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Lexical learning in an Italian-German bilingual elementary school

1 Introduction

One of the most common heritage languages spoken in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg is Italian (Kölle 2017). It is remarkable, however, that bilingual elementary school programs for Italian are rarely found in Baden-Württemberg and also throughout Germany. According to data from the association *Frühe Mehrsprachigkeit an Kitas und Schulen* ('Association for early multilingualism in day care centers and schools', FMKS 2019), there are altogether 857 elementary schools with bilingual English-German classes and only 28 elementary schools with bilingual Italian-German programs in Germany. Regarding the situation in Baden-Württemberg, there are currently three elementary schools with bilingual Italian-German tracks. One of these elementary schools participated in the present study to investigate the language development during the elementary school years.¹ In this paper, we report the growth in the lexical area (nouns and verbs) at the beginning and end of first grade. Since this is a small and very heterogeneous sample, some data from selected children will also be analyzed qualitatively.

2 Theoretical background

The term *bilingual class* is used as an umbrella term for different types of programs: mostly it refers to teaching at least one subject in a language other than German or using another language in almost every subject. The term *immersion* includes the idea of teaching contents (CLIL) in foreign languages to a high degree (Zydatiś 2000: 27). Studies on bilingual programs and immersion

Note: This chapter is largely based on Plötner & Rinker (2020).

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examine the development of students' different skills, such as the development of reading skills (e.g. Linke 2015) in the context of bilingual teaching while contrasting them with monolingual school contexts (e.g. Wode 2015). Other studies analyze the attitudes and opinions of actors in immersive programs or forms of assessment (e.g. Massler et al. 2013) as well as different immersion models or the content and language design of subjects, success factors of immersion (e.g. Wode 2006, 2015) over the years. Success factors that were formulated for immersion are: use of the foreign language "over a longer period of time" (i.e. ideally over years), usage is "sufficiently intensive" (60–70 % in school contexts or whole day programs), and as "structurally diverse as possible" (i.e. in many contexts of content) (Wode 2006: 4, translation by K.P.). It should also be mentioned that sufficiently adequate qualitative input (i.e. mother tongue or similar) is necessary, which is also "rich in variants" and is used for interaction in the classroom (Kersten et al. 2009: 6–9).

Since several studies exist on vocabulary and syntax acquisition for the English-German bilingual context (e.g. Daniel 2001; Steinlen and Piske 2016; Wode 2015), some of the results relevant to this study will be summarized below. In an English-German school immersion context, one study observed significant increases in receptive vocabulary after one year of learning (Couve de Murville et al. 2016). However, the classes differed in terms of the intensity of contact with English, which also correlates with the different results. Significant increases in English vocabulary from grade 3 to grade 4 could also be found in another bilingual English-German program, where no difference between monolingual and multilingual children was observed (Steinlen and Piske 2016; also Steinlen et al. 2015).

In their study on the productive use of English in a partial immersive school program, Garbe et al. (2015) observed that in grade 1 individual lexical items were increasingly produced. Nouns such as *dog*, *frog*, *bird*, *picture*, *children*, etc. dominate. Moreover, the children produced first verbs (e.g. *play*, *go*, *sleep*, *drink*), articles (*the*, *a*) and the conjunction *and*. In grade 2, the authors found considerable increases in English language structures (and not only in single items), such as various forms of time and inflection.

Wode (2015: 21–22) shows for the verb production in English that the form *V-ing* dominates in immersion classes of grade 1 – here, however, it is often not used in the target form (e.g. **he gettings*). At the end of grade 2 students produce more uninflected *V-O* as well as *V-s* and *V-ed*. At the end of the fourth grade the number of *V-ed* has increased, *V-ing* has increased again, a decrease of *V-O* and *V-s* can be recorded. The majority of linguistic utterances is semantically and morphologically "purposeful" (Wode 2015: 23). Garbe et al. (2015: 72–73) also

observe a dominance of the present progressive, whereby they identify it without an auxiliary verb, in particular in grade 2.

A recent study on lexical learning (nouns and verbs, English and Gaelic) in a Gaelic-medium school in Scotland shows a clear discrepancy between the acquisition of nouns and verbs during the first four years of schooling and between production and comprehension. However, the difference between nouns and verbs becomes less pronounced as the grades progress (Chondrogianni et al. 2019). The different development stages of nouns and verbs in acquisition have also been documented in numerous studies (e.g. Haman et al. 2017). The developmental discrepancy between production and comprehension is called the *receptive-expressive gap* and has already been found in studies on mono- and bilingual acquisition (Gibson et al. 2012).

To our knowledge, studies on the language pair Italian-German examine language acquisition (Dittmar and Giacalone Ramat 1999; Schmitz 2006), but not language learning in immersion contexts. In the following, we report on an Italian-German bilingual program and on the acquisition of German and Italian nouns and verbs. Based on our information, this study is the first to investigate children's lexical progress in a bilingual Italian-German elementary school and to provide insight into the language acquisition processes of children who come to school already having acquired Italian language skills (except for first results of the current study reported in Plötner and Rinker 2020).

3 Research questions

The present chapter analyzes learners' progress and the growth in the receptive and productive lexical tasks for German and Italian. In particular, we examine how the lexical learning occurs in the different word classes (nouns, verbs) over the period of investigation, the first year of schooling. This leads to the following research questions:

- Q1: What is the progress in the lexical area (nouns/verbs; reception/production) between test time 1 (T1) and test time 2 (T2)?
- Q2: Are there relationships between high/low results in Italian and German (nouns/verbs, reception/production)?

In addition, special attention is given to the linguistic background of the learners and their success in the respective subtests (receptive/productive). Therefore, the data of six learners with different first and second languages is ana-

lyzed in more detail. The following research questions for these selected learners are formulated:

- Q3: Are there differences in language comprehension and language production regarding different linguistic backgrounds of the selected learners (monolingual German, bilingual Italian-German, bilingual German-other language)?
- Q4: Do high/low values in the initial position T1 (receptive/productive) continue to T2?

4 Research design

4.1 Background of the classroom context

Data was collected in a public elementary school in Baden-Württemberg. In addition to regular classes for each grade level, the elementary school includes a bilingual Italian-German class. Since almost 50% of the subjects and/or contents in individual subjects are taught in Italian, we consider the bilingual school we have investigated as an example of *partial immersion* (Zydatiś 2000: 9). In the bilingual class, lessons are taught either by a single teacher or – depending on availability – in team teaching: In the examined grade 1, German, science and mathematics lessons are carried out in team teaching, i.e. in German or Italian. It was observed by the authors that a large part of the task instructions is given in Italian and that there is a continuous change between the two languages during the team teaching in the subjects mentioned above. However, there is still a dominance of the German language (productively and receptively). It can be stated that most of the success factors listed by Wode (2006; 2015) are considered in this program: continuity (throughout elementary schooling), extensive use of the language in different contexts (Italian and German are used in the different subjects) and sufficient intensity. Input from native speakers of Italian is also guaranteed.

4.2 Subjects

The group studied consists of six- to seven-year-old children attending the above-mentioned 1st grade in the bilingual program. A detailed parents' questionnaire was used to assess the linguistic background of the students. Five of the examined children already had knowledge of the Italian language before

entering school since one of the parents regularly speaks Italian (mother tongue) with them. However, while one child (bilingual, L1=Italian) speaks exclusively in Italian with both parents and also always responds to the Italian class teacher in Italian, the other bilingual children (L2=Italian) only speak Italian with one parent to varying degrees. In addition, five other children speak a second language besides German at mother tongue level (French, Spanish², Romanian, Arabic and Greek). The tested children can therefore be classified as displayed in table 1:

Tab. 1: Language and gender of students for which pre- and post-test data are available

overview languages			
languages	girls	boys	total
monolingual (German)	3	4	7
bilingual (L1 = Italian, L2 = German)		1	1
bilingual (L1 = German, L2 = Italian)	2	2	4
bilingual (L1 = German, L2 = other than Italian)	2	3	5
total	7	10	17

As it can be seen, the students' background is quite heterogenous. Nevertheless, German is the dominant language, since it is the language of the environment and spoken by all students before school enrollment.

4.3 Test instruments

The children in the bilingual Italian-German class were tested in a pre-post design, at the beginning and at the end of first grade. A lexical test for verbs and nouns was used (as in Chondrogianni et al. 2019)³. The vocabulary test *Cross-Linguistic Task* (CLT, German version: Rinker and Gagarina 2014) was developed within the framework of an EU project. It has by now been designed in 27 languages according to the same procedure and exists for German and Italian, among others (Haman et al. 2017), thus allowing to assess lexical development

² The child speaks Spanish with the mother and hears Italian from the father at times. The family language is German. It was counted as bilingual due to the fact that the third language is rarely used in the family.

³ Other language skills were assessed in addition, but the data is not reported here.

in two or more languages using the same instrument. In the CLT, 32 raw points can be achieved per subtest. Norms do not yet exist. As described in Haman et al. (2015), nouns and verbs were selected for the CLT because these word types exist in all languages and yet differ in acquisition between languages. Both production and understanding are recorded for nouns and verbs. A tablet version of the CLT is available for German and Italian (among other languages). In the productive part the children have to name one item each: noun: ‘What is this?’ (child: ‘A lamp’); verbs: ‘What is he/she doing?’ (child: ‘sing’, ‘He/she sings’, ‘he/she is singing’); in the receptive part they have to choose one picture out of four (e.g. ‘Show me the banana’). The test takes about 15-20 minutes per child for both languages and is carried out individually with each child on the iPad. The test was conducted at the beginning and the end of the 1st school year in individual rooms at the school by the two authors and trained assistants. The complete testing (including the tests not reported here) took about 60 minutes per child.

5 Results

At time point (T1), all students had participated in bilingual classes for three weeks. It can therefore be assumed that at T1 little receptive and productive competence (nouns, verbs) can be demonstrated in the data collected among the children without prior knowledge of Italian. The T2 testing took place at the end of the school year 2018/2019, about one month before the summer break. A time point 3 (T3) was planned for the end of the second school year, so that both languages could be observed longitudinally, but had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was postponed to the beginning of the fall 2020.

5.1 Quantitative results

In the following, the pre- and post-data of the children are shown for the entire group (Tab. 2). The great linguistic heterogeneity of the group would suggest splitting the data according to linguistic background, but the group with $n=17$ is too small.

Tab. 2: Raw scores reached in the vocabulary test (CLT). Noun_comp/Verb_comp = noun/verb comprehension, Noun_prod/Verb_prod = noun/verb production; max score: 32 points; Standard Deviation in parentheses

	Noun_comp	Verb_comp	Noun_prod	Verb_prod
German_T1	31.4 (0.8)	29.7 (2.0)	27.5 (3.1)	22.3 (5.3)
Italian_T1	18.1 (7.3)	12.7 (7.5)	2.9 (5.3)	0.7 (2.7)
German_T2	31.8 (0.3)	30.6 (1.1)	29.8 (1.6)	25.1 (3.8)
Italian_T2	22.0 (6.2)	14.4 (7.9)	12.9 (5.7)	2.4 (3.5)

In the German test part, the scores are already quite high at T1. The table also shows the typical CLT distribution of nouns > verbs and comprehension > production (Haman et al. 2017). However, even at T2 there are still increases in those areas where no ceiling effects were found: In noun production, there is an increase of 2.3 points, in verb production an increase of 2.8 points.

In the Italian test, there are developments in all areas, too. In the receptive part, there is an increase of 3.9 points in nouns and 1.7 points in verbs. In the verb production in Italian, there are 1.7 points more at T2. The increases are particularly large in the area of noun production, with an additional 10 points at group level (from 2.9 to 12.9).

5.1.1 Language comprehension German/Italian

For the following comparison, we selected a total of six students. The selection criteria were based on the first and second language (or two first languages) and the gender of the learners (3 boys, 3 girls): It_07 and It_14 are monolingual (German), It_05 and It_17 are bilingual (German = L1, other Romance language = L2) and It_01 and It_13 are also bilingual (L1 = German/Italian, L2 = Italian/German, marked with an asterisk (*) in the following). The following data was collected for those students in the language comprehension part of the CLT (refer to table 3).

Tab. 3: Language comprehension German (nouns and verbs) T1 and T2

language comprehension German						
German	It_01* biling.*	It_05 biling.	It_07 monol.	It_13* biling.*	It_14 monol.	It_17 biling.
noun T1	31	32	32	32	32	32
noun T2	32	32	32	32	32	31
difference	+1	+0	+0	+0	+0	-1
verb T1	28	29	28	31	26	28
verb T2	30	30	30	31	31	31
difference	+2	+1	+2	+0	+5	+3

Tab. 4: Language comprehension Italian (nouns and verbs) T1 and T2

language comprehension Italian						
Italian	It_01* biling.*	It_05 biling.	It_07 monol.	It_13* biling.*	It_14 monol.	It_17 biling.
noun T1	31	20	18	25	12	24
noun T2	31	29	15	29	15	27
difference	+0	+9	-3	+4	+3	+3
verb T1	21	1	1	7	0	1
verb T2	24	17	14	18	6	9
difference	+3	+16	+13	+11	+6	+8

In the receptive results of the German nouns, no relevant differences in the results of the examined bilingual students (marked with *) are discernible. Even at T1, maximum values can be achieved by the students. In the receptive part of the verbs, minimal differences can be noted at T1, but these seem to be native language-independent. The bilingual child It_01 reaches the same scores as monolingual children, the lowest score of the group examined here even comes from a monolingual German child. However, at T2, all children can assign between 30 and 31 verbs.

In the Italian language, particular differences are obvious: At T1, the bilingual child It_01 (Italian-German) achieved the highest results. In addition, the bilingual children with Italian as a second language can make more correct choices than the monolingual children It_07 and It_14. The bilingual child It_05 (German-French) can identify two Italian nouns more than the monolingual

child It_07. This tendency continues at T2, when It_07 approaches or even exceeds the results of the bilingual children (German-Italian). With respect to the receptive verb part, again the bilingual child It_01 (Italian-German) has achieved the highest number of correct answers. The bilingual child It_13 does not reach this score by far. The other children can show only one verb correctly. At T2, a clear increase is observed in It_05. The monolingual child It_07 also shows a high increase to 14 correctly recognized nouns and thus overtakes the bilingual child It_17. The monolingual child It_14 shows the smallest number of verbs.

5.1.2 Language production test German/Italian

The following data was collected from the six selected learners:

Tab. 5: Language production German (nouns and verbs) T1 and T2

language production German						
German	It_01* biling.*	It_05 biling.	It_07 monol.	It_13* biling.*	It_14 monol.	It_17 biling.
noun T1	28	29	28	31	26	28
noun T2	30	30	30	31	31	31
difference	+2	+1	+2	+0	+5	+3
verb T1	19	25	22	23	25	21
verb T2	20	26	26	29	23	27
difference	+1	+1	+4	+6	-2	+6

In line with the test of German noun comprehension, all children score similarly to T2 in the noun production of German nouns and achieve between 30 and 31 correct answers. Here, the initial differences seem to be relativized. All children can actively name the required nouns. Differences can be seen in the production of German verbs: The bilingual Italian-German child It_01 at T1 and T2 is below the scores of the monolingual German and bilingual Italian-German and German-X-speaking children, respectively. The bilingual Italian-German child It_13 achieves the clearest increases and also the highest score in the production of German verbs.

Tab. 6: Language production Italian (nouns and verbs) T1 and T2

language production Italian						
Italian	It_01* biling.*	It_05 biling.	It_07 monol.	It_13* biling.*	It_14 monol.	It_17 biling.
noun T1	21	1	1	7	0	1
noun T2	24	17	14	18	6	9
difference	+3	+16	+13	+11	+6	+8
verb T1	11	0	0	0	0	0
verb T2	12	3	2	4	0	1
difference	+1	+3	+2	+4	+0	+1

It_01 achieves the best results in both tests for language comprehension and production of Italian nouns and verbs. However, It_01 shows only small gains – the scores are in the average range of the gains that could be determined for all children in the quantitative part. In comparison, the other children show high gains, especially in the noun production of Italian, while for the verb production of Italian only a few verbs can be found.

Taking into account the family language background, the following results for the individual children should be highlighted:

- It_01 (bilingual Italian-German): The performance in German regarding the verbs is lower than that of the other students; the performance in Italian is far higher than that of the other students, especially for Italian verbs. There is no fast progress between T1 and T2.
- It_05 (bilingual French-German): The performance for the Italian language, especially for T2, is close to the results of the bilingual Italian-German students.
- It_07 (monolingual German): Especially in the area of Italian nouns, a strong increase in T2 can be observed; in the German language, the monolingual child does not perform significantly better than bilingual children.
- It_13 (bilingual Italian-German): High results in the production part regarding the German nouns are already observed at T1 and a progression in the German verb part is recognizable. In addition, a high progression in the production part of Italian nouns can be observed.
- It_14 (monolingual German): The result of the German nouns at T2 is comparable with that of the other students. There is a decrease in the area of German verbs and no progression in the production of verbs in Italian, but a relatively strong increase in the area of nouns in Italian.

- It_17 (bilingual Spanish-German): In the productive part, the results are not much better than the results achieved by monolingual children. However, the Italian background (based on the information in the parents' questionnaire, the father uses Italian at times) is visible in the comprehension part of the Italian nouns at T1.

5.2 Qualitative results: Language production verbs

Since the quantitative data show a clear discrepancy between comprehension and production as well as between nouns and verbs for both monolingual and bilingual children, this section will illustrate interesting findings for verb production as it constitutes the weakest area. Only the most frequent phenomena for both languages in the two tests will be summarized.

5.2.1 German

The following corpus examples (from T1) illustrate several representative examples of some central characteristics for verb production:

- (1) **Die streichelt sein Hund.* (It_01)
 she pet3SG his dog.
 'She pets *his dog.'
- (2) *Hund streicheln* (It_13)
 dog petINF
 'to pet a dog'
- (3) *Sie streichelt ihren Hund, der ganz nett ist.* (It_14)
 she pet3SG her dog who really nice be3SG
 'She pets her dog, who is really nice.'
- (4) *Sie tut den Hund streicheln.* (It_17)
 she do3SG the dog petINF
 'She pets the dog.'

A large part of the verbs for T1 is expressed in inflected form, which can also result from the question itself (*Was macht er/sie?* 'What is he/she doing?'). However, as a direct answer it is also possible to use the infinitive, which is

still exist in the language production of verbs in German as well as in all tested lexical areas for the Italian language. Here it can be seen that the language comprehension of nouns in Italian shows a much slower progress than the language production of Italian nouns among all learners (perhaps due to an already high score for nouns at T1), but the overall values of language comprehension are significantly higher than those of language production, as in previous studies: The observed difference between production and comprehension as well as between verbs and nouns was also reported in Chondrogianni et al. (2019), using the CLT. While nouns have been claimed to be more ‘vulnerable’ in the (second) language acquisition process, they can also be claimed to be more easily fostered (see Klassert et al. 2014; Sandhofer et al. 2000).

Research question 3: The data reveals differences between individual students with diverse linguistic backgrounds, but these differences cannot (yet) be systematized quantitatively. In the qualitative analysis of the six selected learners, the bilingual Italian-German speaking child (It_01) achieves the highest scores for Italian in all areas but does not progress as quickly as the other students. This may be due to the high initial scores, especially for Italian language, at T1. The increase in It_01 in all areas for both languages is between 0 and + 3 points. The scores for the Italian language are lower than the German equivalents in the comprehension and production sections which may be explained by the influence of the environmental language, i.e. German.

In the language comprehension of nouns in Italian, the Italian-German speaking children achieve higher scores than the monolingual children and the French-German speaking child It_05. At T2, the monolingual children have lower scores in the area of language comprehension of nouns in Italian than the other students. In the area of verb comprehension in Italian, this tendency cannot be observed at the time of the second study (T2). The monolingual child It_07 reached more points here than the bilingual child It_17. Altogether, the French-German speaking child It_05 achieves the highest increase in the comprehension test of Italian nouns and verbs (+16 and +9) and in the production of Italian nouns (+16). However, the child is considered by its teachers to be a particularly high-achieving learner. Whether the high scores can therefore be attributed to the linguistic background alone is questionable.

Past studies (Steinlen and Piske 2016; Steinlen et al. 2015) report no differences between monolingual and multilingual children. However, English immersion programs do not usually have the kind of heritage-language multilingualism that matches the language of immersion. Thus, in this study, we are able to report for the first time the development of individual children with a

heritage language background in an educational context where the heritage language is fostered.

6.2 Future directions

The data shows an increase in production and even more so in comprehension after one year of bilingual Italian-German schooling, and it is expected that this proportion will increase again at the third measurement point (T3). There are differences between (formerly) monolingual German and bilingual children – but mainly with regard to children who came to school with Italian language skills. These differences tend to be less remarkable at T2 for some monolingual and bilingual children (non-Italian bilingual children) as could be shown in the direct comparison of 6 learners in this article. Further analyses will provide insight into larger groups after T3 (Rinker, Bloder and Plötnner under review).

With regard to the production of verbal structures in the Italian language, the results from T3 can provide further insight (analysis under way). Especially the number of produced verbs in direct comparison between the students as well as the inflection forms (infinitive or 3rd person singular) and possible extensions of verbal structures seem to be interesting for future qualitative analyses regarding the acquisition of Italian. It also remains to be investigated whether the students will use high-frequency, semantically light/empty verbs or hypernyms and/or nouns for specific Italian verbs (as a paraphrasing strategy or as a pragmatic strategy) or whether they will continue to produce only few Italian verbs in T3. It is interesting to look more closely at the nouns and verbs already produced at T1 and/or T2, and at common Italian verbal help structures in order to derive didactic implications, possibly also for foreign language teaching. Therefore, a more detailed qualitative analysis must be undertaken on this including all children's linguistic resources. It is important to consider that the CLT vocabulary requires the naming of a number of specific home activities that monolingual Italian-speaking children (in Italy) have already acquired by the time they enter school, e.g. *grattugiare* 'to grate', and *segare* 'to saw' as well as the knowledge of specific verbs for sport activities, e.g. *remare* 'to row'. For children, especially those without Italian as their home language, it is almost impossible to learn such verbs if they are not used or needed within the school context. Children address this fact repeatedly during the test ("We haven't learned that yet"). Data capturing the language used in the classroom could provide more information on the noun-verb ratio in bilingual classes.

Overall, all children showed impressive lexical gains within the first year of schooling in the newly learned or heritage language Italian. Thus, the current study adds to the existing literature on bilingual programs in Germany.

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