

*Loquor, ergo sum:
from communicative competence
through bilingualism
to metalinguistic/metacognitive development*

Renzo Titone*

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RESUMO – A tese central deste artigo consiste na afirmação de que uma verdadeira competência bilingual implica o mínimo de duas línguas, não somente no nível tático das habilidades sensório-motoras na produção e recepção da comunicação verbal, mas principalmente nos níveis estratégico e ego-dinâmico de uma adequada compreensão cognitiva das estruturas lingüísticas. Procura-se esclarecer algumas afirmações contemporâneas importantes da Psicolingüística onde a confusão ou a negligência são dominantes e que comprometem uma sadia prática educacional.

ABSTRACT – This essay is intended to clarify some important contemporary issues in Psycholinguistics where confusion or neglect is dominant and endangering sound educational practice. Some reflections over the notions of communicative competence as the pivot of language will be presented. The central thesis is that real *bilingual competence* implies the mastering of two languages not only on the *tactical* level of sensory motor skills on decoding and encoding verbal communication, but, above all, on the *strategic and ego-dynamic* levels of adequate cognitive comprehension of language structure.

* University of Rome. University of Toronto.

1 Introduction

The purpose of my essay is to clarify some important contemporary issues in Psycholinguistics – applied to language teaching – where confusion or neglect are dominant and endangering sound educational practice. In particular, I would like to share some reflections over the notions of ‘communicative competence’ as the pivot of language learning/teaching. This notion is all too often misunderstood; and, as it relates to bilingual education, diverts us from a very important educational goal: what is called by modern educational *psycholinguists metacognitive/metalinguistic development*.

My thesis is that real ‘bilingual competence’ implies the mastering of two languages

- not only on the *tactical* level of sensory-motor skills in decoding and encoding verbal communication, but, above all,
- on the *strategic and ego-dynamic* levels of adequate cognitive comprehension of language structures – and especially of linguistic and personal consciousness of the human values of language and culture.

Linguistic – communicative competence in two languages/cultures becomes an invaluable asset of the human communicator – if, and only if – the total human personality, in its performative, cognitive, and deeply conscious dimensions, is involved in the command of the two communication systems.

My discussion is divided into two parts:

- What is the meaning and significance of a ‘personological’ view of language and ‘communicative competence’?
- Is it ascertained by research that true ‘bilingual competence’ generates a high degree of ‘metacognitive/metalinguistic development’?

2 Redefining communicative competence

2.1 Communicative competence and a personological view of language

Since the late Sixties there has been a great deal of talking about ‘communicative competence’ as opposed to ‘Linguistic competence’. The discussion has become more heated as language teaching specialists have taken a hold of the notion of ‘communi-

cative’ as the pivotal concept of language pedagogy, especially vis-a-vis second language acquisition. The so called ‘communicative approach’ has become the dominant trend in many countries under various forms, like the Council of Europe’s proposal of the widely applied ‘notional-functional syllabus. Heated discussions usually beget chaos and conceptual confusion. So has it happened in the applied psycholinguistics field.

What is the problem? If, on one hand, the new notion of ‘communicative competence’ is weighted on the side of the adjective – communicative – it may be reductive on the side of the noun – competence. My contention is that ‘competence’ is a notion that overrides the limitations of a behavioural view of language learning; and it overrides a chomskian view in that it embodies a process rather than a structure. Competence deals with a cognitive command of both linguistic rules and pragmatic constraints.

But, on the other hand, an ill-defined notion of competence risks falling into two reductive parameters, namely:

- cognition reduced to declarative knowledge of an abstract and static nature, or the opposite, to mere operational knowledge of an essentially concrete nature such as characterizes practical skills;
- pure cognition in a strictly rational perspective, ignoring the role of affective, deeply personal factors, clustered around the deep core of the Ego/Self.

In the former the communicator is viewed merely as a thinking intellect or, vice versa, as a mechanically operating system. In the latter the communicator is considered as pure intellect devoid of affections, emotions, motivations, attitudes, in short as a cold, frozen, insensitive individual not as a fully living Person.

Is there a way out of such an impasse? Yes, if we redefine Competence and Communication in deeper and richer terms, namely by taking account of the essential structural and dynamic components of the communicating personality. This proposed solution will be discussed by

- redefining the notion of competence;
- by considering communicative competence as including structurally and dynamically linguistic competence;
- by placing communicative competence into its appropriate role, viz. as an asset of the Speaking Person;
- by proposing a holodynamic view of communicative competence in light of the so-called Holodynamic Model of language behaviour and language learning.

2.2 Redefining the notion of competence

'Competence' essentially means the mastering of both knowledge and skill. It implies knowing the rules and paradigms of action; but, at the same time, being capable of using instrumental strategies and tactics aimed at definite objectives. In sum, it is tantamount to a dynamically structured system of awareness and skillfulness, both as essential prerequisites to any successful operation. Both declarative and operational knowledge must be present in the acting organism, implying the ability to carry out well-conceived operations according to the demands of accuracy and fluency. In the case of language competence it is understood that the speaker-hearer ought to master all the rules specific of a definite language system on all its levels (phonology-phonetics, morphology-syntax, semantics-lexicon), but at the same time to command the automatic performance of language units and sequences. The planning, previewing, connecting of language sequences must moreover be carried out under the conscious control of the speaker's Ego or Self, at least in the starting moment of these operations. Furthermore, the fact that the Ego/Self is not an isolated monad breathing out pure self-expressions but, in using language, aims at sending out messages, i.e., 'communicating', to an interlocutor in a vital dialectic exchange between Ego and the World, urges the consideration of the interactional character of communication. This demands taking account of and agreeing with social rules govern communicative interaction. All of this amounts to saying that both knowledge and skills constituting 'competence' are to be working on all the systemic levels of the Language system but also, no less, in the sphere of pragmatic relations. Hence the enlarged notion of 'communicative competence' as encompassing the more restricted notion of 'Linguistic competence'.

2.3 Communicative competence/linguistic competence

It would be wrong to oppose 'communicative competence' to 'linguistic competence' as if they were non-inclusive and heterogeneous notions. In reality, no communication is possible without the use of linguistic (and non-linguistic) tools. Language as performance (*parole*) prerequisites the existence and availability of language as a system (*langue*).

Therefore linguistic competence must be mastered before one is able to perform verbal communication. Communication is a

wider pale containing language. But language and linguistic command are not sufficient in themselves to ensure interpersonal contact, or real communication, if they are devoid of the knowledge of social rules ensuring and governing effective communication. The 'pragmatic' component adds an essential element to procedural knowledge of the "how" of the communication process.

It is precisely this attention to the pragmatic rules and conditions of communicating that call imperiously for the active participation of the total of the communicator's personality at all levels, conscious, subconscious, unconscious. If one can imagine a speaking machine programmed to produce and put out linguistic 'objects' – like automatically produced sentences – it is absurd to imagine an unconscious or mechanical emission of messages – which by their very nature imply the intention to communicate with another person. In short, no communication can take place without the conscious, intentioned, participation of at least two persons. There is no such thing as non-personalized communication, although most improperly one could speak of 'impersonal messages' in quite a different sense.

2.4 Communicative competence as an asset of the speaking person

The pivotal terms involved in authentic communication are therefore: *person, intention, context, message*. The interesting speculations developed by Malinowsky (1935), Morris (1946), Gumperz and Hymes (1964), Halliday (1973), and others, have helped define the elements of communicative competence, from the role of social context, to the meaning of message, all the way to the role of intentions and functions in the pragmatic use of language. *But very few have perceived the basic relevance of the role of the Person in the act of human communication.*

Such heightened view of human interaction demands a philosophical view or at least a metatheoretical concern over the total reality of human communication. Perhaps, the one thinker who best has speculated over the role of the Self and of Selfhood in human communication has been the French semiotician, Paul Ricoeur (e.g. in his collection of essays entitled "Soi-même comme un autre", 1990). He has duly emphasized the personalized, conscientized character of discourse, from a philosophical, logical, linguistic, and semiotic perspective. I would gladly speak of a Psycholinguistic and Psychosemiotic Personalism as a fundamental meta-

theory of human communication. This view is substantialized into an integrated model of the acting Personality, which will be the focus of the following discussion.

2.5 A holodynamic view of communicative competence

I introduced the term 'holodynamic' attached to the term Model (1973 et passim) when trying to define the dynamics of human activity in all areas, and especially in the linguistic-communicative area, viewed from the perspective of the structure of Human Personality. The adjective means that all (holos) the essential components of personal activity (dynamis) are present in human behaviour and human learning. More so in the case of language and communication as human activities.

Beyond a merely cybernetic view, implying both strategic and tactical operations, the Human Being needs the initiative power and the deep-seated control of the Self or Ego (not in the Freudian sense) whatever action is performed in the fullness of humanity. This means that all worthy human behaviour and learning, more so when language is involved, needs the simultaneous participation of the three operational levels: viz.,

- the *Tactic Level* (of sensory-motor performances, like encoding and decoding),
- the *Strategic Level* (of mental programming, selecting, ordering, controlling, reviewing, correcting, through all sorts of feedback operations), and
- the *Ego-dynamic Level* (of deep conscious and unconscious motivations, desires, attitudes, intentions, decisions, under the control of self-consciousness and language awareness, over social rules of interpersonal contact).

Where does "communicative competence" lie? Where is the source and the performing of communicative acts located? Why is Man responsible for all his words? Why, in sum, is speech so tremendously important with respect to human existence and destiny? Certainly, neither linguistics nor psychology can give answers to these questions: they belong on a higher level, the level of philosophical wisdom.

Concretely speaking, the source theory of my proposal is explained by the merging of two Models: the psychological Holodynamic Model with the neurological Bimodal Model (see Fig. 1). The teaching/learning process entailed in the achievement of competence is to be specified on the three basic levels of the Active

Personality (see Fig. 2), while a Person-centered Communicative Competence Model implies cross-breeding between personality levels on one side and structure and function components of competence, both on the linguistic level and on the communicative level, on the other.

R. Titone's "Holodynamic Model"

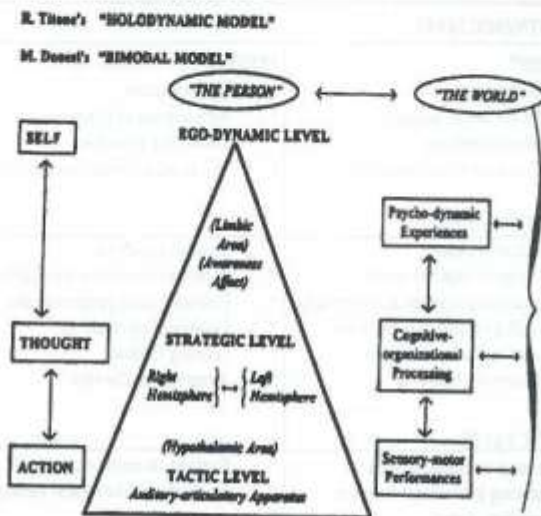
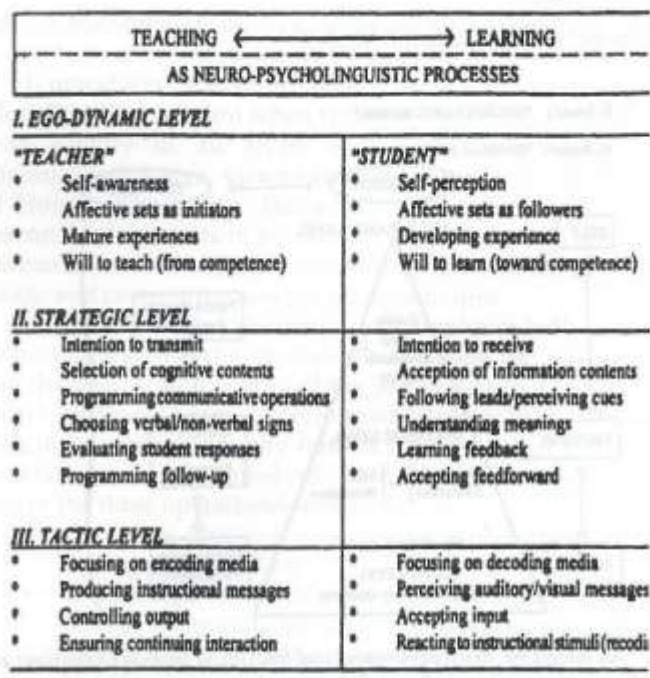


Figure 1. An integrated descriptive/operational MODEL of language behaviour and language learning (a neuro psycholinguistic framework)

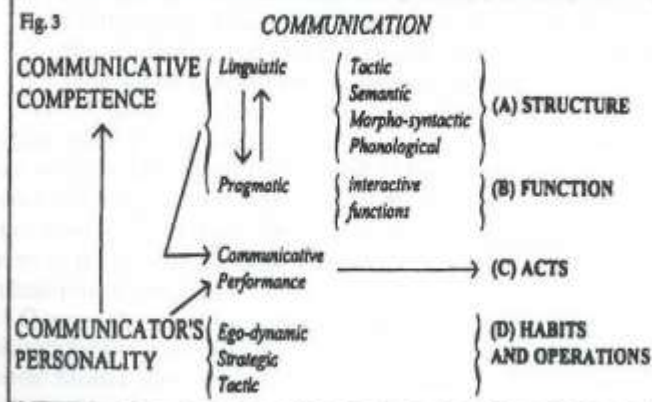
Fig. 2 Titone's "TEACHING/LEARNING HOLODYNAMIC MODEL" (Toronto 1990)



3 Bilingual education and the development of metalinguistic abilities: a research project

To begin with, we must acknowledge that bilingual competence represents the summit of communicative ability. Furthermore, the vital connection between bilingualism as a psychological state and metacognition/metalinguistic consciousness has been recently underlined and repeatedly confirmed by research. Theoreticians and researchers from different countries and more or less complex linguistic and cultural settings have brought evidence to the positive correlation between the two individual states, provided certain social, psychological, and educational conditions have been ensured. The purpose of my contribution will be that of bringing to the attention of educational psycholinguists the results of some investigations and experiments carried out in linguistic and cultural settings where Italian is the first spoken language of bilingual and diglossic individuals from a very early age (pre-school and primary school education).

After summarizing the main features of our research project on metalinguistic abilities, I will outline our basic hypotheses, clarify a few terminological assumptions, and present the results of some investigations carried on in Italian settings.



3.1 *An ongoing research project on metalinguistic development: italian settings: monolingualism, diglossia, bilingualism*

As is well known, Italy is a mixed-lingual country with over 10 dialects of a very different historical origin and four languages added to the national language, Italian, viz. French, German, Slovenian, and Albanian. These four second languages are currently taught and used since kindergarten level in special-statute Regions: Valley of Aoste, Alto Adige, Friuli, Puglia-Calabria/Sicily. (It should be added that a fifth language, Ladino, is semi-officially used and taught in a restricted area of the Province of Trento). We have accordingly truly bilingual areas protected by special laws and enjoying bilingual schooling from kindergarten, or at least primary school levels.

Besides these cases of societal bilingualism we have a high percentage of diglossic speakers who, outside of school premises, use both the local dialect and the standard national language according to varying social situations. In some cases dialects have been recaptured and also literally reintegrated, with a spreading tendency toward even teaching them in certain elementary schools. In these cases, beside the maintenance of oral competence, the goal of some supporters is that of developing writing skills and even of teaching some formal grammar where the dialect has been studied with modern linguistic methods.

A third situation is the condition of monolingual speakers who since early childhood have only spoken the national language, Italian, even though with unavoidable regional inflections and a slightly peculiar regional lexicon (Italo-Sicilian, Italo-Neapolitan, Italo-Piedmontese, Italo-Lombard, Italo-Venetian, etc.).

But all monolingual speakers, going through complete formal education, at least up to Junior High School (Scuola Media: age 11-14), are bound to study at least one foreign language, and after Junior High School even two or three foreign languages (one should remember that the current Italian Elementary School Syllabus, approved in 1985, enforces the acquisition of one foreign language from Grade I, or at least Grade III. This means that, if we cannot speak of real acquired bilingualism, we are at least entitled to speak of a sort of "enriched monolingualism").

Within this developing perspective we have decided to launch a research project aiming at checking the educational and psychosocial outcomes of such a mixed lingual and pluricultural situation by testing the degree of metacognitive and metalinguistic development of students submitted to bilingual education or at least to

diglossic behavior. Our subjects of analysis represent very different age levels and educational curricula: kindergarten (age 3-5), elementary schools (age 6-11), middle schools (age 11-14), secondary schools (age 15-19). In order to evaluate the degree of metalinguistic development we have devised a special test – TAM: *Metalinguistic Abilities Test* – that has been developed and standardized in three forms (Form A: kindergarten; Form B: elementary and middle School; Form C: secondary school). The test has been correlated with other measures and variables, namely: Linguistic Aptitude, Age, Sex, Social Class, Schooling Level, and especially bilingual and/or diglossic competence. The investigations I am going to report on will deal with monolingual subjects, diglossic and bilingual/trilingual subjects.

3.2 *Extension to other countries*

In order to check on the validity of our hypotheses and evaluation tools, we are now trying to extend our research to other national settings, namely: Spain, with reference to speakers of Castilian and Catalunyan (Barcelona), and to speakers of Castilian and Andaluzian (Huelva); secondly Canada, with reference to speakers of Italian and English or French (Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal). We are in the process of translating and adapting our test of metalinguistic abilities, which indeed was drawn from an earlier sketch formulated by Hakes (1980) and further articulated into special metalinguistic abilities and subtests (Titone & Pinto, 1989).

Our conviction that bilinguality is a powerful factor, from a very early age, in the special development of metalinguistic abilities and consciousness, has already been confirmed and supported not only by other investigations (in Canada, Australia, USA) but also by our results gathered since 1985 in Italy. I will now go on to discussing other aspects of our problem.

3.3 *Some basic hypotheses*

We can distinguish three main cases where the relationship between linguistic competence and metalinguistic consciousness can be detected: (1) Monolingual education vs. diglossic competence; (2) early L2 acquisition vs. monolingual education; (3) bilingual education vs. Monolingual education. Our hypotheses accordingly can be defined as follows:

- (1) Monolingual education has the lowest chance of producing a high degree of metacognition, having as its only resource the factors tied with literacy, and specifically learning to read and intensive/extensive reading as a reflective activity.
- (2) Diglossic competence, provided it is systematically submitted to special teaching strategies, can become a source for analytic reflection over language texts. But to become effective from the point of view of reflective ability teaching must be oriented towards deep comparative/contrastive analysis of the two codes, the low language and the high language (to use Ferguson's terminology).
- (3) Bilingual education has the highest chance of providing food for thought, in that it can stimulate, spontaneously or systematically, analytic reflection over the structures and functions of the two Languages and their cultures, being both actively present and working within the mind of the bilingual speakers and most of all being equally the media and the contents of a rich educational process. The level of effectiveness of bilingual education *stricto sensu* can be approached by a very productive teaching/learning of a foreign language (experiences to this regard consider intensiveness and extensiveness of time of instruction, beside appropriateness of teaching methodology, as essential factors for attaining significant results).

Next to bilingual education we have found that conscious and systematic exploitation of diglossic competence, by bearing the student's attention upon the structure of the dialectal code, can have a particular effect upon metalinguistic consciousness. But what do we mean by the terms "Language Awareness", "Metalinguistic Consciousness", "Metalinguistic Abilities" (and incidentally "Epilinguistic Awareness")?

3.4 Terminological assumptions

Writers frequently fall into ambiguities or haziness in using these terms, with great damage to the definition of research objectives and to the interpretation of results. I (Titone, 1985) usually distinguish language awareness from metalinguistic consciousness. The former characterized as implicit, caused by cognitive maturation and appearing prior to formal schooling. The latter characterized as formal, rational, intentional, declarative knowledge of the sign and symbol systems common to languages, appearing at about 12 years, after exposure to formal schooling.

As reported in Titone (1985), Tunmer and Harriman (1984) suggested that major views of metalinguistic awareness include (a) those who see it as part and parcel with the language acquisition process, (b) those who see it as distinct, and of unique importance, (c) those who employ the information processing metaphor to describe and explain this concept, and those (d) who see it as a consequence of reading and grammar skills. Indeed, the notion of metalinguistic consciousness is a higher order ability that follows the attainment of a certain level of proficiency in reading and grammar. The interesting point to be made here is that bilinguality as a psychological state involving intelligence factors and motivational attitudes, seem to be a particularly powerful factors in influencing development of metalinguistic consciousness even in very young children grown up in a state of simultaneous bilingualism. And this independently of the type of first and second languages acquired and used. (For further discussion of terminological definitions cf. MacClaren, 1989.)

We should add here one more concept proposed more recently, i.e. "Epilinguistic Awareness". As Gombert (1990/1992) states: "We shall employ the term "Epilinguistic" to designate the "unconscious metalinguistic activities", supposing by definition that a reflective, intentional character is inherent in metalinguistic activity in the strict sense of the term" (p. 10). Thus we could say that "Epilinguistic awareness" is an implicit type of reference to the working of languages, a sort of intuitive knowledge following or governing the elements of speech acts. But, if this notion may have a relevance in the analysis of language acquisition processes in children, I think that its relevance is almost null in the case of advanced bilingual behaviour, especially where the case refers to school-directed acquisition. Here "metalinguistic consciousness" may be more important and pertinent.

3.5 Some investigations in Italian settings

I will – for the sake of illustration – consider only a selection of eight cases studied by my research coworkers.

CASE I. Early bilingual education and cognitive flexibility (Veccia 1989).

- a) Objectives of the investigation. The following are the preliminary questions asked by the researcher:

- Does L2 competence improve competence in L1 ?
 - What is the degree of metalinguistic development acquired by young bilingual children?
 - Is bilingualism a factor enhancing the disappearance of egocentrism?
 - Is cognitive flexibility (and intellectual creativity) enhanced by bilingual acquisition?
- b) The sample was made up of two groups of subjects: an experimental group of 19 children and a control group of 18 children, age 3:4-4:4. Their social extraction was mixed class. The second language taught was French in a Southern area of Italy (Avellino kindergartens).
- c) The testing tools were:
- an intelligence test (Terman-Merrill) with IQ as a result;
 - tests of oral comprehension and production in L1; a test on nominal realism and cognitive flexibility;
 - a test of oral comprehension in L2 (French).
- d) Results: both the awareness of the conventional nature of names and the ability to invent new semantic contents and new words were very high (87.5% in the experimental group vs. 50% in the control group). It is granted that these two traits mark some important aspects of metalinguistic consciousness. And they were stimulated by the acquisition of a second language (French), very different from the first language (Italian/Neapolitan).

CASE II. "Metalinguistic development in elementary school children speaking Italian and Albanian" (D' Errico, 1988).

- a) Objectives: the influence of comparative analysis of Italian and Albanian upon metalinguistic development.
- b) Sample: 20 bilingual children of two V grade classes from the Province of Cosenza
- c) Tools: a teaching method based on analytic comparison of the two languages starting from Grade II. The evaluation was made on the basis of a questionnaire on the social perception of the two codes, of translation of texts from Italian into Albanian, and TAM (metalinguistic abilities test).
- d) Results: with regard to the control group the children tested showed superiority especially in certain metalinguistic abilities, viz. comprehension, semantic disambiguation, and semantic acceptability.

The pedagogical method followed seems therefore to be highly relevant, namely guiding the children to comparative analysis of the structures of the two language systems.

CASE III. "Trilingual education in the Elementary schools and cognitive development" (Pilotti, 1990).

- a) Objectives: To measure the correlation between diglossic + bilingual competence and metacognitive abilities.
- b) Sample: 244 Subjects comprising 4 Grade I classes + 5 Grade III classes in a mountain village of the province of Turin (North Italy) studying Italian, English, and the local Dialect: distributed into experimental groups and control groups.
- c) Tools: a questionnaire on the social class of the Ss, an intelligence test, linguistic tests in the four skills of all 3 languages. Moreover, an evaluation of socio-linguistic attitudes toward the three codes, added to the children's trilingual competence.
- d) Results: Cognitive development appeared to be higher after one-year instruction in all experimental groups both in Grade I and Grade III. Language development was also significantly higher in all experimental groups: better oral production (esp. with regard to lexical competence), better written production (also with regard to lexicon), and less morpho-syntactic errors.

CASE IV. "Cognitive development and trilingual competence" (Punxeddu 1989).

- a) Objectives: To measure the degree of cognitive development in trilingual children, speaking Sardinian (Cagliari), Italian and studying English, in Elementary Schools.
- b) Sample: 30 Ss from 2 Grade V classes and from low social class (agricultural).
- c) Tools: reading tests and oral translation from and into the 3 languages; also written production in Italian.
- d) Results: First of all, the use of the Sardinian language did not represent any obstacle either to competence in Italian or to the acquisition of English. Neither were the social factors a handicap to the acquisition of L1 and L2. The "transfer effect" (Cummins, 1974) was altogether evident.

CASE V. "Metalinguistic development in junior adolescents (Middle schools)" (Ottavi, 1988).

- a) Objectives: it measured the interrelation between different language and cognitive abilities as a function of the level of schooling (Grades VI, VII & VIII).

- b) Sample: 60 Ss belonging to Grades VI, VII, and VIII of the Italian Middle School system all monolingual.
- c) Tools: Administration of the TAM (Metalinguistic Abilities Test).
- d) Results: no significant differences among the three grades (Grade VII seems to be the culminating point of cognitive development). Metalinguistic consciousness depends on global intellectual development. The absence of influence from foreign language study seems to be one of the reasons for lack of significant metacognitive growth.

CASE VI. "Metalinguistic development in students of Junior High school (Middle school) level" (Elia, 1991).

- a) Objectives: to ascertain dependence of metalinguistic development on social class level. (The use of the local dialect is implied but not considered as a teaching goal).
- b) Sample: 36 Ss in Grade VI (age 11:5). From varying social classes, with some diglossic component.
- c) Tools: the TAM (metalinguistic abilities test).
- d) Results: The social class level seems to determine metalinguistic consciousness to some degree through the medium of the national language, Italian, as a dominant medium both in the home environment and in school. The higher the social level of the home, the more developed will be the level of cognitive/metacognitive development, but to some conditions (like the use of the language, reading habits, contact with a second language).

CASE VII. "Metalinguistic abilities and L2 learning in the elementary school" (Di Bernardino, 1996).

- a) Objectives: to ascertain the degree of metalinguistic development in elementary school children studying a foreign language and the impact on this effect of properly planned teaching strategies.
- b) Subjects: 121 children studying foreign languages during a three-year period (3rd, 4th, and 5th grades) of which sample half were FL students and half following a monolingual curriculum.
- c) Measurements: entrance examinations consisting of an IQ Test (WISC) + a linguistic aptitude test for children (TALB) by Titone; final assessment on the basis of proficiency tests in FL comprehension and productions, mainly oral, and especially a

metalinguistic abilities test (TAM 2nd level: age 9-13), made and standardized by Titone and Pinto.

- d) Instructional approach: special teaching strategies leading to developing levels of language awareness, based upon a combination of the communicative approach in terms of the 'notional-functional syllabus' with procedures leading the pupils to forms of analytic-comparative reflections upon the assimilated patterns of the L2 (English, French, or German in comparison with L1, Italian).
- e) Results: in all subtests of the Metalinguistic Abilities Test the Ss of the experimental group were significantly superior to the Ss of the control groups even in the case where language abilities were equal in both groups.

CASE VIII. "Metalinguistic development and L2 learning in the middle school (junior High School)" (Gambellini, 1996).

- a) Objectives: Ascertaining the cognitive advantages of L2 learning at middle school level (esp. grades 6th and 8th), after a differing period of time in studying the L2 at the elementary school level.
- b) Subjects: students at High School level with prior L2 learning in the elementary school (experimental group) and students L2 beginners at Junior High School level (control group).
- c) Measurement tools: a questionnaire at the outset, Standard Progressives Matrices 38 by Raven, and at the end the Metalinguistic Abilities Test (TAM 2).
- d) Results: The sample of Ss involved 142 Ss, of which 60 belonged to VI grade and 82 to VIII grade: 50% having studied L2 previously, 50% not having had any initiation. The languages studied were English or French or Spanish. One global result consisted in the level of metalinguistic ability: an average score of 50.8 in the experimental group, and of 42.2 in the control group. The conclusion was that a decisive factor in metalinguistic progress consisted in the longer period of time devoted to L2 learning (starting in the elementary school), whereas natural progress in age and schooling was not significantly influential independently from previous L2 contact.

4 Conclusions

We are at present – as said above – developing further applications of our objectives and experimental tools to other samples of learners and settings. Having the opportunity of longitudinal investigations through all grades of Italian elementary schools, but also of kindergartens in different Regions and Provinces of Italy, all the way through secondary schools, in which at least one foreign language is taught, or where bilingual education programs are being developed, we will be able to compare longitudinal results in metalinguistic development.

At the same time ascertainment of the same variables in different countries (Spain, Canada) will make it possible to establish cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons. We believe in the effectiveness and meaningfulness of this perspective which underlines the primary importance of language acquisition not merely as a communicative tool but above all as a formative factor addressed to the development of the learner's whole personality, which appears to be the highest objective of basic education in the modern world.

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