

An Italian Case: Students with a Foreign Background in IVET and the Access to Italian as Second Language

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Abstract

The article is based on a study carried out in 2014-2015 by the administration of nearly 3600 questionnaires on a sample equally distributed among Italian students and pupils with foreign origins in Initial Vocational Education and Training-IVET in six Italian regions. The text examines the survey data related to the ownership and use of the Italian language and of different dialects for the students of foreign origins. Starting from the research evidence, some proposals for the strengthening of the Italian language for young people with foreign origins are suggested. A bibliography reference, per author, and in relation to the issues of intercultural education, Italian second language, active citizenship, integration and inclusion, is annexed.

Keywords: Young people of foreign origin; Italian as second language

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Introduction and context

This paper is based on the results of a quantitative survey (2014-2015) with 1840 foreign students and 1835 Italian students attending classes in the framework of the Initial Vocational Education and Training (hereinafter IVET), in six Italian Regions, from the North to the South. The use of foreign languages, Italian and dialects is a central issues in the survey, in relation to the development of a multi-cultural and cross-cultural identity, and as a bridge to link the themes of localism to those of global migration. (L. Daniele, 2015).

As for the contextual data, we have that the IVET in 2013-14 educational year has had a positive trend, with more than 316,000 students enrolled in the triennial courses, that amounts to the 11.3% of the total of the secondary cycle population.

The inclusive nature of the IVET - Initial Vocational Education and Training is evident, incomparable with the parallel segments of our education system: in the year 2013-2014 students with foreign origins enrolled in IVET were 46,375 units, accounting for 16.9% of the total enrolments in IVET (except Islands, where data are not available), of which 23,836 in educational institutions (training centers or agencies).

If we put these data in comparison with those related to other educational pathways, we have that students with foreign origins in upper secondary school (general education) are only 6.6%, while in the technical and professional schools are 15.2% of total enrolments (see Tab. 1).

Table 1- Students with foreign background in IVET pathways (I, II, III year), training year 2013-14 (v.a.; %)

	Students with foreign origins in training agencies I-III year (a.v.)	Total enrolments in the training agencies I-III year (v.a.)	Percentage of students with foreign origins enrolled in the training agencies I-III (%)	Students with foreign origins in the schools I-III year (a.v.)	Total enrolments in the school (general; technical; professional pathways) I-III year (a.v.)	Percentage of students with foreign origins enrolled in the school (general; technical; professional pathways) I-III year (%)	Total pupils with foreign origins enrolled in the training agencies+ school (general; technical; professional pathways) I-III year (a.v.)	Total students with foreign origins+ Italians in the training agencies and school (general; technical; professional pathways) I-III year (a.v.)	Percentage of students with foreign origins enrolled in the training agencies and in the school (general; technical; professional pathways) I-III year (%)
Tot.	22,836	119,445	19.1	23,539	155,321	15.2	46,375	274,766	16.9

Source: data elaborated by Isfol, 2015

Turning our attention to the presence of non-Italian pupils in the school system, the availability of data collected annually from the 2001/02 school year allows to make some observations on the flows recorded in the last decade. The National Report 2013/2014 (Ministry of Education - MIUR ISMU, 2014) confirms a large increase of foreign students in the school population in the period 2001/02- 2013/14 from 196,414 in the 2001/02 school year (2.2% of the total school population) to 802,844 pupils with foreign origins in the 2013/2014 school year (9% of the total), although with a progressive deceleration from 2008/09 to date, in relation to the effects of the economic crisis in Italy.

Generally, it is interesting to note that foreign students enrolled between 2009/10 and 2013/14 grew by 19.2% compared with a decrease of -2.0% of Italian students and a decrease of -0.4% of the total school population (see Tab. 2).

Table 2 – School population by citizenship, school-year 2009/10, 2011/12 and 2013/14 (a.v., %)

School year	Non Italian citizenship	Non Italian citizenship %	Italians	Total
2009/10	673,592	7.5	8,283,493	8,957,085
2011/12	755,939	8.4	8,204,227	8,960,166
2013/14	802,785	9.0	8,117,329	8,920,114

Source: data elaborated by Isfol, 2015

Pupils with Romanian citizenship (154,621), Albanian (107 847) and Moroccan (101,176) are amongst the largest groups attending the Italian school in the school year 2013/14, then the group of Chinese origin students (39,211) follows, together with the Filipino group (24,839).

Female pupils with a foreign background are 385,365, or 48% of all foreign students, similar percentage is observed among native students (48.3%).

The methodology

The research was carried out by ISFOL in 2014-2015 (*Gli allievi di origine straniera nell' IeFP –Students with foreign background in Initial VET*, ISFOL 2014) on students with foreign background in IVET: 124 vocational training institutions in Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Latium and Sicily were reached. 3675 questionnaires have been used for the analysis, of which 1840 were filled in by students with a foreign background. Of this latter sub-sample, 149 pupils had a foreign parent and one parent born in Italy (8.1%); 488 were students born in Italy, from foreign parents – G2 (26.5%); 212 were pupils arrived in Italy when they were less than 6 years – G1.75 (11.5%); 541 were students arrived in Italy when they were between 6 and 12 years - G1.5 (29.4%); 434 were students arrived in Italy when they were between 13 and 17 years G1.25. Only 16 (0.9%) questionnaires were compiled by pupils arrived in Italy at the age of 18 or more – G1, (for the definition of G2; 1.5; G1.75; G2, see Rumbaut, 1997) this quota, being statistically not significant, it has not been considered in the detailed analysis. (see Tab. 3).

Table 3 – Students with a foreign background interviewed, according to the migratory generation

	Sample size	%
Students with a foreign parent and one parent born in Italy	149	8.1
Italian foreign students born in Italy G2.0	488	26.5
Students arrived in Italy when they were less than 6 years G1.75	212	11.5
Students arrived in Italy when they were between 6 and 12 years G1.5	541	29.4
Students arrived in Italy when they were between 13 and 17 years G1.25	434	23.6
Students arrived in Italy at the age of 18 or more – G1*	16	0.9
Total	1840	100.0

*This quota, being statistically not significant, it has not been considered in the detailed analysis

Source: data elaborated by Isfol, 2015

The core topics were: family situation and the migratory pathway; studies and training; satisfaction with the choice of VET and integration within the training centers; prospects and expectations regarding employment; linguistic and social integration outside the training context. The questionnaires were administered by ISFOL during the months of April-June 2013. The survey was financed by the Italian Ministry of Labour.

The issue of the language

The issue of the presence of foreign-born students, linked to the theme of the quality of the general education, has been present in the Italian scientific literature since the early Nineties. Less attention has been paid to the presence of foreign students in vocational training and education, not only in relation to the performance of pupils with foreign background, but also with regard to the integration, identity and belonging to the peer group in the training centers.

The term integration, therefore, refers also to the possibility of participation in a community, thereby “recognizing a full existence active and conscious - not without conflict – of the subjects to integrate” (E. Besozzi, 2012, pg 9). Thus, the question of integration, affiliation, personal identity formation, social and cultural development of the new citizens is relevant from the dual point of view of the relations between individuals and between them and the larger society.

Against this background, the general hypothesis that motivates this article is that the identity and cultural belonging is dynamically determined through the relationship with those who have a similar linguistic and cultural origin, but also with the new groups met in the country of destination. The relational dimension brings up a new paradigm concerning cultural identity, linked to the exchange with the various human, spatial and temporal contexts.

The wide diffusion of the Italian as a “lingua franca” for those who has arrived in Italy from school age, but also for newcomers, has been growing since the early Nineties. In fact, the term of "Italian as second language" does not represent anymore the extensive and widespread use of this language made by the young people with foreign origin in the exchanges with the natives, but also in inter-ethnic relationships.

Italian has become actually a "second mother tongue", visited and practiced, next to the maternal language of origin. The Italian, in fact assumes an important place in the construction of the identity for adults and young people, in the exchanges and in the narration of the personal or family migration. The Italian language then looks like:

- the language of “survival” for the adults newly arrived in Italy;
- language of work and exchanges for those who reside here since longer;
- language “to certify” for those who demand the release of the residence permit;
- language “of the children” for foreign families, whose children every day bring at home new terms, new meanings and stories¹.

¹ National Observatory of the integration of foreign students - Osservatorio nazionale per l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri e per l'intercultura, Gruppo 1. Insegnamento dell'italiano come lingua seconda e valorizzazione del plurilinguismo (2015),

The context has therefore become very complex and diversified: the needs related to acquisition of Italian on behalf of the newly arrived adults and children, coexist with the needs to refine the language, to better the mastery and quality of expression in the workplace and in everyday situations, improving vocabulary, syntax, oral expression and writing. These needs are linked to the expression of the self and the strengthening of the social roles of the adult or young adult (student, citizen, user, patient, etc.).

The table below shows that the percentage of students with foreign background attending Italian courses as second language tends to increase with the age at arrival (from 14,4% to 70,6%). Worryingly, 21.9% of young people arrived in Italy between 13 and 17 years old report not having attended any Italian course. An alarming bell is ringing for this generation of students near to become full citizens at the age of 18. (see Tab. 4).

Table 4 – Students who have attended Italian as second language courses (%)

	Migratory generation			
	Italian foreign students born in Italy G2.0	Students arrived in Italy when they were less than 6 years G1.75	Students arrived in Italy when they were between 6 and 12 years G1.5	Students arrived in Italy when they were between 13 and 17 years G1.25
yes, organized by the school that I attended before the CFP	21.2	10.8	33.9	49.0
yes, organized by the CFP that I attend now	3.6	1.8	2.0	10.4
yes, organized by associations or other bodies	6.1	1.8	4.7	11.2
no, I have not attended any courses	56.2	79.6	54.9	21.9
No answer	12.9	6.0	4.5	7.5
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: data elaborated by Isfol, 2015

The questionnaire contained a question about the knowledge of Italian (speaking, reading and writing competence), a self-assessed measure which can give the representation of the perceived easiness in the everyday use of Italian. In the comparison between pupils with foreign background and Italians, as far as speaking and reading is concerned, there is no great difference: in both cases more than 90% of Italians and students with foreign origins declare to be good or very good, it is so evident that the Second Generation has reached the native children. More distance is recorded for writing: 8,2% of the students with a foreign background says they are poor or very poor in writing, compared with 3,1% of the Italian sample. If we

“L’italiano che include: la lingua per non essere stranieri. Attenzioni e proposte per un progetto di formazione linguistica nel tempo della pluralità”

consider into details this data it is remarkable that 15,8% of the 1.25 Generation arrived between 13 and 17 years old (6,9% of G1.5; 3,9% of G1.75; 5,6 of G2.0) affirms to be poor or very poor: a question should be posed whether this generation will be able to recover this important gap after the age of 18, without focused initiatives to avoid their permanent exclusion from an active and full citizenship.

Multilingualism is also a relevant issue. Italian educators are giving a growing attention to this matter, considering that multilingualism could, on one side, enrich the curriculum of the monolingual students giving them more instruments in an intercultural world, on the other, valorize the migratory history of the foreign students, who are otherwise made invisible in their specificity. The foreign students, compared to Italian students claim more frequently to know at least another language besides Italian, and in 31.5% of cases, even three languages. For Italians the second language indicated is predominantly English, while for students with foreign background, it is the mother tongue (Fig. 1).

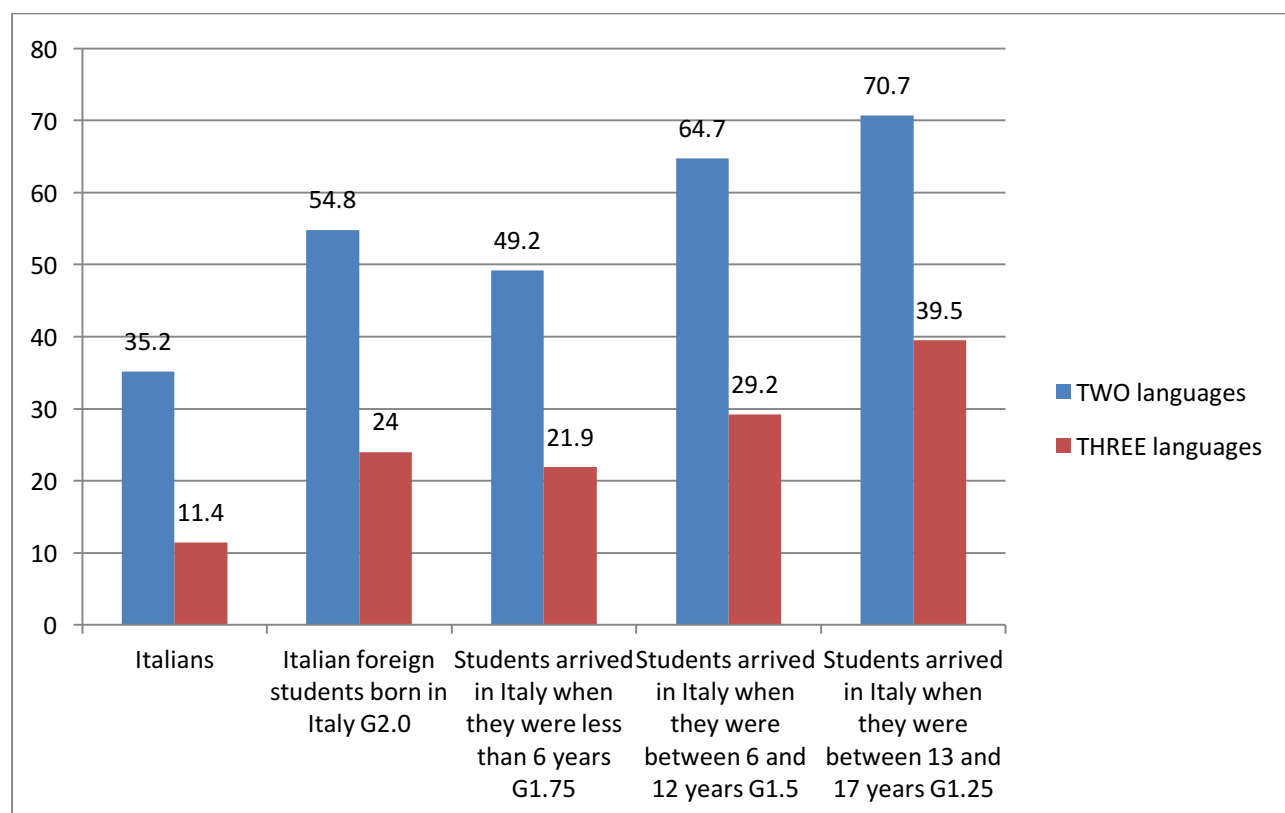


Figure 1 - Multilingualism: comparison among Italians and foreign students (migratory generations (Rumbaut, 97);%)*

* Only valid responses "very good" and "fair" (in a scale of four values) to the question: can you speak, read or write a foreign language (Italian included in "two" or "three" languages)

Source: data elaborated by Isfol, 2015

The analysis of the use of the language in everyday situations gives counter-intuitive results: Italian is the first language used by foreigners in relationships between peers, and this also applies to the most recent generations arrived in Italy, but it is even more relevant that several generations of foreign boys and girls use the Italian more frequently than the Italians, who (for 20.5% of the Italian sample), in many regions, prefer to use the dialect instead of Italian in the relationships between peers and within the family. Thus, in some regions the Italian language, has become a vehicular

language for the relationships within the institutions, even the school and training center. It is then possible to observe the presence of both intercultural and globalization dynamics and forces related to localism, which are still very strong and rooted in all Italian regions (see Tab. 5).

Table 5 – Italian (and dialect) in everyday life (1°choice; %)

	Italians	G 2.0	G1.75	G1.5	G1.25
Italian	79.5	82.3	87.4	78.3	67.2
Foreign language	1.4	15.0	10.1	19.4	31.8
Italian dialect	19.1	2.7	2.5	2.3	1.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100
V.a.	1835	488	212	541	434

Source: data elaborated by Isfol, 2015

The scene is completely different considering the language used in the relationships with family members: for the students with foreign background mother tongue becomes the first language spoken, even for the generations (G 2.0) born in Italy, who still keep the mother tongue as the language which underline their belonging to the native community. Similarly, in a symmetrical perspective, for the Italian students, in one case out of five, it is the dialect – the language of the identity - to be dominant in the domestic relationships within the family (see Tab. 6).

Table 6 – First Language spoken in family relationships (1^ choice, %)

	Italians	G 2.0	G1.75	G1.5	G1.25
Italian	78.5	39.2	42.5	30.3	19.0
Foreign language	0.6	59.9	57.5	69.3	80.8
Italian dialect	20.9	0.9	-	0.4	0.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100
V.a.	1835	488	212	541	434

Source: data elaborated by Isfol, 2015

Discussion and conclusions

The above considerations, drawn from the results of research conducted by ISFOL, including the context analysis conducted by means of interviews with directors, teachers and tutors of the training centers, lead us to present some concluding remarks in the field of strengthening of Italian as second language and the enhancement of a multilingual presence in the classroom as a cultural enrichment factor:

a) in the first place it seems necessary to move from spontaneous and scattered interventions to a systematic and formal plan to develop the provision of Italian as second language at regional and national level in primary education and for adults in the workplace. This plan should take into account regional specificities and promote collaboration between institutions that already have accumulated significant experience in the field, like in the case of the Adult Learning Centers, or the courses financed by the European Fund for the Integration-EFI, and the initiatives promoted by the non-governmental organizations with quality standards at European level.

b) Secondly, it seems necessary not only to develop a training offer for the achievement of the A2 level (corresponding to the beginner's level in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR*) in Italian as second language (this certificate is necessary to get the residence permit for long-term residents), but also to develop devices and teaching methods to reach the most vulnerable users, those who are illiterate or with low literacy. It is necessary to develop learning content related to everyday situations. Also, it should no longer be delayed the development of content that meet even the highest levels of Italian language command (B1, B2, C1, C2, in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR*) for those who already received a tertiary education in their own country.

c) An alarm bell sounds for the foreign students arrived in Italy from 13 to 17 years: in 15.8% of cases they claim to have little or no expertise in writing in Italian. This circumstance can seriously impair their ability to be a citizen and a worker, in the absence of specific interventions for this type of target. Similarly, the argument can be extended to newly arrived pupils, whatever the age at the arrival. In fact, comparative research, analyzing PIAAC data (Alieva Aigul, 2014), have demonstrated the limited usefulness of the model of "segregation" through the transit of newly arrived pupils in "special" classes before their introduction in general classes. Instead, the model of the immediate "integration" in general classes, as it is in Italy, seems to give better results in terms of performance of the second generation. Nevertheless, it is also true that today this practice is based mostly on the informal capacity of learning and adaptation of the pupils with foreign origins, and it is supported by the competences, as well informal, in terms of multicultural pedagogy and teaching methods, acquired by the teachers on the field. The provision of Italian as a second language should be, on the contrary, individualized, organized in 6-8 hours of teaching per week with teachers with specific preparation (A. Aluffi Pentini, 1995). Moreover, for foreign-born students compensatory measures also should be considered: for example, the recognition of the level of command in the mother-tongue and the recognition of "credits" for incoming students from foreign school systems.

d) "The right to education can only be fully exercised if the learners master the specific linguistic rules that are applied in schools and are necessary for access to knowledge. (...) In this context, particular attention should be paid, right from the outset of schooling, to the acquisition of the language of schooling, which, as both a specific school subject and a medium of instruction in the other subjects, plays a crucial role in providing access to knowledge and cognitive development"²: it is really relevant to make students acquire a good understanding of the "micro-languages", the specialized languages related to each discipline: "Every school subject (history, art, mathematics, etc., including the language of schooling as a specific subject) uses its own specific forms of oral and written expression: students should master these forms in order to successfully participate in school activities"³. It is therefore important that teachers are aware of their role as facilitators of learning and that they are supported in this role. In the Recommendation of the Council of Europe of the 2014 on the States on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling, some

² Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success.

³ Ibidem

operational runways are suggested for those responsible for educational contents and programmes to promote effective consideration of the linguistic dimensions in the various school subjects by:

- i. “making explicit the specific linguistic norms and competences which learners must be able to master in individual school subjects;
- ii. making explicit in the programmes and curricula the learning modalities that should allow all learners, and in particular the most vulnerable among them, to be exposed to diversified language-learning situations in order to develop their cognitive and linguistic capacities;
- iii. highlighting, in the programmes, convergences in the linguistic dimensions of the various subjects, in such a way as to reinforce the effectiveness of the educational project;
- iv. recalling, in the programmes for the language of schooling as a specific school subject, the special place which this language holds because of its cross-cutting effect on all the learning processes conducted in that language;
- v. encouraging authors of educational materials to ensure that such materials explicitly take account of the linguistic dimensions of the different subjects;
- vi. continuing and extending research in this field.”⁴

In this field, in Italy, tutoring projects have been successfully implemented with university students, native and with foreign origin, who support foreign pupils in the learning of Italian as second language for 60-100 hours per year and receive credits for their efforts.

⁴ Ibidem

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