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Early Bilingualism at School
Data from a Project with Children Aged 0 to 6

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Abstract In order for early bilingualism education projects to be beneficial for language acquisition, a solid framework for teacher training and curriculum development is crucial. Additionally, a continuous monitoring of the outcomes and planning decisions is fundamental. This article presents the main aspects of early language teaching and the characteristics of language learning in very young learners. It also provides data from a bilingual education project for children aged 0 to 6. The project is based in Italy and involves teaching English as a foreign language in two kindergartens and five nursery schools. The following section presents a selection of data focusing on language acquisition and learners' enjoyment within the project.

Keywords Bilingualism. Educational linguistics. School project. Early childhood education. Language teaching.

Summary 1 Planning Early Language Teaching at School. – 2 Language Learning Features in Very Young Learners. – 3 Bilingual Education for Children Aged 0 to 6: Research Data from Bilingual Education Project.

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1 Planning Early Language Teaching at School

In early bilingualism educational projects, language teachers' awareness of children's bilingual acquisition processes is a fundamental component. Once teachers have been trained about the impact and advantages of early exposure to additional languages[1] it is crucial to focus on their ability to design a process based on children's needs and developmental characteristics. Hence an attentive analysis into the young students' requirements is essential for the stimulation of their linguistic abilities, along with the capacity to select the most effective language strategies. This is a circular process, in which the feedback obtained informs the design of future activities. Therefore, while planning is important, flexibility is also crucial to reconsider planned activities in response to learners' reactions. Students' achievement is closely linked to the quality of planning; accordingly, instructional design should be learner-centered, recognizing that language programs ought to be adapted to learners rather than requiring learners to conform to the program.

As mentioned, teachers working in early bilingual projects need to be aware of the fundamental principles of language planning to very young learners. A starting point could be considered the knowledge of how a young bilingual brain functions. Considering its ability to infer from a given input,[2] it should be both abundant and correct. Children need to be frequently and meaningfully exposed to the target language in order to formulate hypotheses about its functioning and understand the framework that underpins its system (Roch, Florit 2013). As an obvious consequence, input needs to be accurate, otherwise hypotheses will be created on an incorrect basis and the main framework will be inefficient, invalidating further language acquisition. Therefore, when teaching languages at school, it is crucial to design programmes that provide continuous, abundant, accurate and varied exposure. According to this, daily and short activities are more advantageous than long and sporadic ones. A low exposition to the target language undermines all language abilities, particularly speaking (Edelenbos et al. 2006). Given the young age of the learners, this factor is particularly relevant, as listening and speaking are often the primary – or only – skills being actively stimulated. Time and quality of exposure are, therefore, fundamental and, in many cases, predictive of the success of the learning process (Edelenbos, Johnstone 1996; De Houwer 2024).

1 Slattery, Willis 2001; Edelenbos et al. 2006; Harmer 2007; Williams et al. 2013; Fabbro, Cargnelutti 2018; Marini 2018; Marsh et al. 2020; Kroll, Mendoza 2022; Gracia-Tabuenca et al. 2024; Novello 2024; De Houwer 2021; 2024.

2 Tomasello 2003; Kuhl 2004; Berki Gleason 2005; Ellis 2008.

Another important aspect to be considered in planning, concerns the use of the two school languages. Mixing languages in the same activities is not beneficial for learners (Cameron 2001) in a context where the focus is teaching a second language. Children possess high capabilities to comprehend, anticipate, and infer; therefore, they require rich and meaningful input during activities. This does not imply that they are not allowed to respond using their native language. Teachers should create a positive environment where children who already speak are not afraid to use the target language, input and output need to be considered differently. If a child prefers to reply in their native language, it should not represent a problem. Instead, teachers can employ appropriate strategies to gradually stimulate the use of the target language. Considering the aforementioned capabilities of the children, translation of the input does not represent a valid strategy, as it can slow down both acquisition and motivation.

Concerning spoken output, Slattery and Willis (2001) suggest to:

- Speak significantly more than the children.
- Create a safe environment where children can experiment with the language.
- Repeat words/sentences previously used.
- Maintain attention by asking questions.
- Positively react to children's initial utterances, even if incomplete.
- Expand or enhance what children say.

These suggestions underscore that positive interaction is beneficial for the language classroom. Young learners need to be immersed in a holistic language experience (Novello 2023), in which interaction constitutes a central component. Additionally, research shows (Kuhl et al. 2003) that passive exposure to a second language is not effective with very young children, thus interaction should always be present in the language classroom, whether through teacher speech or structured tasks. Planning a positive learning environment is particularly important due to the epigenetic influences on language acquisition (Novello 2023), and despite language processes implied in learning a native language being similar to the ones used in the foreign language, learning environments can differ in terms of decontextualization, artificiality of language, and motivation. Consequently, the learning environment should provide meaningful context, relevance, and authenticity.

Additionally, positivity in the learning environment should include effective error management. Teachers need to be aware that errors are learning strategies, and they provide useful feedback on the learning process. Errors in early bilingualism environments must not be punished or formally corrected, as children do not possess the cognitive capacity to adjust their production based on decontextualized information. Since children are keen observers and hypothesis-makers,

they need to be exposed to the correct model of what they produced incorrectly. In this way they can continue creating the linguistic system according to their natural learning processes.

Another important aspect in planning concerns how to link various brief activities. One effective approach is to connect them both linguistically and thematically. This enables children to be repeatedly exposed to the same language across different contexts, which facilitates both comprehension and memorization. Conversely, jumping between different and disconnected activities does not help maintain the focus (Kang Shin 2006). Planning thematic units can, therefore, be useful, as broad contexts allow numerous interconnected activities. Within the same thematic unit, it is possible to include different activities such as songs, stories, and games, that redundantly use the language enabling the children to internalise words and structures while, gradually, introducing new language.

Routines also play a crucial role in planning. Routines are familiar to students and provide moments for redundancy in a reassuring environment. For very young children, for instance, gathering toys, preparing for meals, reuniting for stories, preparing for sleeping, could be significant moments to use the target language.

Elaborating on what was outlined by Edelenbos et al. (2006), we can include the following among the indicators of quality in effective language program design for very young learners:

- Attention to classroom climate.
- Multiple learning opportunities.
- Consistency in planning.
- Coherence in content.
- Practical, hands-on activities.
- Student engagement and active participation.
- Strategy-based instruction.
- Assessment oriented toward communicative goals.
- Quality of teaching.
- Teaching as an ongoing process.
- Attention to individual learner characteristics.
- High-quality instructional materials.
- Meaningful instructional interventions.

Among the fundamental principles identified by the European Commission (Edelenbos et al. 2006) regarding early language teaching, based on a synthesis of numerous studies and research in the field, are the following:

- Providing meaningful contexts and relevant thematic areas.
- Promoting holistic learning.
- Considering age-related characteristics of learners, including physical aspects.
- Adopting a positive approach to foreign language acquisition.

Additionally, the following are emphasized:

- Attention to the concept of language acquisition.
- The importance of a multisensory approach.
- Consideration of learners' strategies and learning styles.
- Awareness that comprehension precedes production.
- The importance of frequent and early exposure.
- Consideration of all learner characteristics.

Studies agree on focusing on aspects connected to children's global learning, including educational linguistics, pedagogy, psycholinguistics, and neurolinguistic elements. Considering all characteristics impacting children's development is essential for an effective bilingual education programme. When planning, supporting children's natural learning processes in a positive environment is crucial, along with the quality of teaching.

2 Language Learning Features in Very Young Learners

In early bilingual education programmes, teachers need to be trained on the main attitudes observed in young language learners. Understanding their language behaviours, along with their strategy implementation and potentialities, leads to tailored planning in an effective learning environment (Sundara 2022; Pfenninger at al. 2023).

Harmer (2001; 2007) highlights the following characteristics in young learners:

- They understand the overall meaning, even if they do not know all the words.
- They often learn indirectly rather than directly.
- Their understanding mainly comes from interaction, from what they see, hear, and touch.
- They are not yet able to grasp abstract linguistic concepts (such as grammatical rules).
- They show curiosity about the world and enthusiasm for learning.
- They need individual attention and teacher approval.
- They enjoy talking about themselves and their lives.
- They have limited attention spans, which can increase with engaging activities. They get bored easily.

McGlothing (1997) identifies the main behaviours observed in children as:

- Lack of interest in the language itself.
- No disturbance or frustration over what they do not understand.
- Use of their own interests in approaching learning.
- Increased confidence when communication is successful.

The above indications lead to a reflection about the type of learning that needs to be stimulated in children, along with the activities to implement.

First, it is important to consider how the child's attention is drawn to the global message and prepare activities accordingly. Children do not need to understand everything, but they gradually deduce new meanings based on the context along with familiar information. When planning it is crucial to select activities which contain information, either linguistic or non-linguistic, already known by the children in order to allow them to infer meanings. Young children tend to learn from what is around them, more than focusing on what can be explicitly taught. Hence, the learning environment should be filled with the target language in every aspect, giving the children the opportunity to interact, even physically, with it. Teachers should stimulate this interaction by fostering opportunities to get in contact with the language. Children's curiosity should be satisfied by using the target language; the way they explore the world, using sensory clues, can be an opportunity to design meaningful activities.

Time dedicated to activities can vary according to the child's attention span, which, as stated by Brown (2001), can rise when actively engaged. Children need to receive positive feedback in meaningful contexts. Additionally, given their young age they do not need explicit explanations of language functioning. Children cannot understand abstract rules and are focussed on oral abilities. As Slattery, Willis (2001) observed, children up to seven years old:

- Acquire language through listening and experience, as with L1.
- Learn through play; they do not consciously seek to learn new words or sentences; their learning is incidental.
- Love to play with sounds in the target language, imitating and making strange noises.
- Are unable to organize their learning.
- Cannot read or write in their native language; it is important to focus on speaking and playing.
- Develop grammar by contextualized abundant exposition to the target language.

Considering the different learning characteristics of students is of high importance. As far as possible, given the very young age of the students, it is important to respect their learning styles and therefore take into account studies on language acquisition in students with neurodiversity, such as giftedness or specific learning disorders (Novello 2025). As stated by Blondin et al. (1998), verbal intelligence has a strong impact on foreign language learning, consequently it is worthy to adjust activities according to children's potential. This is also confirmed by Edelebons et al. (2006) who summarized good practice in teaching languages to young children giving both the

perspectives of children and the education system. The aspects included from the child's perspective, are as follows:

- Meaningfulness of a lesson or topic for the child.
- Coherent development of sense in individual lessons, and throughout the year.
- Contribution of each lesson to the individual language acquisition process.
- Quality learning for the individual child with his/her strengths and weaknesses.

Among the aspects included from the perspective of the education system are:

- Amount of teacher training required.
- Content of teacher training.
- Budgets available (time of learning, financial resources).
- Motivation of teachers.
- Quality assurance.
- Monitoring of change.

Understanding the main characteristics of children in language learning is fundamental to designing high quality teaching. Both planning and flexibility are crucial. Teachers should organize their teaching according to students' feedback, along with relying on good practices suitable for both individual and group learning.

3 Bilingual Education for Children Aged 0 to 6: Research Data from Bilingual Education Project

The following data regards a bilingual education project with children aged 0 to 6, attending five nursery schools and two kindergartens in the North-East of Italy. The project began in 2015 and has developed over the years due to the continuity of the research and subsequent feedback shared among school management, scientific supervisors, and teachers. The scientific supervisors developed a model that includes the following steps, which are implemented annually:

- Teacher training.
- Planning or supervising planning.
- Meetings with families.
- Monitoring.
- Meetings during the school year with teachers and school directors.
- Data analysis.
- Replanning of teacher training based on feedback and results.

Concerning teacher training, at the beginning of every school year, new teachers are offered a course on the fundamental principles of early bilingual education. This course is both theoretical and practical, and includes the following topics:

- Fundamental principles of educational linguistics.
- Neuroscience of early development.
- English language teaching for very young learners.
- Language teaching methodologies for children.
- Language strategies and activities for children.
- Lesson planning.

The teacher training course is attended not only by teachers who work in English with the children but also by all staff members involved in their care and education, as it is important to share the main characteristics of the project and the benefits for the children. To date, more than one hundred individuals have participated in the training.

With regards to planning, teachers are guided every year through the design of activities. This is a crucial aspect, as it includes a selection of objectives, activities and strategies. Additionally, it allows for the monitoring of how teachers have benefitted from the training and how well they understood the main theories and practices related to early bilingual education. One of the key decisions in the planning process is to respect the formative objectives already established by the schools in relation to children's development. Consequently, linguistic objectives are planned accordingly. The adopted strategy identifies which objectives can be achieved with the use of the English language, while respecting both pedagogical and linguistic theories. Curriculum planning includes routines, as these are part of the schools' permanent activities implemented using the English language.

For the success of the project, families are informed each year about the objectives and the main stages of the programme. Importantly, the scientific supervisors, together with school headteachers and teachers, meet parents and caregivers to present the project and respond to their questions. Moreover, schools organize meetings during which families can participate in activities with their children. In this way, parents and caregivers can gain a deeper understanding of the natural approach used with their children. Families also have access to the school library, and they can borrow books in English.

Monitoring children's classroom activities is another important component of the project. Teachers are periodically observed by supervisors to support them and to understand the development of the programme. Observation grids and check lists have been developed (Novello 2021) and are used to share feedback. Meetings with teachers and school directors are fundamental, as they provide

opportunities to reflect on the project, solve problems, and think about new proposals. During these meetings, data from observations are shared and discussed. In addition, questions such as the following are posed to teachers to guide the discussion:

- How did the children initially react to the language change?
- How do they react now?
- Are you able to follow the planned curriculum?
- Are the objectives too numerous or insufficient?
- Are you able to use the language for an amount of time appropriate to the objective?
- Are you able to create an environment suitable for language acquisition?
- Are the materials adequate in terms of both quantity and quality?
- Is the sequencing of activities in English functional to achieving the objective?
- What difficulties have been encountered?
- What feedback has been received from parents?
- How can the project be improved in the short and long term?

Children are also observed during the project while being exposed to the target language (see Novello 2023 for the types of tasks and classroom activities implemented). Through the years, different types of observation have been carried out. Three times a year, teachers complete an assessment grid (Novello 2021) in which they include their observations regarding children's English language development. Additionally, a researcher is occasionally appointed to collect specific data about the project, such as the ones reported in this article.

As reported in the following chart, throughout the years many children have been observed, thus allowing the gathering of significant data, which supports reviewing planning and objectives.

Project data	**2021/2022**	**2022/2023**	**2023/2024**	**2024/2025**	**2025/2026**
Schools	5 nursery schools, 2 kindergarten	5 nursery schools, 2 kindergarten	5 nursery schools, 2 kindergarten	5 nursery schools, 2 kindergarten	5 nursery schools, 2 kindergarten
Number of children	393	429	439	447	443
Number of bilingual children	66*	77**	89***	86****	80****
Number of teachers involved in the project	45	42	43	43	49
Teachers' age	From 23 to 60	From 24 to 60	From 23 to 61	From 24 to 60	From 23 to 63
Teachers' degrees	High school (5) University (40)	High school (3) University (39)	High school (3) University (40)	High school (5) University (38)	High school (4) University (45)
Number of teachers with a language certification (B2 level or above)	20	25	16	19	14

* Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Moldovan, Nigerian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Sinhalese, Spanish.
** Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, English, Filipino, French, German, Japanese, Moldovan, Nigerian, Persian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish.
*** Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, English, Filipino, French, German, Moldovan, Moroccan Arabic, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish.
**** Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, English, Filipino, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Macedonian, Moldovan, Moroccan Arabic, Nigerian, Persian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish.

As shown in the chart, hiring teachers holding a language certificate of at least B2 level, which is the minimum required to participate in the project, is challenging. Despite these difficulties, the project has an average time of language exposure as the following:

- 1,5 hours per day at kindergarten.
- 2 hours per day at nursery school.

As mentioned above, the ongoing communication with teachers is fundamental to gathering useful information regarding children's language acquisition process. Feedback on favourite activities is consistently required to plan effectively, and include the following:

Nursery school:

- Storytelling.
- Songs.
- Routines.
- Games of movement.
- Thematic workshop.

Kindergarten:

- Storytelling.
- Songs.
- Routines.

Data gathered throughout the years has been consistent. Here follows, as an example, data gathered in 2022/2023 by an appointed researcher in a nursery classroom including 20 children (aged 6 months to 3 years). Data was gathered for a year in three different months (November/ February/May) using the above-mentioned assessment grid. Data referred to November regards only children enrolled in the project since the previous year, as new arrivals start being assessed later.

1) Years children have been enrolled in the project:

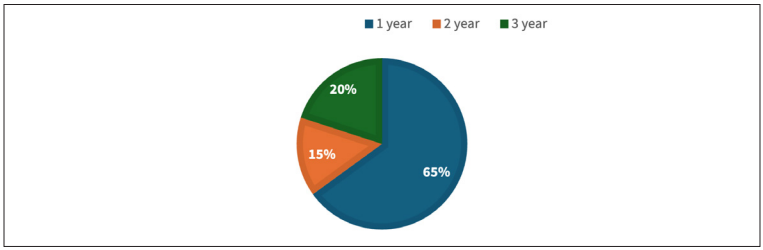


Figure 1 Years enrolled in the project

In this class 65% of children were new arrivals, 20% were attending the third year, and 15% were in their second year of attendance.

As mentioned above, every year the presence of other languages is investigated. Plurilingualism is an important aspect of the project, every language is valued and teacher training always emphasizes this point.

2) Languages spoken at home:

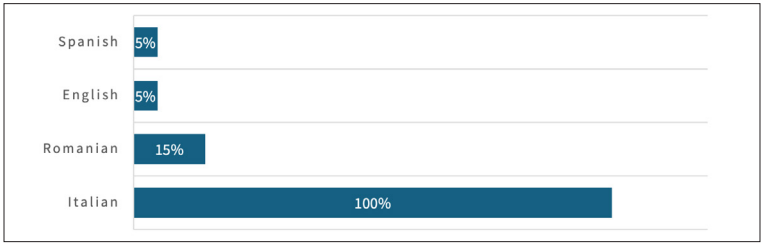


Figure 2 Languages spoken at home

In this classroom Romanian (15%), English (5%) and Spanish (5%) were languages spoken at home in addition to Italian (100%).

The following data regards children's language acquisition process. Every aspect has been evaluated using the following criteria:

- AAA: acquired.
- AA: almost acquired.
- A: initial acquisition.
- NA: not acquired.

As the next figure indicates, the capacity of the children to notice the switch from Italian to English rose with the time of exposure.

3) Comprehends when teachers switch the language:

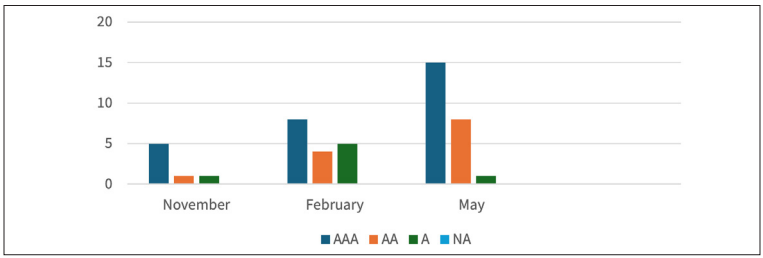


Figure 3 Comprehension of language switch

Children understand when teachers switch the language, and they react with increasing calmness, as the following figure shows:

4) Is not intimidated by the use of English:

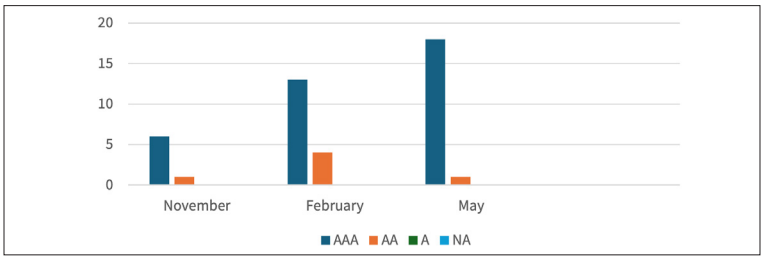


Figure 4 Calmness at code switching

Although signs of intimidation during language switching were recorded in a small number of children, close attention has been paid to this phenomenon over the years. Interviews with teachers,

together with the analysis of their notes, revealed that children who do not appear calm during language switching tend to display similar behaviours in other situations involving change or different activities. Consequently, the approach has been to continue exposing children to English, supporting them as in other situations. However, since each child is different, alternative approaches may sometimes be necessary.

The following data concerns language acquisition processes related to language abilities. It has been observed that children – as in other classes – tend to improve their ability to listen to and reproduce sounds in English and, in the case of older children, to sing songs as well.

5) Listens to and produces sounds/songs in English:

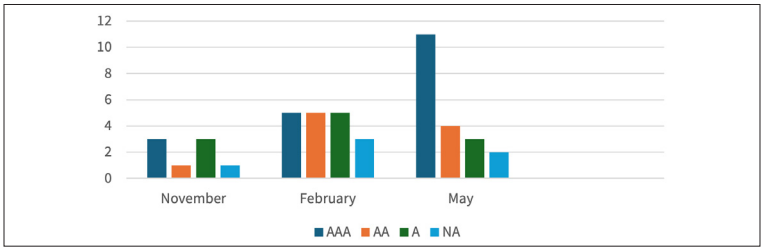


Figure 5 Listening and production of sounds and songs

In this project, songs represent an important component of the curriculum, and their value has been confirmed over the years.

With regard to oral comprehension, the observations include data from situations both with and without concrete references. As shown in figures 6 and 7, there is a significant increase in comprehension, and some children reach high levels of comprehension without the need for concrete references.

6) Understands simple instructions/messages with concrete demonstrations/references:

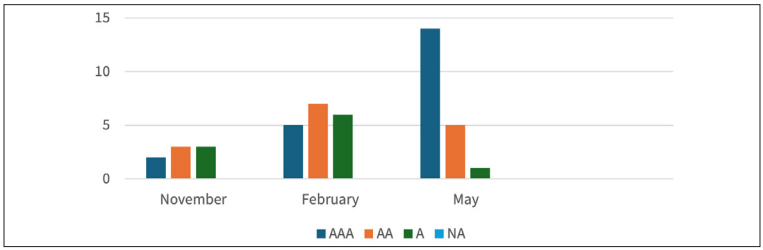


Figure 6 Comprehension with reference

7) Understands simple instructions/messages without concrete demonstrations/references:

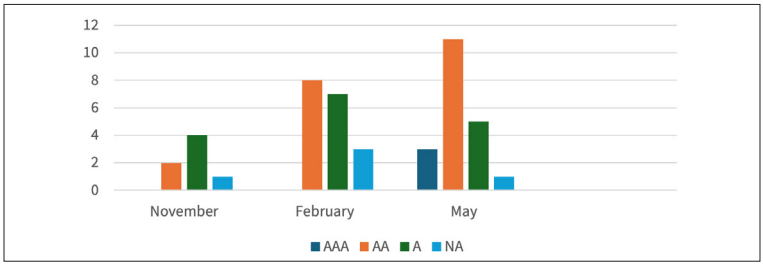


Figure 7 Comprehension without reference

With regards to oral production, although it was not a main objective, it is interesting to note that it increased not only in terms of repetition **[fig. 8]** but also in the production of brief sentences **[fig. 9]**.

8) Repeats some words in English:

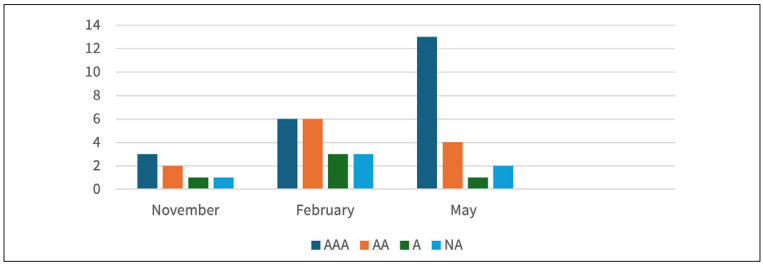


Figure 8 Word repetition

9) Produces brief sentences:

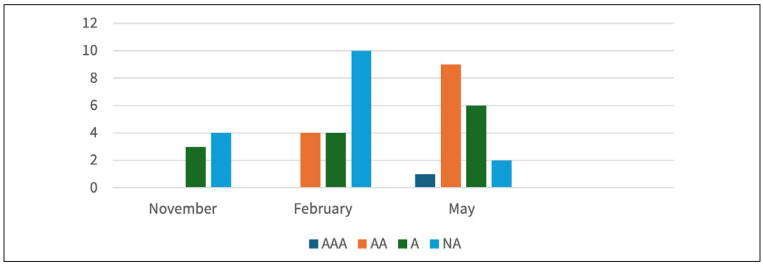


Figure 9 Sentence production

Concerning lexicon, it was soon observed that the children were able to comprehend and retain words **[fig. 10]**. The activities and strategies implemented in the projects therefore proved to be effective. This approach, as also evidenced by the following data, turned out to be successful, as it enabled the children to achieve a natural acquisition of the language.

10) Recognizes and uses words:

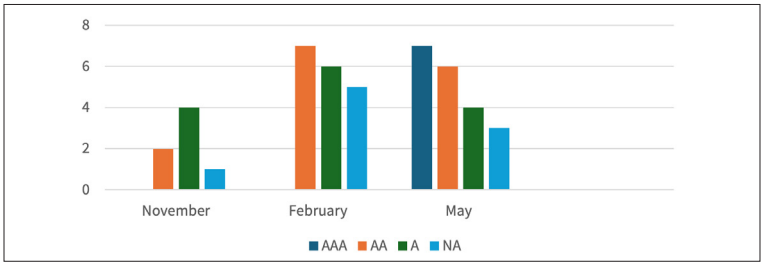


Figure 10 Words recognition and use

The following data regards aspects related to curriculum planning.

In addition to songs, storytelling represents another fundamental activity in this project, as it benefits early language acquisition.[3]

Figures 11 and 12 show an increase in both attention and comprehension during storytelling activities.

11) Listen to stories in English:

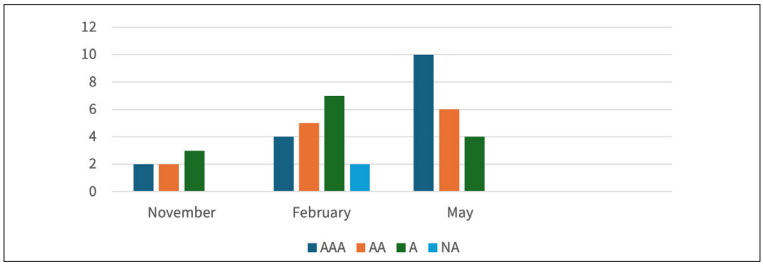


Figure 11 Storytelling listening

3 Slattery, Willis 2001; Brewster et al. 2004; Li, Sedhouse 2010; Fattori 2022.

12) Comprehends stories:

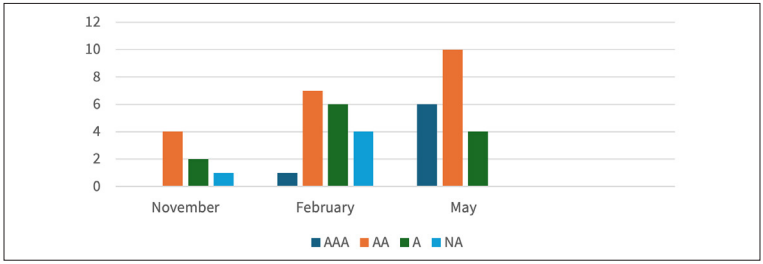


Figure 12 Storytelling comprehension

The following section presents the observation of a single curriculum objective: colours. Colours represented an important area of knowledge for the children, as they were included in the thematic area of the school year. Therefore, observing their acquisition was essential in order to monitor the children's progress within the curriculum.

13) Recognizes and says some colours:

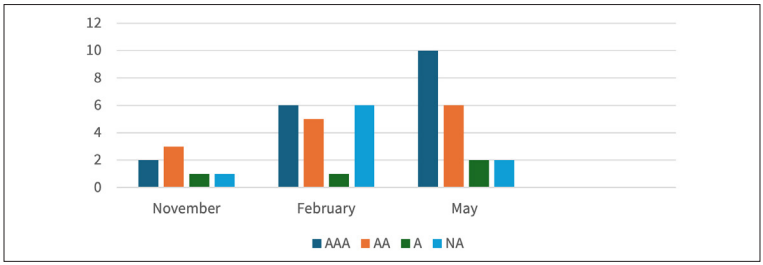


Figure 13 Colours recognition

As final examples, two experiences related to the macro-planning of the curriculum are presented: attention and enjoyment. As shown in Figure 14 and 15, a significant increase in both aspects was observed, thus confirming the effectiveness of the curriculum, which is improved every year on the basis of feedback from the data and the teachers.

14) Pays attention to activities in English:

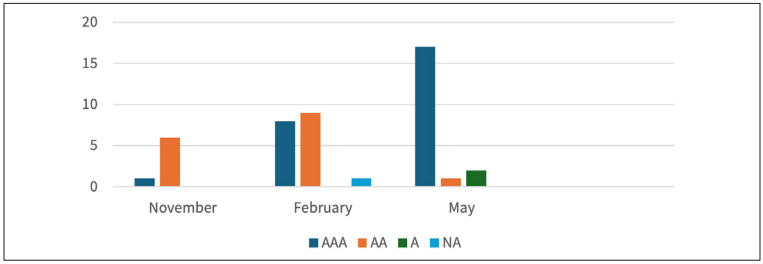


Figure 14 Attention to activities

15) Enjoys participating in activities in English:

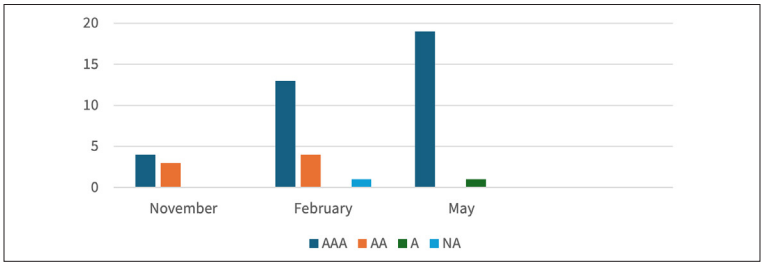


Figure 15 Enjoyment during activities

At kindergarten level as well, although the project started later than in the nursery schools and involved fewer hours, improvements were observed in the following areas:

- Curiosity about the language.
- Oral responses to questions.
- Word repetition.
- Naming objects.

In both contexts – kindergarten and nursery schools – the spontaneous daily use of words and short phrases was also frequently observed.

One set of data that has been consistently gathered – and continues to be collected – concerns the high level of comprehension of simple instructions.

The approaches used to introduce the English language have facilitated, since the beginning of the exposure, the comprehension of these types of messages (Novello 2023).

As emerged from the presented data, a solid framework is fundamental to the success of a language programme. In this

project, it has supported, and continues to support, the achievement of the objectives. Therefore, the above-mentioned model proved to be effective, and its implementation may be recommended in early bilingual education programmes. In particular, teacher training and continuous feedback are essential components.

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