every day". Only nine is the percentage for this reply in Italy.

I would like to conclude by proposing again one central question raised by Salomone: *Can an average student succeed in learning 2 languages in addition to his/her L1?*

My reply is yes, if:

- learning starts early
- learning is helped by well trained teachers
- learning has a strong social support (by this term I mean positive attitudes of families and rich extra school input).

However, in reality the problem is much more complex. In fact, the original question generates two others:

- *Can an average student succeed in learning 2 languages in addition to his/her L1 and to the L of the host country?* (for instance an Albanian student in Italy with German and English as school foreign languages in addition to Italian).
- *Can an average student succeed in learning 2 languages in addition to his/her L1 and to the 2 L of the host country (national and historical minority)?* (for instance an Albanian student in Fassa school with German and English as school foreign languages in addition to Italian and Ladin).

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