

REASONS FOR COMMUNITY LANGUAGE LEARNING IN UKRAINIAN COMPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN ITALY

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Abstract

The increasingly diversity, multi-culturalism and multilingualism of Italian society has not had any real impact on Italian state language policy and planning: community languages, that is the languages of relatively recently arrived migrant communities in Italy, are not taught in Italian state schools, neither to students with a migrant or refugee background, nor to native students. Given this absence of provision in the state system, learning of community languages is primarily achieved through complementary education. Drawing on qualitative data obtained from interviews conducted with school organisers and teachers, this paper presents a discussion of the reasons for Ukrainian language teaching and learning in two Ukrainian complementary schools in Italy. Ukrainian complementary schools provide an appropriate and fruitful terrain of investigation due to the size of the Ukrainian migrant population in Italy, and because complementary education is the only opportunity available for Ukrainian language learning at school level in this country.

Keywords community languages; complementary education; language learning; Ukrainian; Italy

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Complementary education in Italy. – 3 The Ukrainian community in Italy. – 4 Methods. – 5 Rome Ukrainian complementary school. – 6 Milan Ukrainian complementary school. – 7 Reasons for Ukrainian language teaching and learning. – 8 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Set up by migrant communities with the aim to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage (Wei 2006), and counteract perceived deficiencies in the host country education system (Sneddon, Martin 2012), complementary schools, also known as 'heritage', 'supplementary', 'community', 'mother tongue', 'weekend' or 'Saturday' schools¹, are informal educational institutions that operate outside mainstream state schooling. They are usually promoted by diasporic and ethnic minorities living in a given area, and are mainly run by volunteers who may or may not have formal teaching qualification. Classes generally take place part-time at weeknights or weekends, frequently in premises borrowed from state schools. There is a broad variety of different educational scenarios: in some schools, meetings are held once a week, often on Saturdays or Sundays outside of the normal teaching hours; in others, teaching is delivered every weekday afternoon to students grouped by age and skills (Thorpe, Arthur, Souza 2018; Nordstrom 2022).

Complementary schools promote the maintenance of community languages, i.e. languages used by members of minority communities as their first languages within a majority language context (Wei 2018). More specifically, in this work the term 'community languages' is used to refer to the linguistic codes of relatively recently arrived migrant communities in Italy, who have brought with them

¹ The range of names seems to reflect more the different interests of researchers and policy makers, than the actual titles used by the schools themselves (Thorpe, Arthur, Souza 2020). The adoption of the term 'complementary' in this paper aims to stress their complementary function to mainstream education.

languages that are spoken in their original homelands and are not yet recognised and protected by Italian law (Panzeri 2015). Italy officially recognises twelve historic linguistic minorities in its territory: French, Occitan, Franco-Provençal, German, Ladin, Friulian, Slovene, Sardinian, Catalan, Arberesh (a variant of contemporary Albanian), Greek and Croatian. These languages are protected by national law 482/1999 ‘Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche’ (Law governing the protection of historical linguistic minorities), adopted on 15 December 1999 (Panzeri 2009)². The present study does not aim to analyse the teaching and learning of the historic minority languages officially recognised by the Italian state, but of the languages spoken by members of significant recent immigrant communities, or their descendants, within Italy.

Complementary schools can be grouped together loosely into a broad typology of the following kind: there are schools focused on teaching the language, history and cultural heritage of the country of origin; schools aimed at obtaining educational and professional qualifications issued by the countries of origin; confessional schools, in which the religious perspective is the main educational axis; and schools that are concerned, above all, with offering tutoring and help with homework for subjects taught in the public education system (Maylor et al. 2010).

The available literature is mostly concerned with complementary schooling in North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Kagan, Carreira, Hitchins Chik 2017; Brinton, Kagan, Bauckus 2017; Montrul, Polinsky 2021). There is still a substantial lack of research on the immigration societies of Southern Europe, including Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, which until a few decades ago were countries of emigration to more advanced economies (Tereshchenko, Grau Cárdenas 2013; Steenwegen et al. 2022). This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap by examining two cases of Ukrainian complementary education in Italy. The schools were selected because of their location in cities with high percentages of Ukrainian migrants and refugees, and because they represent different types of Ukrainian complementary education in Italy, church-affiliated and independent. Italy provides an appropriate and fruitful terrain of investigation due to the size of its Ukrainian migrant population, and because complementary education is the only opportunity available for Ukrainian language learning at school level in the country.

The paper starts with a discussion of complementary education in Italy, exploring its relevance for maintaining community languages and building multilingualism in the country. It then gives some background information on the Ukrainian community, essential for understanding the cultural and linguistic importance of Ukrainian complementary schools in Italy. The next sections present the methodology used for this study, followed by the findings and a discussion of the reasons for Ukrainian language teaching and learning at the complementary schools.

2 Complementary education in Italy

Although substantial foreign immigration into Italy began in the 1960s, it was only in the two decades after 1991 that it became a truly mass phenomenon, with an average growth rate of 14.1% between 1992 and 2001, and of 11.7% between 2001 and 2011. From 2011, after a long period of increase, the trend started to change towards stabilizing inflows of immigration, and increasing outflows of foreign citizens resident in Italy leaving for other countries (Colucci 2019). Recent figures issued by the Italian National Institute of Statistics place the number of foreign citizens legally resident in Italy at about five million, corresponding to 8.7% of the total population (NoiItalia 2022).

Complementary education in Italy is linked to the presence of significant numbers of young people belonging to the first and second generations³, whose linguistic and cultural diversity doesn't find support in the Italian educational system (Machetti, Barni, Bagna 2018), even if some recommendations from the Italian Ministry of Education attempt to increase awareness of the

² About the provisions and measures governing the teaching of the historic minority languages officially recognised by the Italian state see Sierp (2008); Van der Jeught (2016); Piergigli (2017); Iannaccaro, Dell'Aquila (2020); and the portal of the Italian Ministry of Education <https://www.miur.gov.it/lingue-di-minoranza>

³ The second generation accounts for over 20% of the foreign population resident in Italy (Machetti, Barni, Bagna 2018).

advantages of knowing and using community languages (Pizzoli 2018). According to the last survey issued by the Italian Ministry of Education (Miur 2022), there are about 865.000 students with foreign citizenship in the Italian school system, which amounts to 10,3% of the total student population. This number includes students with foreign citizenship born in Italy, i.e. the second generations, who are not immigrants but still legally foreigners, due to the restrictive Italian naturalisation policy. Although there are about 200 different nationalities among the students with foreign citizenship, some communities are far more represented than others. Around 68% of the total is made up of ten countries: Romania (17.9%), Albania (13.5%), Morocco (12.6%), China (5.9%), India (3.4%), Egypt (3.3%), Moldavia (3%), Philippines (2.8%), Pakistan (2.6%), and Bangladesh (2.6%)⁴.

The increasingly diversity, multi-culturalism and multilingualism of Italian society has not had any real impact on Italian state language policy and planning (Love 2015). Community languages are not taught in Italian mainstream schools, neither to students with a migrant or refugee background, nor to native students (Pizzoli 2018; Machetti, Barni, Bagna 2018). Given this absence of provision in the Italian state school system, learning of community languages is primarily achieved through complementary education and this is basically where all community language teaching takes place.

Italy's Constitution and laws allow private individuals the right to set up schools, at no cost to the state (Giorgi, Giorda 2017). The Ministry of Education's website states that non-EU citizens and entities, who intend to establish or manage schools and educational organizations in the country, are required to apply for authorization to the relevant Regional School Office. If a refusal is not notified within 120 days, it is deemed that the authorization has been granted (Istruzione 2021). Lack of government funding or control means that these schools have the freedom to develop their own curricula, syllabuses, examinations and pedagogic goals. They represent community attempts to organise themselves to promote languages and cultures not available in mainstream education (Wei 2006; Creese et al. 2006).

There is currently almost no collated, published information about how many community complementary schools operate in Italy and who they serve. No national surveys have been conducted to date and no large-scale studies have been attempted to provide accurate data. The lack of data and research in this area reflects, generally, the difficulty of investigating educational organisations that operate outside mainstream schooling and are, thus, on the peripheries of the vision of policy makers, practitioners and researchers (Sneddon 2012; Thorpe, Arthur, Souza 2018). The few available studies concern Islamic schools for Arabic heritage speakers (Giorgi, Giorda 2017), Saturday schools for Russian heritage speakers (Perotto 2014), and for Polish heritage speakers (Małek 2019)⁵. Overall, the scanty available literature highlights the vulnerability in terms of funding and staffing of community complementary schools in Italy, and their marginalized position in the wider Italian educational contexts.

3 The Ukrainian community in Italy

Ukrainian immigration to Italy started right after the dissolution of the Ussr and the establishment of independent Ukraine in 1991. The introduction by the German government in 2000 of a very liberal visa policy for Eastern European states boosted immigration from these countries: in a few years Ukrainians became a substantial segment of the non-citizen population of many Southern European countries, including Italy (Cvajner, Sciortino 2010⁶).

According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat 2022), legally residing Ukrainian citizens (N= 236,000) constitute the fifth largest migrant population, mostly consisting of women (almost 80%). Lombardy, Lazio and Campania are the regions with the highest concentrations of Ukrainian migrants. The majority of Ukrainian migrants to Italy come from north-western and south-western

⁴ On foreign students in Italian schools see Santagati 2017; Bonizzoni, Romito, Cavallo 2014.

⁵ McCabe (2017) gives some mention of Czech complementary schools in Italy, and Pepicelli (2017) of Arabic courses offered by Islamic Centres in Rome.

⁶ According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Germany have been the main countries of migration for Ukrainians in the EU since 2011 (OECD 2021).

regions of Ukraine, where dialectal variants of Ukrainian are used. South-western dialects show influences of Polish and Romanian, and diverge more substantially from Standard Ukrainian (Koscharsky, Hull 2009).

A survey of companies and associations self-labelled as 'Ukrainian' shows that there is a rich and diverse network of Ukrainian organizations in Italy, including Ukrainian complementary and Ukrainian language schools, Ukrainian seminaries, companies offering translation and interpreting services, ballet schools, youth associations, coffee places and restaurants, and Ukrainian shops (Ukrainian companies 2023). There are also Ukrainian-studies programmes at several Italian universities.

Thanks to amnesty and major labour regularisation programmes for illegal immigrants implemented by Italy in 2002, 2009, and 2020, children initially left behind in Ukraine could join their mothers. In the school year 2020-2021, Ukrainians between the ages of 6 and 19 years constituted 2.3% (N = 20.175) of all foreign students, making them the thirteenth most numerous migrant group in Italian schools (Miur 2022). On the whole, the Ukrainian community is viewed in Italy as a 'non-visible' community, and it is rarely described as being subject to racism and marginalisation (Cvajner 2019). In Ukraine, education is highly valued as a means for upward social mobility and economic advancement (Shibanova, Malinovskiy 2021). Studies in other contexts of Ukrainian migration inside Europe found that parents consider complementary education of great importance for complementing learning in mainstream education, also because the level of the foreign educational systems is often regarded as lower than that in Ukraine (Leifsen, Tymczuk 2012). Ukrainian parents living in Italy are strongly motivated to have their children educated in complementary schools in order to improve their socio-cultural and job chances in future life (Bocale 2023).

After a presentation of the methodology of this qualitative study, the following sections present, first, the two complementary schools' history and activities; and, second, what reasons are provided by the school leaders for Ukrainian language teaching and learning.

4 Methods

This study follows a qualitative research approach (Denzin, Lincoln, 2005; Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell, Creswell 2018), drawing on interviews and observational data in the context of two complementary school in Italy. The key research questions were: "Why the school has been set up and what the school management team wants to achieve?" and "Who attends Ukrainian complementary schools and for what reasons?"

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the schools' organisers and teachers. The interviews centred around the motivation for setting up the schools, the reasons why students enrolled, the schools' goals, pedagogical approaches, organizational structures, instructional techniques, and participants' perceptions and views of their schools. All the interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes to allow content analysis and thematic analysis. The analysis was informed by ethnographic methods and models (Blommaert, Jie 2010; Bethune, Gilbert, 2019).

In the work emphasis is given to interviews with school leaders and teachers, who play a key part in the organization and management of the schools. Still, not presenting data on the views of pupils and parents remains a limitation in this research. Another limitation of the study is the small number of participants involved, which does not permit to make claims for representational generalization or transferability (Lewis, Ritchie 2003). Notwithstanding these limitations, this research provides important insights into the reasons for Ukrainian complementary education in Italy which can be further and wider examined.

5 Rome Ukrainian complementary school

The school was established in 2004 by a leading member of the Rome Ukrainian community in response to request by parents who wanted their children to achieve Ukrainian certificates of

education. The school was included in the study because it follows the syllabus issued by the 'International Ukrainian School' (Mižnarodna Ukraïns'ka Škola), a department set up by the Ministry of Education of Ukraine to give Ukrainian citizens abroad the possibility of obtaining Ukrainian certificates of higher education upon successful completion. The curriculum includes Ukrainian Language, Ukrainian Literature, History of Ukraine, World History, Maths, and Art, as well as Biology, Physics and Chemistry in the senior classes of secondary school. Classes run on Saturday afternoon and range from kindergarten to the last year of secondary school, supporting teenage students preparing their final school examination. The school is managed by Oksana (all names are pseudonyms), the head teacher who has both administrative and educational duties.

The school doesn't have premises of its own, and over the years it has changed its location four times. Oksana remarked how it was difficult to find an institution willing to accept them, partly because of the lack of an Italian government office dealing specifically with complementary education, and partly due to the absence of assistance by the Ukrainian Embassy, whose cultural attaché doesn't deal explicitly with educational issues. Another, related problem was to define the school's legal requirements in accordance with Italian regulations, which lack a specific, clearly defined 'road map' for the official registering and approval process of complementary schooling. The school was set up following the model of sports clubs, which are allowed to contract specific agreements with schools for the provision of services, such as use of gym and pool facilities. The school is presently run in the premises of a mainstream state school by twelve volunteer teachers, whose travel and phone expenses are reimbursed. Parents pay a monthly fee of 50 euros, which was reduced to 14 euros per month during lockdown periods, when teaching was held online. The school does not receive funding from government or local authorities.

In the school year 2021-2022, before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the school had 44 students with an age range between 5 and 19 years. The influx of Ukrainian refugees⁷ led to a fivefold increase in the number of students, that now stands at about 200. Around sixty percent of the students are primary school children. The vast majority of students studies in Italian schools at the same time, and considers the attainment of a Ukrainian education a 'plan B', in case they decide to go back to Ukraine. Oksana noted that there was a high rate of school dropout among secondary school students, many of whom did not attend Italian schools either. All students have standardised and non-standardised varieties of Italian and Ukrainian as part of their linguistic repertoires. Among the students without a refugee background, many come from mixed marriages with an Italian father and a Ukrainian mother, and are growing up in multilingual households where Italian, Ukrainian, Surzhyk, a highly variable form of mixed Ukrainian-Russian speech emerged from the long contact between the two genetically related East Slavic languages (Del Gaudio 2010), and Russian are used. Oksana pointed out that the decision to operate the complementary school on the premises of state schools had been motivated by the fact that students belong to different religious confessions, or profess no religion.

6 Milan Ukrainian complementary school

The school was first set up in 2005 on the premises of a Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church after members of the community, mostly women, demanded a school that gave high priority to maintaining the Ukrainian language and a religiously-infused culture. Since its foundation, the school has changed its location three times, and is currently operating in facilities provided by a Ukrainian Greek Catholic parish on Milan's outskirts. The parish has a large congregation and offers an array of activities for the community during the week. It serves multiple functions, both religious and educational, but also cultural, social and psychological. The school was included in the study, because it is located in Milan, which is home to one of the largest number of Ukrainian immigrants in Italy (Istat 2022), and also because church-affiliated schools represent about seventy percent of Ukrainian complementary education in Italy (Ukrajins'ki školy v Italiji 2021).

⁷ According to data reported by Intersos, 173.645 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Italy since February 2024, including 49.444 children (Intersos 2023).

Before the Russian military full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the school had 85 students with an age range between 5 and 15 years. Students were for the most part Italy-born of Ukrainian heritage, and lived in households where Italian was the primary language, and Ukrainian, Surzhyk and Russian were spoken to some extent. Similarly to what reported for the Rome school, the number of students has increased dramatically in recent months, reaching almost 300 at the start of the school year 2022-2023. The pupils who have recently arrived from Ukraine and are at the early stages of learning Italian are particularly cherished by the school leaders for their native language proficiency, and perceived as an aid to the language learning of other children in the school. All students attend mainstream Italian schools; the school is, thus, really complementary because it is not the main provider of education for the community children.

In the school there are 18 teachers offering their services on a voluntary basis; they are often a parent or grandparent of one of the current or former students. Parents pay a small fee of 15 euros a month (5 euros for pre-schoolers, 25 euros for two siblings in the same family), which goes toward reimbursing teachers for travel and phone expenses. Similarly to the Rome school, the school is not funded by the state or by NGOs. Classes run on Sundays for three hours after the main service. The school is managed by two teachers, Oleksandr and Maria. The school has a strong connection to the parish, and Ukrainian Greek Catholic values are considered central in the up-bringing of the children attending the school.

The school curriculum consists of Ukrainian language, Ukrainian literature, history of Ukraine, music and catechism, where fundamental concepts of Ukrainian Greek Catholic Christianity, the Gospels and church practices are taught. The Ukrainian language classes teach Ukrainian grammar and literacy skills such as reading and writing. The Ukrainian literature classes cover major canonical works by Ukrainian authors. Teaching/learning materials are developed by the teachers or selected from different textbooks.

7 Reasons for Ukrainian language teaching and learning

In discussing their schools' curricula, the interviewed organisers and teachers placed a heavy emphasis on the Ukrainian language as one of the most fundamental elements in the formation of a Ukrainian identity among their students. They remarked that Ukrainian was the language of Ukraine, and knowing Ukrainian bound children living in Italy to all Ukrainian citizens living in Ukraine. Asked why teaching Ukrainian was important, Oleksandr, one of the headteachers of the Milan school, explained that it was important, because Ukrainian is a marker of the Ukrainian identity, and this identity should not be lost. Oksana, the organiser of the Rome school, added that Ukrainian complementary schools in Italy aim to strengthen the cultural and linguistic identities of the children of Ukrainian migrants and refugees, and that they also seek to encourage a sense of belonging with Ukraine and of pride for being Ukrainian in students. As a salient marker of ethnolinguistic identification, language helps migrant communities to maintain links to their cultural heritage and country of origin.

Maria, who teaches in the Milan school, believed that students should be empowered to celebrate their own Ukrainian culture and share pride of their language with their families and friends. The beauty of the Ukrainian language was compared to the beauty of the Italian language:

Children speak Italian, which is considered a very melodious language suitable for singing, but they should know that also their native language is very musical and singable.

Research on community language learning in complementary schools is fundamental to understanding not only how minority language speakers relate to their community language and to the dominant language of wider communication, but also how community languages may become a valued component of the minority speakers' identities. The headteachers' comments about the importance of learning Ukrainian confirm the fundamental role that language plays in proclaiming identity: through language, identity can be manifested at multiple levels – from the process of self and other categorisation by which individuals negotiate their belonging and their uniqueness, to the

use of language as a means to perform and interpret identity and difference (Edwards 2009; Joseph 2013)⁸. The centrality of language learning in articulations of ethnic consciousness and heritage, which emerged in this study, back up similar findings in other contexts of complementary education (Chinen, Tucker 2006; Szczypek Reed et al. 2020; Liang, Shin 2021).

The school leaders were also particularly keen to stress the importance of teaching Standard Ukrainian in order for students to learn what they perceived to be as the ‘pure’⁹ and ‘correct’ language.

Since we know that our students probably have people in their households who don't know the Ukrainian language well, we are always careful to speak only Standard Ukrainian at lessons so that the students can gain a maximal exposure to it (Oksana).

Remarks of this type echo language educational policies and standard language ideologies that can be found in Ukraine, where language educators and linguists often promote a purist prescriptive language ideology, which aims to differentiate a high status language from varieties which show mixing of Ukrainian and Russian (Bilaniuk 2018). These language ideologies have deeply influenced language policies in Ukraine, especially in relation to education (Bocale 2022).

Some reasons for learning Ukrainian were more pragmatic and instrumental. Ukrainian was viewed not only as an important marker of ethnic identity, but also as a linguistic capital¹⁰ to be acquired and possibly used later in life.

If students can't speak literary Ukrainian fluently, and if they fear speaking the Ukrainian language in public, it will be difficult for them to be integrated in the Ukrainian society as full-members if they decide to return to their country of origin. Some of them are expected to stay only temporally in Italy.

Finally, Ukrainian was also considered as a means to avoid the risk for young Ukrainians to become assimilated into the dominant Italian culture¹¹, a question which was touched upon by Oleksandr.

The biggest risk for these children is assimilation into the mainstream Italian culture. Many children issued from immigrant families have assimilated into the mainstream Italian culture and tend to identify themselves with this culture rather than with their Ukrainian ethnic group.

In a similar vein, Oksana spoke of the necessity of young Ukrainians avoiding loss of their heritage through assimilation. Studies in other European contexts report that complementary schools see it as their mission to protect second and third generation children from being assimilated into the society and culture of the host country (Karatsareas 2021), a purpose shared by the headteachers who took part in this research.

8 Conclusions

In Italy, complementary schools are a multifaceted and growing phenomenon that still has to be fully described and understood. Educational authorities and the general public are usually not familiar or aware of these educational initiatives. Even teachers in mainstream schools ignore that some of their

⁸ Joseph even suggests the coalescence of language and identity when he affirms that they are ‘ultimately inseparable’ (Joseph 2004, 13). The relation between language and identity, however, is seen as not static but dynamic (Extra 2007), as identity itself is not a set of static traits, but a dynamic, changing, multi-layered construct that continuously interacts with the semiotic system of language.

⁹ This work follows Heller's definition of language purity as rejection of hybridity (Heller 2008, 510).

¹⁰ Linguistic capital, defined as fluency in and knowledge of a language, can be understood as a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). According to Park and Wee ‘Just as capital in the economic sense means money that can bring more money, the point about linguistic capital is the other kind of profit it may bring’ (Park, Wee 2013, 142).

¹¹ Vedovelli (2011) describes similar fears of assimilation and loss of identity among Italian migrant communities abroad.

students attend complementary schools after school or on weekends¹². The highly heterogeneous and largely hidden nature of complementary education makes it difficult for researchers to access complementary schools and engage in participative studies. On their part, complementary schools usually don't attempt to reach out not only to state educational institutions, but also to complementary schools of other communities (Wei 2014), even if some recent initiatives have been put in place with this goal in mind in countries such as the Netherlands (Heritage Language Education Network). Much research is still needed to explore and fully understand the importance of complementary education in Italy and its interrelationship with the mainstream educational system.

The findings reported in this paper, although limited to a small and specific sample, can be useful not only to understand the aims and practices of Ukrainian complementary schools in Italy, but also the reasons behind heritage language teaching in schools supported by migrant and refugee communities. Further research needs to be carried out on the impact of Ukrainian language teaching on students, in particular on the effects on their language use, identity development, and willingness and capacity to maintain their community language.

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¹² This is attested inter alia by the debates which took place during the seminars held on International Mother's Day 2022 and 2023 at the Centre for Research on Minorities of the University of Insubria (based in Como, Italy), where community language teachers and teachers from mainstream Italian state schools met to discuss the issues facing complementary education and community language learning.

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