Research project. The Babil task as a tool for assessing the bilingual profile: analysis of the relation between linguistic history and acquisition of preliteracy skills in language minority bilingual children.

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A vast literature examined the role of bilingual exposure on the development of linguistic skills in L1 and L2 in bilingual populations. In Italy (MIUR, 2017) about 10% of children inkindergartens come from migrant families and, although bilingualism is known to offer cognitive and metalinguistic advantages, often these children show a gap in linguistic skills compared to their monolingual peers. Given that bilingual children’s language knowledge is distributed over two languages, performance in either language alone is not expected to be equal to that of monolingual children of the same age. However, how much the rate of development of bilingual children differs from that of monolingual children and how this relates to factors such as amount of input is still not well understood. This is particularly true in the case of bilingual sequential language minority children, who are exposed to a second language (L2) mainly when they start attending kindergartens and who speak a minority language at home. This group is highly heterogeneous and an accurate evaluation of quality and quantity of exposure in both languages is necessary to understand how linguistic input modulates language development. Moreover, linguistic skills (phonology, vocabulary, narrative skills) in kindergarten, also defined as pre-literacy skills, are known to be important predictors of later reading development and school achievements.

A topic of particular interest is referred to the amount of translations equivalents and single words in the two languages and the BABEL Task offers a way to assess both L1 and L2 receptive vocabulary, as well as morpho-syntactic abilities. Further, as suggested by previous literature, it is essential to understand how linguistic skills in L1 and L2 relate to ecological measures of language production such as narrative skills. Finally, the analysis of efficacy of intervention programs allows understanding developmental trajectories of pre-literacy skills and defining good practices in educational and clinical setting.

The aims of the research project will be to analyze: the relationship between quality and quantity of exposure and linguistic skills in L1 / L2; the development of lexical skills, through the analysis of translation equivalents; trajectories of pre-literacy skills as a result of intervention programs. The study has a specific focus on the preschool age in bilingual sequential language minority children exposed to Italian as a second language.

The activity of the research grant includes a review of the international literature on the relationship between linguistic exposure and skills in L2, with particular reference to lexical, phonological and narrative skills. The project then requires the definition and implementation of an experimental study aimed at the assessment of L1 and L2 proficiency through the BABEL task and other tools for the analysis of linguistic skills and linguistic history in sequential minority bilingual children in preschool age. The project then requires to implement and assess the efficacy of an intervention program delivered in school settings on pre-literacy skills. Results of the research project will finally be analyzed and submitted to international peer-reviewed journals. The study will be conducted in kindergartens of the Municipality of Bologna and at the Department of Psychology, University of Bologna.