

# The Linguistic Skills of Foreign Students in the Italian School System

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**Abstract.** The relative stability of migration has led to the strong presence of immigrant children in the school. For some decades the Italian school has been faced up with the growing participation of students of foreign origin, although small compared to other countries. In this panorama we will have many young foreigners in the next few years with a degree obtained in Italy. This work aims to analyze the linguistic skills of foreigners on the basis of data collected by the Integration of second generations survey conducted in 2015 by the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT).

**Keywords:** Migration background · Foreigners · Language skills

## 1 Introduction

Italy was born as a country of emigrants with the great migratory waves of the last century, but at that time, the internal movements, which led to the urbanization of the great industrial areas of the North, led to a linguistic reshuffle that produced the spread of the national language [1].

In addition to the traditional endogenous plurilingualism that had characterized our language, by the coexistence of Italian and dialects, there is also an exogenous plurilingualism, or neo-multilingualism [2].

The presence of immigrant languages brought Italians in contact with so many cultures and idioms for the first time. Mainly the school has contributed to the socialization of foreign children with Italian children. For foreign students the school is the first place where takes place the matching between the world and the culture of the host country, and this is the first moment they capture the cultural differences of their family. At school, the learning of Italian language is combined with the learning of origin language, as an integral part of schooling, of primary socialization and identity making [3].

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In the literature, especially in North America, is stated that language learning continues to occur in the transition from one generation to another [4]. The second and third generations, born from immigration, "become more and more similar" to the native or autochthonous population (or deriving from previous migrations) [5], with the need to integrate as quickly as possible with the culture and society of the host country, learning to live according to the rules of the host society [6].

The second generation in the narrow sense, referring to the Recommendation of the Council of Europe in 1984, consists of children of immigrants:

- born in the host country;
- emigrated with their parents;
- who have reached their parents following family reunification or, in any case, after a period of emigration of one or both parents [7].

But, looking at the Italian reality, very different cases match with this category:

- teenagers and children who were born and raised in Italy, are completing the Italian schooling, but they cannot be Italian in the statistics, according to the ius soli (right tied to the place of birth), because the law (n. 91 of 1992) states that citizenship can only be claimed from maturity age and subject to restrictive conditions;
- children of mixed or nomadic couples, considered in full respects by the school system as children of foreign origin as carriers of cultural heterogeneity;
- adolescents joined after completing a broad socialization process in their origin country, or at least reaching their parents after an emigration period of one or both parents.

Furthermore, speaking of immigrant children, we should consider the categories of young immigrants also in reference to the age in which the young moved [8] and, therefore, we will talk about:

- generation 1.75 minor who moves abroad in the preschool age (0-5 years), and carries out the entire academic career in the destination country;
- generation 1.5 child who started primary school in the origin country, but completed school education abroad;
- 1.25 minor generation migrating between the ages of 13 and 17.

They are children and young people in primary education (in the family) and in secondary (at school) [9]. The new ITAGEN2 survey in the school year. 2005/2006 [10, 11].

In 2015, Istat conducted a survey on the integration of second generations co-financed by the European Union and the Ministry of the Interior to apply to the European Fund for the integration of third-country nationals (EIF) to analyze the various aspects of the integration of children with a migration background and different aspects including migration history, school integration, social relations, the family, the use of the Italian language, a sense of belonging and projects for the future [12].

## 2 The Master Profile of the Interviewed Students

### 2.1 Percentage Distribution by Citizenship and Country of Birth

The students with foreign citizenship included in the school system are around 815 thousand, equal to 9.2% of the school population as a whole (a percentage higher than that of foreigners relationship to the general population of 8.3%).

The Italian school model is structurally evolving, since some years the migratory origin students represent the dynamic component of Italian school system which contributes with its growth, to contain the decrease of the total school population: in the last five-year period 2011/12–2015/16 foreign students increased by 7.8%, while Italian students decreased by 2.3%. Furthermore, the migration phenomenon is assuming stabilizing characteristics, both for the characteristics of families migratory projects (boys are here without their will), and for the growing rate of immigrant children born in Italy, almost 60% of foreigners students (for all orders and grades), and now outnumber the children of migrants who arrived here after birth [13].

The Istat Integration of second generations survey, foreseen by the 2014–2016 National Statistical Program, is a sampling survey and involved 821 municipalities, it was held in approximately 1,400 secondary schools of first and second degree with at least 5 students of foreign citizenship. The students interviewed are:

- children of mixed couples,
- immigrant children of foreign citizenship (all types of Rumbaut),
- children adopted abroad (international adoptions),
- foreign immigrant children in Italy who have acquired Italian citizenship,
- foreign citizenship children born in Italy from foreign parents,
- children born in Italy from foreign parents who have acquired Italian citizenship,
- children born in Italy from Italian parents since birth.

In 2015, foreign secondary school enrollments amounted to 148 thousand in the first classes and 157 thousand in the second ones. Over 68 thousand students were interviewed, among them just less than half with foreign citizenship, as shown in Table 1 below. The foreign presence among the students interviewed is of 47.2% and concerning males is of 45.9

**Table 1.** Percentage distribution of respondents according to citizenship, by gender.

| Sex | Citizenship | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Italian | Foreign | Total |
| Males | 54.1 | 45.9 | 100.0 |
| Females | 52.8 | 47.2 | 100.0 |
| **Total** | **53.5** | **46.5** | **100.0** |

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

Among the interviewed students born in Italy, as shown in Table 2, the 20% are children of parents with foreign citizenship, while the 2.1% are Italians born abroad, for international adoptions or children of mixed couples with a biography often comparable to that of second generations [14].

**Table 2.** Percentage distribution of respondents by citizenship and country of birth.

| Country of birth | Citizenship | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Italian | Foreign | Total |
| Italy | 80.0 | 20.0 | 100.0 |
| Abroad | 2.1 | 97.9 | 100.0 |
| **Total** | **53.5** | **46.5** | **100.0** |

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

But next this general data, it is essential to look also at the of birth place of students with non-Italian citizenship present in the national territory. Unlike other European countries, immigration in Italy is characterized by the strong diversification of the countries of origin, even with concentration on some nationalities (Romania, Morocco, Albania, China), immigrants represent over 190 different citizenships [15, 16].

Foreign students interviewed, though the concentration in 6 prevalent nationalities: Romania, Albania, Morocco and the People's Republic of China, historic emigration areas towards Italy, and Moldova and Ukraine, new emigration areas, (in total about 20%), represent 162 different nationalities as shown in Table 3. The interviewed students of Romanian citizenship are the most numerous group in the Italian school with

**Table 3.** Percentage distribution of respondents born abroad, by country of birth.

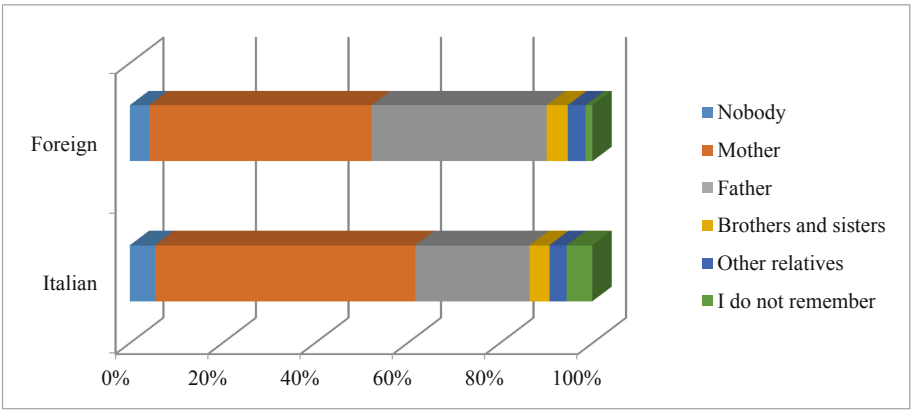
| Country of birth | % |
|---|---|
| Romania | 8.6 |
| Albania | 4.1 |
| Morocco | 2.3 |
| Moldova | 2.0 |
| Ukraine | 1.6 |
| Republic of China | 1.0 |
| Ecuador | 0.9 |
| Republic of Macedonia | 0.8 |
| Poland | 0.7 |
| Pakistan | 0.7 |
| India | 0.7 |
| Perù | 0.7 |
| Philippines | 0.7 |
| 150 more countries | 75.1 |

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

8.6%, followed by the Albanian students with the 4th, 1%, the Moroccans with 2.3%, the Moldovans with 2.0% and the Ukrainians with 1.6%. A massive presence is represented by Asian nationalities. Among these the most numerous is undoubtedly the Chinese one with 1.0%.

## 2.2 Percentage Distribution by Migratory Generation

The interviewed students arrived in Italy mainly with their mother, respectively 56.3% those with Italian citizenship and 48.0% those with foreign citizenship or with their father almost 25% of Italians and almost 38% of foreigners (Fig. 1). 4.2% is represented by unaccompanied minors without assistance and representation of parents or other legally responsible adults, plus Italian students (5.4%) of foreign ones, and taken in charge of educational projects carried out in Italy or adopted [17]. Between 3.8 and 4.6% of respondents arrived in Italy with brothers, sisters or other relatives.




Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations.

**Fig. 1.** Percentage distribution of respondents born abroad according to the person with whom they came to Italy and citizenship.

Considering the results of the survey and its characteristics of statistical representativeness, we can arrange the 815 thousand students with foreign citizenship who live in Italy in four groups:

- born in Italy, in fact comparable for linguistic skills to Italian speakers;
- born abroad and entered Italy before the age of 6 and not entered the school system;
- born abroad and entered Italy from 6 years to 11 and who started primary school in the country of origin;
- born abroad and entered Italy at the age of 11 and over and who have been included in the study course in their country of origin for some time.

The interviewed boys with foreign citizenship born in Italy are 30.4%, the second generations, the so-called foreigners but not immigrants; while foreigners entering Italy

at age 11 and over, defined as foreigners and even immigrants, are almost 20% of students, as shown in Table 4. In the middle there are different situations, namely those born abroad and entered Italy before the age of 6 and from 6 to 11 years, the so-called generation 1.5, about 50% [18], by experience, migration project, economic level and family culture, which largely determine the percentage of academic success.

**Table 4.** Percentage distribution of foreign respondents according to migratory generation and type of school.

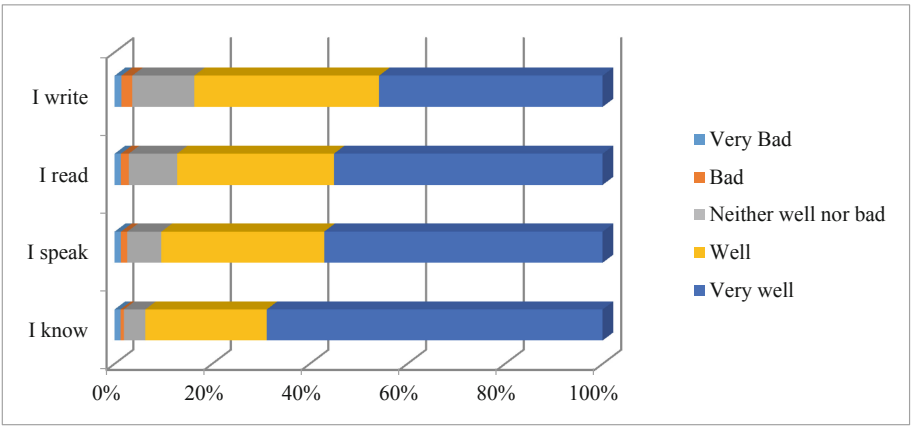
| Migration generation | Secondary school | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1st degree | 2nd degree | Total |
| Born in Italy | 43.1 | 18.4 | 30.4 |
| Born abroad and entered Italy before the age of 6 | 23.7 | 23.3 | 23.5 |
| Born abroad and entered Italy from 6 to 11 years | 22.0 | 30.1 | 26.2 |
| Born abroad and entered Italy at age 11 and over | 11.2 | 28.2 | 19.9 |
| **Total** | **100.0** | **100.0** | **100.0** |

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

## 3 Italian Language Skills for Foreign Students

The relative stability of migration project has determined the strong presence of immigrant children in the school. The learning of Italian language is fundamental, not only for scholastic success, but also in the context of scholastic and social integration strategies and it is the basic condition to understand and to be understood, to participate and to feel part of the community, scholastic and not [19].

The language for the study, distinct from the linguistic elaboration necessary in face-to-face communication (language to communicate) and required in school situations, has been recognized as the determining point, vehicular language, of the teaching-learning of Italian language [20]. As shown in Fig. 2, the Italian language is



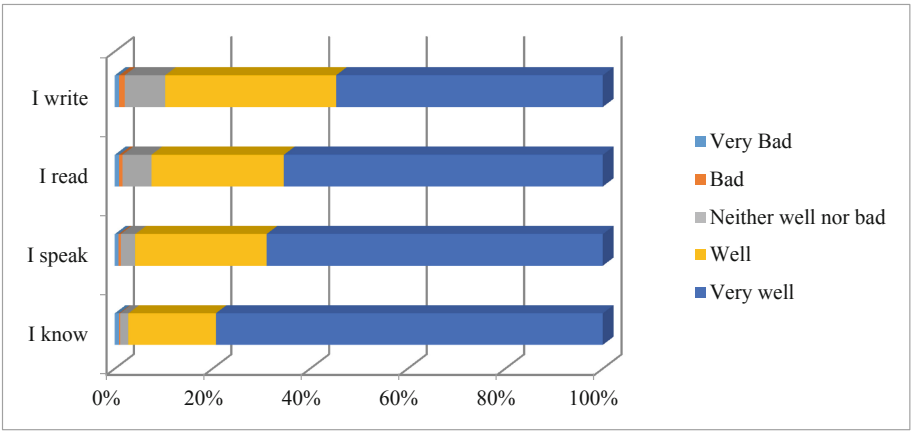

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

**Fig. 2.** Percentage distribution of students with foreign citizenship according to Italian knowledge levels, for language skills in Italian.

known fairly or very well by almost 94% of foreign students: 90.5% speak it quite well or very well, while more than 87% successfully read and study textbooks.

From the top, more than 16% of foreign students has difficulties in mastering the specific complexities of written Italian language (for self-assessment), which is indispensable for successfully studying the various subjects. The Italian language skills of students with foreign citizenship change if they have lived in Italy for at least 5 years, as shown in Fig. 3.

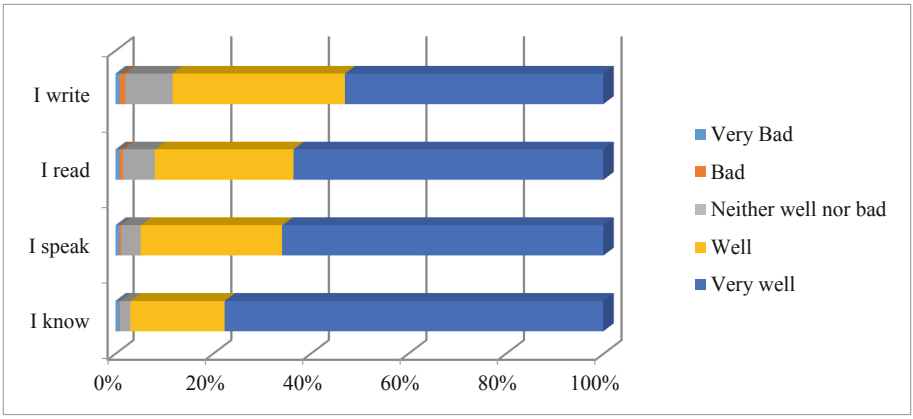
Among the foreign students who have been living in Italy for at least 5 years, over 97% understand the Italian language, almost 96% speak it and more than 92% can read it fairly or very well. Skills in writing also improve with just over 10% who write badly or very badly. To describe the relationship with Italian language by second generations and foreigners we often speak of filial language, as opposed to mother tongue, to emphasize that children are often the ones who bring Italian into their home. While on the one hand, the presence of children in immigrant families is a very important factor in linguistic integration, as it leads many parents to force to learn Italian better [21], and if the parent speaks Italian in Italian, children's linguistic competence grows significantly and aligns with students who have lived longer in Italy. In this context, children and parents play the role of mediators between the language-culture of origin, mother tongue, and the Italian one.




Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

**Fig. 3.** Percentage distribution of students with foreign citizenship who have lived in Italy for at least 5 years according to levels of knowledge of Italian, for language skills in Italian.

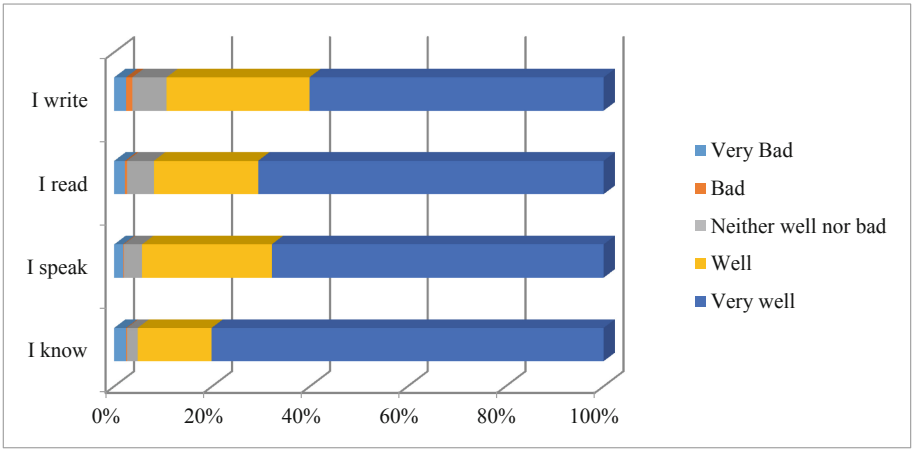
If the mother speaks Italian, the Italian language is known fairly or very well by almost 97% of foreign students, almost 95% speak it and almost 92% can read it fairly or very well, as shown in Fig. 4. Even the writing skills are better, in fact, more than 88% can write enough or very well. Making equal with foreigners who have been in Italy for longer, we will have less than 1% know, speak, read and write Italian very badly.




Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

**Fig. 4.** Percentage distribution of students with foreign citizenship who speak Italian with mothers according to levels of Italian knowledge, for language skills in Italian.

If, on the other hand, the father speaks Italian, 95% of foreign students know Italian well enough or very well, just over 94% speak it and almost 92% can read it (Fig. 5). Even writing skills are aligned with the values of students who have lived in Italy for more than 5 years with more than 89% who can write enough or very well.




Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

**Fig. 5.** Percentage distribution of students with foreign citizenship who speak Italian with fathers according to levels of Italian knowledge, for language skills in Italian.

## 4 Language Skills in Other Languages of Foreign Students

Very often, foreign children and young people who coming school are not only bilingual, but also multilingual. More than investigating the linguistic condition of foreign citizenship children and the use of Italian language in different contexts, in this research has been also examined the knowledge and the maintenance of the language of their origin countries language. Within the foreign student population, a rich and plural presence of mother tongues has been confirmed, a language spoken before schooling age (Table 5).

In the top position we have Romanian with 22.2% of students, followed by Albanian, 16.3%, and Arabic, 11.2%. Among the other languages known with significant quotas we find English with 7.5%, Spanish with 7.2%, Chinese with 5.3%, Hindi; Bengali; Tamil; Punjabi with 3.6%, the Filipino with 3.0% and the Ukrainian with 2.9%. 5.3% of foreign students recognize Italian as their mother tongue. Language is an articulated system of codes and symbols continuously changing and evolving because it is in continuous contact with both the other languages spoken or known, and with the environment within it is naturally used [22].

For Italian school it is not only important teaching Italian but also understanding in which language the foreign student thinks, to identify the linguistic possibilities that some mother tongues have towards Italian metaphors or allegories, as well as in the comprehension of complex mathematical or scientific abstractions [23].

It is essential to understand in which language the child thinks and what is the degree of completeness in the mastery of his mother tongue. In fact, according to the studies of Cummins [24] and Balboni [25], "what appears" on the surface "in linguistic communication is only a part of conceptualization and verbalization process that occurs in the mind".

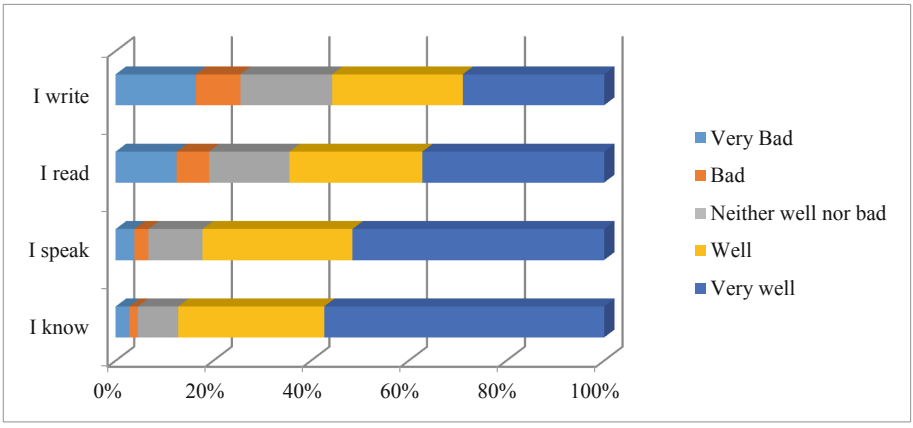
**Table 5.** Percentage distribution of students with foreign citizenship according to the native language.

| Native language | % |
|---|---|
| Romanian | 22.2 |
| Albanian | 16.3 |
| Arabic | 11.2 |
| English | 7.5 |
| Spanish | 7.2 |
| Chinese | 5.3 |
| Italian | 5.3 |
| "Hindi; Bengalese; Tamil; Punjabi" | 3.6 |
| Filipino (Tagalog) | 3.0 |
| Ukrainian | 2.9 |
| 10 other languages | 15.5 |

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

Competence in a language (mother, foreign or second) reflects on the whole linguistic and conceptual individual repertory. It follows that the lack of mastery of any mother tongue in terms of completeness and complexity can create to the foreign boy often unacceptable obstacles to understanding of abstractions, even simple, typical of the Italian language. He is therefore dramatically excluded from the language of the study and consequently from scholastic success [20].

The most positive linguistic environment is one in which the language is used naturally for communication. Considering however that the family is the main agent for maintaining the mother tongue, we examine the knowledge degree of the language parents other than Italian by the students. Figure 6 shows the results of the level of knowledge of the mother's language. Just over 87% of students know it well or very well, just over 82% speak it, 64% read it and almost 56% can write it.

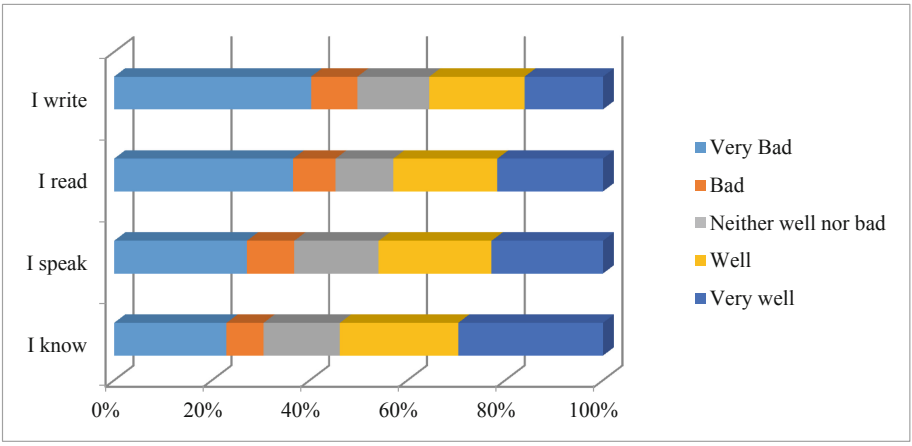



Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

**Fig. 6.** Percentage distribution of students according to the level of knowledge of the mother's language other than Italian, by type of competence.

We will discover a different scenery if we analyze the student's knowledge of his father's language other than Italian. More than 54% know it quite or very well, almost 46% speak it, the law almost 43% and 35.5% write it, as shown in Fig. 7.

So, the foreign student brings with him a wealth of knowledge (linguistic, cultural, relational, etc.) which, depending on the context and the interlocutor, can express in one of the different languages he knows.




Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

**Fig. 7.** Percentage distribution of students according to the level of knowledge of the father's language other than Italian, by type of competence.

## 5 Socialization

The main aspect to be taken in consideration in order to adeguately assess the scenery changes that immigrant languages will be able to determine in the linguistic landscape, is the use of the Italian language with the various interlocutors, family, school and friends.

The verbal language label "language for the study" emphasizes the need to distinguish between the linguistic processing required in face-to-face communication, the so-called language for communicating and the language required in school situations.

Face-to-face communication uses different elements (tone, rhythm, pauses, look, facial expressions, gestures, etc.), while in school situations, a type of formal communication prevails. A goal of linguistic education is, therefore, the development of communicative competence [26].

The relative majority of foreign students declare that they speak mainly Italian in the scholastic context, which however is not the only occasion for foreign students to learn language. As Table 6 shows, we will have 91.5% of foreign students speak Italian with teachers, 80% with classmates, 57.2% who use it with friends and acquaintances and almost 20% in family.

Many students, children of immigrant, especially second-generation immigrants, sometimes speak Italian with the local audio dial-ups of regional dialects, 5.2% do it in the family and with friends and acquaintances, much less in the school environment: with their classmates school, 3.8%, and with teachers, less than 1%.

In the family almost 30% of students very often use a foreign language and 34.5% use both Italian and foreign languages indifferently.

While, with friends and acquaintances, 19.5% of students indifferently use both Italian and foreign languages.

**Table 6.** Percentage distribution of students with foreign citizenship according to the language used by type of interlocutors.

| With which language you speak | Interlocutors | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | In family | With schoolmates | With friends/acquaintances | With teachers |
| Almost always in Italian | 18.8 | 80.0 | 57.2 | 91.5 |
| Almost always in the dialect of the region where I live | 5.2 | 3.8 | 5.3 | 0.8 |
| Almost always in another (foreign) language | 29.7 | 0.7 | 5.8 | 0.4 |
| Almost always in Italian and in the dialect of the region where I live | 3.8 | 8.7 | 8.2 | 2.7 |
| Almost always in Italian and in another language (foreign) | 34.5 | 3.7 | 19.5 | 1.7 |
| Almost always in the dialect of the region where I live and in another (foreign) language | 5.5 | 0.6 | 1.5 | 0.4 |
| Not responding | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| **Total** | **100.0** | **100.0** | **100.0** | **100.0** |

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

The conquest of the Italian-language as a primary language by foreign students has determined the coexistence between mother tongue, adoptive language and dialect, opening new expressive spaces to be lived not as a defect, but as an extra variety, for friendship, playful and creative use [2].

The socialization with the companions and friends also starts from the recreational activities that the students with foreign citizenship realize. 55.8% say they use Italian to watch TV and almost 68% to read comics, books, newspapers and magazines, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Percentage distribution of students with foreign citizenship according to the language used, by type of recreational activity.

| Language used | Play activity | |
|---|---|---|
| | Watch television programs | Read comics, books, magazines, newspapers |
| Especially in Italian | 55.8 | 67.6 |
| A little in Italian a little in another language | 34.0 | 20.1 |
| Especially in another language | 6.3 | 3.7 |
| I don't watch TV, I don't read comics, books, newspapers, etc. | 3.9 | 8.5 |
| **Total** | **100.0** | **100.0** |

Source: ISTAT. Integration of the second generations 2015. Our elaborations

Of the total number of students, 34% watch TV programs in Italian a little in another language, while 6.3% do it in another language; more than 20% read comics, books, newspapers, and magazines a little in Italian a little in another language, while 3.7% always do it in another language. They declare not to watch TV, not to read comics, books, newspapers and magazines, respectively 3.9% and 8.5% of the boys interviewed.

## 6 Conclusions

The survey shows that 20% of students, mostly Romanians and Albanians, are students born in Italy but children of parents with non-Italian citizenship.

The majority of students with foreign citizenship came to Italy for the first time accompanied by their mother; they know, speak and read Italian very well, a little less they know how to write. These language skills improve if the students have been in Italy for several years or one of the parents knows Italian. Furthermore, variables linked to the mastery of the language have a strong impact on the academic success of foreign students [27].

Another characteristic of non-Italian mother tongue students is bilingualism, or speaking a language at school and another at home; in fact the non-Italian-speaking student learns Italian to study but also by studying and interacting with teachers and schoolmates so that the socialization process using the Italian language is very good.

Finally, it is clear that having a command of the language favors insertion and good integration, this allows to satisfy primary needs of life and also to get full participation in the activities of our society by interacting adequately.

The foreigner and his linguistic and cultural baggage must be seen as an advantage as a basis on which to develop the potential, also in favor of Italian students; it can also represent an ideal base for plurilingualism and multiculturalism [28, 29] so that the presence of foreign students can really be an opportunity and an opportunity for change for the whole school, a school that could make the most of richness of diversities.

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