

Anja Zorman, Monica Bertok Vatovec

Linguistic Development in Italian L1 and L2 in Italian Nursery Schools in Slovenia

Schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in Slovenia are open to all children and young people, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. The article addresses the impact of linguistically diverse classes on the linguistic development of children attending Italian nursery schools. The children's parents provided basic background information on the child's language use outside nursery school. The level of the children's communicative competence in Italian, in terms of listening comprehension and oral production, was measured by means of a standardised test. Although results may not always be statistically relevant due to the small number of participants, they show that the prevailing presence of children that only speak Slovene at home does not hinder the linguistic development of children that only speak Italian at home, and that the Slovene-only cohort clearly benefits from attending Italian nursery school.

Keywords: Italian national community, preschool education, linguistic development, LSGR – LJ, ethnolinguistic vitality.

Jezikovni razvoj v italijanščini kot J1 in J2 v vrtcih z italijanskim učnim jezikom v Sloveniji

V vrtce in šole z italijanskim učnim jezikom v Sloveniji se lahko vpišejo vsi otroci, učenci in dijaki, ne glede na etnično pripadnost. Prispevek se ukvarja z vplivom jezikovno heterogenih skupin na jezikovni razvoj otrok, ki obiskujejo italijanske vrtce. Starši otrok so posredovali osnovne informacije o jeziku oziroma jezikih, ki jih otroci uporabljajo izven vrtca. Raven sporazumevalne zmožnosti otrok v italijanščini, t. j. slušnega razumevanja in govornega izražanja, smo merili s pomočjo standardiziranega testa. Zaradi nizkega števila otrok, ki so bili vključeni v raziskavo, rezultati sicer niso vedno statistično relevantni, pa vendar kažejo, da večinska prisotnost otrok, ki prihajajo iz slovensko govorečih družin, ne ovira govornega razvoja otrok, ki prihajajo iz italijansko govorečih družin, in da pri otrocih iz slovensko govorečih družin obiskovanje italijanskega vrtca nedvomno bistveno pripomore k razvoju njihove sporazumevalne zmožnosti v italijanščini.

Ključne besede: italijanska narodna skupnost, predšolska vzgoja, jezikovni razvoj, LSGR – LJ, etnično-jezikovna vitalnost.

Correspondence address: Anja Zorman, Univerza na Primorskem, Fakulteta za humanistične študije, Titov trg 5, SI-6000 Koper/Capodistria, e-mail: anja.zorman@fhs.upr.si; Monica Bertok Vatovec, Giardino d'infanzia Delfino blu / Vrtec Delfino blu, Kolarska ulica 8, SI-6000, Koper/Capodistria, e-mail: monica.bertok@delfino-blu.si.

1. Introduction

Italian is an officially recognized minority language in the Slovene Littoral region where it is spoken as L1 by an estimated 3 % of the population (SORS 2002). Italian has national community language status for historical and cultural reasons. The official language status in the four municipalities in the Slovene Littoral grants children and young people the right to receive education in Italian from preschool to upper-secondary education. The right to receive education in one's first language is one of the core human rights defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and one of the key factors in maintaining and fostering the ethnolinguistic vitality of minorities (Giles et al. 1977; Harwood et al. 1994; UNESCO 2003; Ehala 2009; Bourhis & Landry 2012). In the Republic of Slovenia, Italian and Hungarian national communities are guaranteed the possibility of preserving and developing their language by the Constitution (1991, Article 46) and legislation. When ensuring the protection of national community languages, Slovenia follows the principle of autochthony, and therefore the rights of the two autochthonous ethnic groups do not depend on the number of their members (Zudič Antonič & Cerkvjenik 2019). Education in the national communities' language is regulated by the Act Regulating Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities in the Field of Education (2001) that sets out the specific educational and instruction goals for national communities, their organisation, the construction of the schools' network, and the way national educational and instruction programs are adapted. Schools in the Slovene Littoral that have Italian as the medium of instruction teach national curricular programs that are adapted to the educational and instruction needs of the Italian national community, including content on the Italian national community in Slovenia, Italian language and culture, and Italy in general.

Three nursery schools in the Slovene Littoral use Italian as medium of communication and instruction. They follow the objectives of the national Curriculum for Nursery Schools (*Kurikulum za vrtce*) (Bahovec et al. 1999). It emphasises the objectives concerning language acquisition and education that are to be achieved through children's active participation in the communicative process. Referring to nationally mixed areas in the Slovene Littoral and Prekmurje, the Curriculum stresses the importance of helping children establish good practices in to both the collective bilingualism of the area they live as well as individual bilingualism, where the decision taken by parents and children to receive education in L2 must be respected, while also fostering conditions for the development of both languages.

2. Preschool Education in Italian as a National Community Language in the Cross-Cultural Context of the Slovene Littoral

2.1 Legal Framework

The legal regulation of the status of Italian national community education in Slovenia is based on the London Memorandum, signed on 5 October 1954 and ratified by the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia on 25 October 1954. Provisions of the London Memorandum were agreed upon bilaterally in the Treaty of Osimo (1975), signed by the Republic of Italy and Yugoslavia. After achieving independence in 1991, the Republic of Slovenia became the legal successor of Yugoslavia to these agreements. Slovenia additionally signed (3 July 1997), ratified (4 October 2000) and enforced (1 January 2001) the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe 1992).

At present, the right of historic minorities in the Republic of Slovenia to receive education in their first language is enshrined in the Constitution and is regulated by laws, in particular by the Act Regulating Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities in the Field of Education, passed in 2001, and by the Kindergartens Act, the Basic School Act, the Gimnazija Act, and the Vocational Education Act, all passed in 1996.

The use of Italian as the medium of instruction is stipulated by Article 3 of Organisation and Financing of Education Act, passed in 1996, and it is required by Article 6 of the Basic School Act, Article 8 of the Gimnazija Act, and Article 8 of the Vocational Education Act. These articles also set out the compulsory learning of Italian in schools with Slovene as the medium of instruction that are situated in bilingual areas of the Slovene Littoral.

2.2 Background to Italian and National Community Preschool Education

Educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction were founded to offer education in L1 to Italian national community children living in Istria, both in Slovenia and Croatia. At the same time, these institutions have been open to all citizens, regardless of their ethnic affiliation.

The Report on the Realisation of Special Rights of Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities and their Members in the Republic of Slovenia, published in 1979 by the Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia, shows a continuous increase of children enrolled in Italian nursery schools in Slovenia between 1970, when 52 children were enrolled, and 1976 – with 99 children enrolled. This increase is partly correlated to growing interest of Slovene families and

families that migrated to Slovenia from ex-Yugoslav republics in enrolling their children in Italian nursery schools.

The research, conducted during the 1988/1989 school year by Monica (1991), involved 197 pupils attending grades five through eight in the three Slovene Littoral elementary schools with Italian as the medium of instruction. The research results show that most pupils involved in the study came from Slovene-only homes (44.5 %), followed by Slovene-Italian bilingual homes (38.9 %) and Italian-only homes (16.6 %). 42.1 % of respondents stated they spoke Italian with their mother and 50.3 % with their father. 44 % of pupils spoke Slovene with the mother and 39.2 % with the father. However, when asked in which language they were most proficient, 76.1 % said it was Italian, 20.8 % chose Slovene and 3.1 % indicated a language other than Italian or Slovene.

As part of the research on communicative competence in Italian L1, conducted by Žudič Antonič (2009) during the 2006/2007 school year, 35 eight-grade pupils were asked to state their L1. Almost half of the pupils (48 %) said they used both languages and a quarter (25 %) said their L1 was Slovene. Only 14 % of pupils answered they communicate in Italian with both parents. 17 % spoke both languages with their mother and 14 % with their father. More than half of the eight-graders involved in the research spoke only Slovene with both parents (54 % with their mothers and 51 % with their fathers). Pupils were given a written test to ascertain whether they had achieved the learning objectives stated in the curriculum. Results show that the majority of students (62.9 %) fully achieved the objectives of the written part, while 17 % did so partially and a fifth (20 %) did not. The linguistic competence results showed that 48.6 % of pupils fully achieved the curricular objectives, 37.1 % partially, while 14.3 % failed. The comparison with Slovene L1 showed a similar share of pupils that achieved learning goals fully in both tests, while there is a significant difference in the distribution of those who were successful partially and those who were not, to the advantage of Slovene L1 pupils. The difference may be attributed to a different level of the linguistic heterogeneity of the school population and most of all to the disparity in language used out of school, particularly at home. Since data were not cross-referenced with the pupils' L1, we cannot draw conclusions on the impact of linguistic heterogeneity on the competence of Italian L1 and bilingual speakers.

Linguistic heterogeneity in Italian schools has always been of great concern within the Italian national community and research results show an increase in the number of Slovene L1 speakers in schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in the fifteen-year period between the two studies. At the time the 1988/89 research was conducted, the debate on schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in Istria was split between their role as the institution responsible for maintaining and enhancing Italian national community ethnolinguistic vitality, which as such should be offered exclusively to Italian nationals, and their role as

the space of linguistic and cultural openness in the context of Slovenia's (then) future membership in the European Union, and should therefore continue to be open to all nationalities (Monica 1991). A decade and a half later, when Slovenia was already a member of the European Union, Zudič Antonič (2009) wrote that a strong presence of pupils and students, who are not members of the Italian national community, attending Italian schools in the Slovene Littoral could be seen as "problematic" if schools with Italian as the medium of instruction were considered guardians of Italian linguistic and cultural heritage in the area. The author argues that Italian schools in Slovenia follow their purpose fully, because they create conditions for the preservation of Italian linguistic and cultural heritage, as well as promote intercultural communication and positive attitude towards the other and those who are different. They do not focus on maintaining an exclusive and permanent affiliation to a single culture, instead contributing to developing pupils' and students' critical mind, openness, and tolerance in interactions between members of different ethnicities and cultures. Or as Sorgo et al. (2022, 74) point out, "schools with Italian as the language of instruction play a key role for both the Italian national community and the Slovene national community population, as they attach great importance to language learning and to the development of multilingualism and multiculturalism" in the bilingual and nationally mixed area of the Slovene Littoral.

Research conducted so far provides important insight into the development of education and educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction, which operate in the Slovene Littoral. However, all past research has focused on primary and secondary education. For preschool education, statistical data are available in terms of the number of children enrolled, but no further analyses were conducted on the ethnic affiliation of children, the languages they spoke outside nursery school, and their Italian language skills. We argue that data on primary and secondary education cannot simply be generalised to preschool education, since the nursery school population does not necessarily correspond, in terms of ethnic affiliation, to the primary and/or secondary school population. Children enrolled in Italian nursery schools do not necessarily enrol in Italian primary schools and vice versa.

The research conducted so far shows that Italian schools in Slovenia are faced with several problems. We argue that to understand how these problems manifest in preschool institutions and impact the educational process within those institutions requires (constant) research, as does finding appropriate solutions.

The paper addresses the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What is, at present, the linguistic composition in nursery schools with Italian as the medium of communication and instruction?
- RQ 2: How do contextual variables impact the linguistic development in Italian L1 and L2. The variables are:
 - a) The enrolment in Italian nursery schools (reason, length of attendance).

- b) The use of Italian outside of nursery school (quality use at home, extra-curricular activities, and other interactions).

3. Research Method

3.1 Design and Procedure

To identify if and to what extent linguistically diverse classes in Italian nursery schools in the Slovene Littoral impact linguistic development in Italian L1, L2, we collected data by means of a questionnaire, submitted to parents, and by a standardized language test, which measures levels of listening comprehension and oral production (*Lestvice splošnega govornega razvoja* LSGR – LJ). The LSGR – LJ scales (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2008), originally developed for Slovene, were adapted for the purpose of our research to Italian in terms of contents, culture-specific elements, and linguistic structures.

Data were collected in Italian nursery schools during the 2021/2022 school year. Parents were informed as part of parent-teacher meetings, conducted online, at the beginning of the school year, when the study objective and procedure were presented, and questionnaires filled in. Parents were also asked to sign a consent form.

3.2 Participants

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all human activity, including research (Sorgo & Novak Lukanovič 2020), which is why it was impossible to involve all children enrolled in Slovene Littoral nursery schools in the research. The study involved a total of 68 children, aged 4 to 6, meaning 67 % of children attending nursery schools in Koper and Ankaran were invited to participate in the research. Due to the pandemic, communication with parents took place via Zoom meetings, phone calls, and e-mail. Based on past experience, we can assume that even more parents would have consented to the participation if the project had been presented in person.

In the research 31 participants (45.6 %) involved were male and 37 (54.4 %) were female. With regards to age, 23 participants (33.8 %) were aged 48 to 59 months, 40 (58.8 %) 60 to 71 months and 5 (7.4 %) were aged 72 to 83 months. The division in age groups followed the LSGR – LJ scales (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2008, 75).

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed through basic statistic and correlation coefficient calculations. Due to the very low number of participants, in particular

when these are broken up in terms of the L1 and age group, some statistical data have low evidentiary value. Nevertheless, they offer important insight into the current situation in Italian nursery schools, their associated problems, origin, and consequences.

4. Results and Discussion

4.2 The Linguistic Composition of the Italian Nursery School Population

The children attending Italian nursery schools can be L1 speakers of Italian, L2 learners of Italian, or may come from homes where Italian is spoken to varying degrees. To collect data on the children's home language, parents were asked to state their children's L1. The results, expressed in frequency and percentage of responses, are shown in Table 1. Data in columns indicate the number of children in individual age groups that are L1 speakers of the languages listed in rows.

Table 1: Children (f%) as L1 speakers in individual age groups per language

		Age groups							
		48–59		60–71		72–83		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	1	12.5	6	75.0	1	12.5	8	100.0
	Slovene	14	31.8	28	63.7	2	4.5	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	2	33.4	4	66.6	0	0.0	6	100.0
	Russian	3	75.0	0	0.0	1	25.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	0	0.0	1	50.0	1	50.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	23	33.8	40	58.8	5	7.4	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

From the data in Table 1, we can infer a substantial unbalance between the age groups, with 33.8 % of children falling into the youngest, 58.8 % into the middle, and 7.8 % into the oldest age group. This kind of unbalance compromises the comparison between age groups, as well as the significance of the results for the oldest age group, due to the extremely low number of children present. The inbalance between age groups does not accurately reflect the nursery schools' group composition, it merely shows the age distribution at the time of the testing, conducted in January 2022. Had it been postponed to the end of the school year, the distribution among age groups would have been significantly more homogeneous.

The linguistic composition of the sample in Table 1 shows that most children involved in the research ($N = 44$; $f = 64.7\%$) were L1 speakers of Slovene. There were 8 ($f = 11.8\%$) Italian L1 speaking children and 6 ($f = 8.8\%$) bilingual Italian-Slovene children. 4 children were L1 speakers of Russian ($f = 5.9\%$), 2 were Serbian ($f = 2.9\%$) and Romany speakers ($f = 2.9\%$), 1 was Ukrainian ($f = 1.5\%$) and Bosnian ($f = 1.5\%$). Compared to the primary school population data collected by Monica (1991) and Zudič Antonič (2009), the share of Slovene speaking children is significantly higher, the most significant decrease being in the group of children from bilingual Italian-Slovene families. Given that not all children enrolled in Italian nursery schools continue their education in primary schools with Italian as the medium of instruction, the comparison with past data may not be relevant. The collected data should therefore be interpreted by considering the parents' intention of enrolling their children in Italian primary schools.

4.2 Prospects to Continue Education in the Italian Elementary School

Parents were asked to state whether their children would continue their education at a school with Italian as the medium of instruction. Results, expressed in frequency and percentage of responses, are shown in Table 3 where the columns indicate the data on parents' intention to enrol their children in the Italian primary school, while the rows indicate the children's L1.

Table 2: Parents' intention (f%) to enrol their children in an Italian elementary school according to children's L1

		Prospects of enrolment in an Italian elementary school							
		Yes		No		Unsure		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	7	87.5	1	12.5	0	0.0	8	100.0
	Slovene	17	38.7	25	56.8	2	4.5	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	4	66.7	2	33.3	0	0.0	6	100.0
	Russian	4	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	37	54.5	29	42.6	2	2.9	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

Results in Table 3 show that 54.5 % of parents expressed the intention of enrolling their children in a primary school with Italian as the medium of instruction. The percentage is particularly high for Italian (87.5 %) and bilingual Italian-Slovene speaking children (66.7 %). Likewise, all children from linguistic backgrounds, other than Italian and/or Slovene, except the Ukrainian child, will presumably continue their education in Italian schools. With 38.7 % of affirmative answers, the percentage is also relatively high for Slovene speaking children. However, more than half of the parents of Slovene speaking children (56.8 %) do not intend to enrol their children in the Italian school. The enrolment of these children in Italian nursery schools must be based on some other reason, rather than on the desire to receive education in Italian. The rationale behind the parents' decisions is discussed below (see Chapter 4.4).

The data on the parents' intention to enrol their children in Italian schools confirm that comparison of data on the linguistic and/or ethnic composition of the nursery school population to data collected on primary school population (Monica 1991; Zudič Antonič 2009) is inconsequential and reinforces our argument that data on nursery schools need and should continue to be collected.

4.3 Length of Children's Attendance in Italian Nursery Schools

Besides the linguistic heterogeneity and discontinuity of education in the vertical, Italian nursery schools also face discontinuity at the preschool level. The phenomenon is partly related to migrations, but partly also to the parents' choice to switch between Italian and Slovene nursery schools. Table 3 shows how long (M) children involved in the research had been attending Italian nursery schools by the time the study started being conducted. Data are shown according to age groups (columns) and children's L1 (rows). Data on migrant children are not presented.

Table 3: Length of attendance (M) in Italian nursery schools according to individual age groups and L1

		Attendance										
		Age group										
		48–59			60–71			72–83			TOTAL	
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M
Language	Italian	1	3.0	0	6	3.2	1.3	1	4.0	0	8	3.4
	Slovene	14	3.0	0.9	28	4.0	0.7	2	1.5	0.71	44	2.8
	Italian-Slovene	2	2.0	1.4	4	3.0	1.4	0	/	/	6	2.5
	TOTAL	17	2.7	0.9	38	3.4	1.0	3	2.7	1.53	58	2.9

Source: Own data.

Although statistically insignificant, the figures in Table 3 show a tendency for a gradual increase in the length of attendance correlated to the children’s age in the group of Italian speaking and bilingual children. In the group of Slovene speaking children, the expected increase in the length of attendance is present for the first and second age group, while there is a significant drop in the 72- to 83-month age group, with merely a year-and-a-half-long medium attendance that is even lower than the medium attendance in the youngest age group (48 to 59 months, $M = 3.0$). The results for the oldest age group of children that only speak Slovene at home children have no statistical significance ($N = < 5$) and as such do not allow for a valid interpretation.

4.4 Enrolment Reason

To understand why almost half of the children involved in the research (42.6 %) were likely not going to continue education in Italian primary schools, as shown in Table 2, parents were asked to state the main reason for the decision to enrol their child in an Italian nursery school. The results, expressed in the frequency and percentage of answers, are shown in Table 4: the rows show data for the children’s L1 and the columns present data on why parents decided to enrol their children in a nursery school with Italian as the medium of communication and instruction.

Table 4: Enrolment reason (f%) for Italian nursery schools according to children’s L1

		Enrolment reason													
		Italian national community		Multi-lingualism		Italian acquisition		Slovene schools full		Proximity to home		Didactic approach ¹		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	4	50.0	0	0.0	2	25.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	25.0	8	100.0
	Slovene	7	15.9	16	36.4	20	45.5	1	2.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	4	66.6	1	16.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	16.7	0	0.0	6	100.0
	Russian	0	0.0	3	75.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	0	0.0	1	50.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	17	25.0	21	30.9	26	38.2	1	1.5	1	1.5	2	2.9	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

Results in Table 4 show that the main reasons given by parents for choosing an Italian nursery school include the development of their children's communicative competence in Italian (38.2 %), the importance of multilingualism (30.9 %), and Italian national community affiliation (25.0 %). Didactic approach (2.9 %), proximity to school (1.5 %), and the lack of possibility to enrol their children in a Slovene nursery school (1.5 %) appear to have little bearing on the parents' choice of nursery school.

For parents of Italian speaking children and bilingual Italian-Slovene children, the most important reason to enrol their children in an Italian nursery school was reportedly their ethnic identity (50.0 % and 66.6 % respectively), while the parents of Slovene speaking children said it offers the possibility to develop communicative competence in Italian (45.5 %), with the importance of multilingualism (36.4 %) coming second, which is characteristic of the geographic area and the times. The two reasons also figured prominently among parents of Russian, Ukrainian, Bosnian, and Serbian speaking children. The two Romany speaking children involved in the research were adopted into an Italian national community family with their adoptive parents attributing their decision to enrol the children in an Italian nursery school to the family's ethnic origin.

By examining the data on children's L1 and the reason they were enrolled in Italian nursery schools, we can see that these appear to be primarily institutions aimed at developing communicative competence in Italian, predominantly as L2, and the development of children's multilingual practices and intercultural competence. This information is certainly at the root of the apprehension experienced by the Italian ethnic community, namely that educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction may not be able to continue guaranteeing the quality linguistic development of Italian speaking children and therefore fulfilling their institutional role in maintaining the linguistic and ethnic vitality of the Italian national community. To verify if such apprehension is justified, children were tested using a listening comprehension and oral production test. Testing results are presented in sections 4.7 and 4.8.

4.5 Quality Use of Italian in Family Interactions

Research shows that the highest levels of bilingualism are developed by speakers who live in areas with strong institutional support for the minority language and who have a complex network of linguistic contacts in both languages, particularly in the minority language (Landry & Allard 1992). Parents were asked to answer how often their children interact in Italian with parents and siblings in activities that involve written language, such as reading, riddles, matching, cross-words, and similar. Results, expressed in frequency and percentage of responses, are shown in Table 5 where the columns indicate data on the frequency of shared quality use of Italian, while rows indicate the children's L1.

Table 5: Time (f%) spent in language development activities at home

		Family quality use of Italian									
		Never		Rarely		Often		Almost every day		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	37.5	5	62.5	8	100.0
	Slovene	6	13.6	14	31.8	19	43.2	5	11.4	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	0	0.0	1	16.7	2	33.3	3	50.0	6	100.0
	Russian	2	50.0	1	25.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	1	50.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	10	14.7	17	25.0	26	38.2	15	22.1	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

As expected, Italian and bilingual Italian-Slovene speaking children precede other children involved in the research in terms of family time spent in activities that foster language development, with 62.5 % and 50.0 % respectively of parents stating that this takes place almost every day, with 37.5 % and 33.3 % of parents respectively saying it takes place often. For reasons stated above, Romany speaking children are likewise involved in quality family interactions almost every day.

Within the group of Slovene speaking children, the majority of parents (43.2 %) report that family members often communicate with children in Italian as part of written-language activities, while 11.4 % of parents say this takes place almost every day. A large share of parents, almost a third (31.8 %), rarely spend quality time with their children in Italian, and 13.6 % never.

The frequency of time dedicated to written-language activities in Italian is relatively low for Russian, Bosnian, Serbian and Ukrainian speaking children.

4.6 Italian Use in Out-of-School Interactions

Parents were also asked whether their children used Italian in their spare time with friends and in extracurricular activities such as sports, music lessons, and similar. The data in the columns shows the use of language according to the individual children's L1 languages (rows).

Results in Table 6 show that all Italian speaking and most bilingual Italian-Slovene children (83.3 %) participate in conversations in Italian in their spare time and in extracurricular activities. The same appears to be the case for over a third of Slovene speaking children (36.4 %), while a large share (63.6 %) does not. Results for the Slovene group are comparable to data on parents' intention to enrol their children in Italian primary school with 38.7 % of affirmative and 56.8 % of negative answers. Correlation between the two variables proved to

be significant: $r = .425$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 . Data on the frequency of out-of-school use also correlate significantly with data on the quality use of Italian within family interactions: $r = .478$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 . Children who, according to their parents' declared intentions, are more likely to attend an Italian primary school, are reportedly engaged both in language development activities with their family members and in communicative interactions in Italian in their spare time and as part of the extracurricular activities they attend.

Table 6: Use of Italian (f%) in out-of-school interactions

		Use of Italian out of nursery school							
		Yes		No		Total		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	8	100.0	0	0.0	8	100.0	8	100.0
	Slovene	16	36.4	22	63.6	44	100.0	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	5	83.3	1	16.7	6	100.0	6	100.0
	Russian	2	50.0	2	50.0	4	100.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	1	100.0	1	100.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	0	0.0	1	100.0	1	100.0	1	100.0
	Romany	2	100.0	0	0.0	2	100.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	0	0.0	2	100.0	2	100.0	2	100.0
	Total	37	54.5	29	42.6	68	100.0	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

4.7 Level of Listening Comprehension Ability

Research on language immersion in bilingual educational programs show there are numerous advantages for minority L2 learners, but some difficulties have been reported for minority L1 learners, such as slowing down the academic progress of minority L1 learners and influencing aspects of their language use (see Hickey & Ó Cainín 2001). Table 7 shows results (M) of listening comprehension testing, according to the children's L1 (rows) and age (columns).

Table 7 shows that Italian speaking children develop their listening comprehension ability gradually with age. Data show that having a prevailing number of children, who are speakers of a language other than Italian and/or are raised in a bilingual family, does not at all compromise the development of listening comprehension in Italian speaking children. The results achieved for the listening comprehension test are comparable to results achieved by monolingual Slovene children, as studied by Marjanovič Umek et al. (2008) as part of the development of the LSGR – LJ scales, namely $M = 73.6$ in the 48 to 59 months age group ($N = 86$), $M = 85.5$ in the 60 to 71 months age group ($N = 90$), and $M = 95.1$ in the 72 to 83 months age group ($N = 97$).

Table 7: Average (M) result on the listening comprehension test in individual age groups according to the children's L1

		Listening comprehension							
		Age group							
		48-59		60-71		72-83		TOTAL	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	N
Language	Italian	90.0	0	90.8	4.8	93.0	0	91.2	8
	Slovene	64.9	12.3	81.2	9.1	64.0	11.3	70.0	44
	Italian-Slovene	88.5	2.1	88.5	5.5	/	/	88.5	6
	TOTAL	81.1	14.6	86.8	9.1	78.5	18.5	83.3	58

Source: Own data.

The listening comprehension testing results do not substantiate the evidence reported by Hickey and Ó Cainín (2001) on hindering linguistic development in L1 for L1 learners, while the benefits for L2 Slovene speaking learners are well observed, in particular when passing from the youngest to the medium age group. The research results show a significant drop in the oldest age group, consistent with the drop in the length of attendance in the Italian nursery school (Table 3). In any case, the number of participants in this age group (N = 2) has no (statistical) significance.

Research conducted by Hickey and Ó Cainín (2001) studied the effects of linguistic composition of nursery school groups (predominant minority L1 vs predominant minority L2 vs predominant bilingual) on the percentage and mean of utterances in the minority language, showing that the bilingual children were most sensitive to the group mix, with significantly lower percentage of utterances in the minority language in the majority-language-dominant group. They adapted to the communicative situation similarly as in life. Table 7 shows no difference in the level of listening comprehension for the youngest and the middle age group. No reliable conclusion can be drawn on whether this is consistent with their ability to interact according to the communicative situation or whether this is related to some other factor, due to the statistical insignificance of the collected results.

4.8 Level of Oral Communication Ability

Table 8 shows data on oral production that are consistent with data on listening comprehension presented in Table 5. The correlation between the two test results proved to be strong and significant: $r = .688$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 .

For comparison, monolingual Slovene children (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2008, 75) achieved $M = 59.7$ points in the 48 to 59 months age group (N = 82), $M = 75.7$ in the 60 to 71 months age group (N = 87), and $M = 88.9$ in the 72 to 83 months age group (N = 98). The overall results of our research are lower

than those achieved by monolingual Slovene children. This is true particularly for Slovene speaking children and bilingual children in the middle age group appear to be significantly behind the Italian speaking children. The latter appear to advance in their linguistic development at a similar pace than monolingual Slovene children who had participated in the study by Marjanovič Umek et al. (2008).

Table 8: Average (M) result on the oral communication test in individual age groups according to children's LI

		Oral production							
		Age group							
		48-59		60-71		72-83		TOTAL	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	N
Language	Italian	78.0	0	79.0	21.6	82.0	0	79.7	8
	Slovene	29.6	17.6	52.7	23.9	45.5	23.3	42.6	44
	Italian-Slovene	56.5	37.4	68.5	9.0	/	/	62.5	6
	TOTAL	54.7	23.2	66.7	24.3	63.7	26.8	61.7	58

Source: Own data.

We calculated correlations between listening comprehension results and oral production on the one hand and the likelihood of continuing education in Italian, the quality of Italian used at home, and interactions in Italian out-of-school. Testing results proved to be correlated significantly only with the time families share in language developing activities $r = -.255$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 for listening comprehension and $r = -.249$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 for oral production. The correlation is negative due to inverted values attributed to answers pertaining to quality family time. Results indicate that the more time a child was engaged in interactions with family members in activities that foster language development, the higher the results they achieved in both listening comprehension and oral production tests. Although testing results did not prove to be significantly statistically correlated with the prospective attendance of Italian primary schools and out-of-school peer interaction in Italian, we observed a tendency towards a positive effect on language development, measured with listening comprehension and oral production scales, for both. Results confirm that massive and quality linguistic input in education institutions (Zudič Antonič 2018) and in family and other out-of-school interactions (Landry & Allard 1992) is critical to the optimal linguistic development of children and young people in bilingual settings.

From a didactic point of view, the significant diversity in levels of communicative competence of children enrolled in nursery schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in Slovenia, in particular in oral production, that emerges from average (M) and standard deviation (SD) values (Table 8), calls for differ-

entiated approaches when working with children who do not speak Italian outside the nursery school and to ensure the quality linguistic education of children who are members of the Italian national community and/or are Italian or bilingual Slovene-Italian speakers at home.

5. Conclusions

Even though Italian L1 speaking children in the Slovene Littoral have a right to receive education in their language, living up to the objective to maintain and foster Italian national community ethnolinguistic vitality has proven to be a challenge for preschool educational institutions. The linguistic heterogeneity in Italian schools has always been of great concern within the Italian national community, fearing that schools with Italian as the medium of instruction might not be able to offer the necessary institutional support for the safeguarding and fostering of Italian ethnic community vitality. Although not altogether comparable, the research results show that with time, the share of Italian speaking children, enrolled in schools with Italian as the medium of instruction, has remained stable, while there has been a significant drop in the number of bilingual children and a considerable increase in the number of Slovene L1 children.

The fear that educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction might not be able to fulfil their institutional role in maintaining the linguistic and ethnic vitality of the Italian national community is even stronger at the level of preschool education, since Italian nursery schools are not granted the same concession, namely, a reduced number of children per class, as is true for primary and upper-secondary schools. Smaller groups allow to differentiate teaching more efficiently and as such are an important factor in the learners' academic achievement. A significant number of children enrolled in Italian nursery schools in Slovenia, who are not members of the Italian community, strongly contributes to the complexity of the didactic process, while the large number of children per class means that differentiation and individualisation of didactic approaches cannot always be successfully applied.

Although our research shows that the linguistic development of Italian speaking children is not hindered by the significant presence of children whose L1 is not Italian or who are not bilingual Italian-Slovene speakers, we are confident that Italian nursery schools in Slovenia need more institutional and didactic support, which can be identified through research.

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Notes

- ¹ Nursery schools with Slovene as the medium of instruction carry out activities aimed at exposing children to the Italian language and its presence in the area, while in nursery schools with Italian as the medium of instruction, immersion into Italian culture – and language – through curricular contents, excursions, and workshops conducted by visiting professionals etc. is more extensive and intensive. The didactic approach towards plurilingualism and intercultural dialogue is essentially the same, but the context, the activities and the role of Italian are different.