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Bridging Plurilingualism: From Orality to Writing Across Languages

A Model of Multilingual Literacy for Newly Arrived Migrants in Palermo

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Abstract

Over the past ten years, Palermo has emerged as a particularly significant field of research for the observation, analysis, and teaching related to young and adult migrants. Since 2012, thousands of teenagers and young adults who crossed the Mediterranean using makeshift means—following equally harrowing journeys—have been welcomed into the classes of the Italian Language School for Foreign Students (ItaStra) at the University of Palermo. To date, hundreds of undergraduate and doctoral theses, as well as peer-reviewed articles supported by quantitative data and extensive audiovisual documentation, have been published, recounting this collective experience. In Palermo, through a project that has operated—and continues to operate—on multiple levels and has evolved through various stages, a new learner profile has gradually taken shape: a young individual characterized by fluid plurilingualism prior to departure, further enriched during their migratory journey, and equipped with new communicative resources and needs, yet with limited literacy and emerging reading and writing skills. After outlining this profile, the discussion focuses on an experimental teaching initiative for young plurilingual adults with low or no literacy skills. The literacy model developed within the framework of this initiative builds on students' existing linguistic repertoires and sociolinguistic competencies, enabling them to acquire reading and writing skills in the Roman alphabet. This empowers them to produce and understand texts both in Italian and in the different languages within their repertoires. By avoiding the imposition of a single linguistic

norm, this approach fosters an autonomous form of literacy that emerges organically from the multilingual context of the classroom and is rooted in the students' everyday linguistic practices and learning strategies.

Keywords: L2 literacy education, plurilingualism

Introduction

This study is part of a broad research pathway that began in 2012, when a substantial number of young adults—predominantly men—reached Sicily after travelling along the Central Mediterranean route. We refer to the participants in these flows as newly arrived young migrants, thereby foregrounding both their age and the short interval between migration and settlement in Sicily. Since 2012, several thousand of these youths have spent months attending courses at the Italian Language School for Foreigners of the University of Palermo (hereafter ItaStra). A wide-ranging research program has coalesced around these language-teaching and social-inclusion activities, encompassing second-language acquisition (SLA), discourse analysis, migration linguistics, and related fields (for an overview up to 2022, see Amenta & D’Agostino, 2022). Data collection has combined quantitative surveys with ethnographic observation of both face-to-face and digital linguistic interaction, supplemented by semi-structured interviews. Equally significant has been the development of pedagogical models tailored to this emergent learner profile—plurilingual, digitally connected, and often characterized by low or very low levels of formal schooling, or even pre-migration illiteracy (cf. *Ponti di Parole* model).¹ Extensive investigation of the linguistic ecologies of countries of origin, combined with systematic observation of the multilingual practices displayed by young migrants upon arrival in Italy (D’Agostino, 2022; D’Agostino & Mocciaro, 2021; D’Agostino, Mocciaro & Ba, in press; Farina, 2024), Lüpke’s work (2018, 2020) and Anderson & Ansah (2015) research in West Africa has been fundamental to the design of the multilingual literacy model examined here. Our model is likewise grounded in the observation and analysis of linguistic practices and rests on the premise that the school should not serve to impose dominant language regimes but rather operate as a dynamic arena for negotiating between students’ pre-existing linguistic repertoires and knowledge systems and institutional norms. Accordingly, it integrates the digital writing practices (Androutsopoulos, 2006, 2015; Deumert et al., 2019; Lexander, 2010; Lexander & Alcón-López, 2024) widely adopted by migrants in Italy with the *road* grassroots literacies (Blommaert, 2004; Fabian, 1990) developed in their home contexts, both of which function as resources for sociolinguistic agency.

From the Global South to the Global North: The Invisibility of ‘Other’ Languages and Learning Practices²

In the linguistic policies of postcolonial contexts, local languages are often relegated to a condition of "epistemic invisibility" (Heugh, 2022). Although more than sixty years have passed since the independence of many African and Asian nations, indeed, colonial languages—whose standardized varieties are completely mastered by only a small urban élite and by the higher echelons of government—still exercise a near monopoly in formal domain such as education, commerce, public administration and justice. Conversely, a substantial body of comparative, region-wide research in sub-Saharan Africa reveals on the one hand that local languages are systematically excluded from school curricula and institutional discourse; on the other, that they continue to permeate everyday interactions, revealing the gap between restrictive language policies promoted by national elites and the reality of a dynamic and vital

¹ Cf. pontidiparole.com

² This contribution is part of the research carried out within the framework of the PRIN 2022 Project, protocol 2022FFPSBY - *Young new migrants, multilingual spaces, and Italian as a non-native language between spontaneous and guided learning*, conducted by the research units of the University of Palermo and the University of Udine.

linguistic ecology (Brock-Utne, 2000, 2008; Skattum, 2000a and b; Prah & Brock-Utne, 2009; Deustchmann et al., 2024).

As Lüpke (2018) highlights, this linguistic order has led to minimal investment in developing pedagogical models for West African languages, with direct consequences for civic participation and access to education systems (Djité, 2008; Kouamé, 2024; Puren & Maurer, 2018). The continued dominance of these neocolonial models has grave repercussions, notably the persistently low rates of literacy among younger generations: early schooling—where pupils must simultaneously acquire a new language and basic literacy through unfamiliar methods—becomes unduly prolonged and complex (Fall, 2003, 2011).

A comparable scenario can be observed within educational institutions in the Global North, where ‘other’ languages and ‘other’ linguistic practices³ are systematically overlooked when they diverge markedly from the highly standardized, monolingual norms that still dominate policy and practice at every level. The linguistic experiences and repertoires of individuals who navigate transcontinental spaces, developing broad and flexible sociolinguistic competencies, remain largely invisible. These individuals expand their linguistic resources from their point of departure and engage in practices of rapid, simultaneous acquisition and partial use of languages encountered along the way (D’Agostino, 2021).

In the host contexts—whether hosting centers or institutional spaces—such languages remain invisible except in situations where linguistic mediation becomes mandatory (e.g., healthcare, justice, asylum commissions), but they play no role in pedagogical practices, particularly in literacy education. Schooling often represents the first institutional space where migrants attempt to reconstruct or negotiate their linguistic, social, and cultural identity within their new environment. However, the absence of inclusive educational policies that recognize and value the diversity of linguistic competencies and resources among newly arrived students risks transforming schools into sites of systemic marginalization, relegating languages, identities, and knowledge to ‘the other side of the line’ (cf. the concept of “abyssal thinking” in De Sousa Santos, 2007).

In this light, we share the theoretical and methodological assumptions put forth by Warriner et al. (2024), which suggest considering literacy as “a situated social practice where languages (and linguistic competencies) are more related than distinct” (p. 160). In this sense, our initial hypothesis was that it was necessary to implement a sharp discontinuity with traditional learning models by aligning them with the linguistic resources possessed by each speaker. This approach required not only acknowledging the existence of languages beyond the Global North but also recognizing linguistic practices where code-switching, borrowing, and convergence blur the boundaries between linguistic systems. In such practices, which differ significantly from Western models, variations are not limited to language use but extend to learning methods as well. Canagarajah & Wurr (2011) emphasize very well the strong connection between immersion in linguistic environments where linguistic diversity and continuous, spontaneous learning of new languages are the norms:

Language diversity is the norm and not the exception in non-western communities. In such communities, people are always open to negotiating diverse languages in their everyday public life. Their shared space will typically feature dozens of languages in every interaction. They do not assume that they will meet people who speak their own language most of the time. This mind-set prepares them for negotiating different languages as a fact of life. (p. 3)

³ In our discussion, the term “linguistic practices”—or “linguaging”—is frequently used alongside “languages” or “idioms”. This choice allows us to emphasize the dynamic and flexible nature of language use, which is particularly evident both in the contexts of origin of the transnational migrants we refer to here and in the educational context we will discuss.

And they continue:

In such communities, language acquisition also works differently. Since the languages one will confront in any one situation cannot be predicted, interlocutors cannot go readily armed with the codes they need for an interaction. Therefore, in such communities, language learning and language use work together. People learn the language as they use them. They decode the other's grammar as they interact, make inferences about the other's language system, and take them into account as they formulate their own utterances. (p.11)

This premise underscores the necessity of constructing teaching models that engage with radically other linguistic experiences, mobilizing resources that, both in the Global South and the Global North, are almost invariably ignored.

Rethinking Literacy Practices in Multilingual Education in the Global South

In this context, the decolonization language education cannot be limited to a mere revision of school curricula; it demands a profound transformation of ethos, practices, and persistent monolingual ideologies that shape educational settings across the Global South and the Global North. As Prah (2018, p. 47) highlights regarding Africa—an observation applicable elsewhere—"[o]ne of the correctives which needs to be made [...] is the acceptance of the necessity to build on African indigenous knowledge systems with these latter as credible points of departure". Re-conceptualizing language education as a dynamic process that interrelates multiple knowledge systems, rather than as a unidirectional transfer of knowledge, is essential to foregrounding the linguistic practices of plurilingual migrants within educational interventions. Such a stance simultaneously legitimizes non-European traditions of knowledge production and dissemination, integrating them into host cities (Ndholuvo & Makalela, 2021; Òjó, 2022). These practices—multilingual by nature—are further characterised by pronounced heterography and by their departure from official orthographic norms. In sub-Saharan Africa, they materialise as alternative literacies that emerge outside formal schooling. What may appear as irregular instead reflects deeply embedded linguistic practices shaped by layered sociolinguistic histories. Writing, therefore, becomes an "ethnographic object par excellence" (Blommaert, 2008: 8), intimately tied to the of textual production and circulation, as well as to the interactional routines of the communities concerned. Many migrants who have not benefited from formal literacy instruction develop highly adaptable reading and writing strategies that remain independent of rigid standardisation (D'Agostino & Mocciaro, 2021; Juffermans, 2015; McLaughlin, 2014, 2015; Mumin & Versteegh, 2014). Some may also have cultivated sophisticated writing practices in *daaras*—traditional Qur'ānic schools devoted to the study of the Quran and Islamic precepts. Marked by considerable heterogeneity in their pedagogical models, these institutions not only provide indispensable support to many families but also constitute, for numerous young people, the sole gateway to literacy and schooling (Boyle, 2018; Chehami, 2016; Dia et al., 2016; Easton, 1999; Gandolfi, 2003;). Their methodologies typically combine the development of oral skills—including listening, production, and memorisation through repeated recitation of Quranic chapters—with exercises in memorising, copying, and, in some cases, reading and rewriting. These practices inaugurate an initial literacy trajectory that, depending on the instructional model adopted, may unfold in Arabic, *ajami*, or the Roman alphabet (Ba, 2025). On these grounds, literacy development must not be reduced to the simple conversion of phonemes into graphemes; rather, it should be understood as a process that responds to learners' immediate post-arrival needs, recognizes their prior non-formal educational experiences, attends to their language-acquisition trajectories, and builds upon the skills they have already amassed.

Multilingual Practices in Digital Platforms and in Facebook in Italy

Systematic observation of the young migrants described above reveals a clear continuity between the multilingual practices—both oral and written—that prevail in their regions of origin (and are further amplified during their migratory trajectories) and those that re-emerge in the host society within domains of informal, non-normative language production, especially when no Italian interlocutors are present (see D’Agostino, Mocciaro & Ba, in press). Equally noteworthy is the finding that Facebook is exploited even by users with little or no formal schooling, who mobilise strategies situated along a continuum of increasing autonomy: copying and pasting material from other posts, reproducing fixed formulae and short phrases, and ultimately experimenting with independent composition (D’Agostino & Mocciaro, 2021). D’Agostino, Mocciaro & Ba (in press) further demonstrate that, when one examines the Facebook profiles of young sub-Saharan users, the appropriation of written forms by literacy-emergent learners takes place simultaneously in several languages, owing to sustained exposure to the multilingual input that typifies Facebook interaction. Navigated by plurilingual users, this virtual arena functions as a plurilingual speech community that replicates the linguistic ecologies characteristic of African and Asian contexts of use. It also operates as a site of language learning—a reservoir from which novice writers draw linguistic exemplars and devise strategies for re-using and manipulating written fragments along a path of progressive autonomy. Immersion in such multilingual input therefore precipitates a literacy trajectory that is, from the outset, intrinsically multilingual—because it unfolds across multiple languages and varieties—and mistilingual—because it interweaves distinct varieties even within a single utterance. Moreover, this immersion appears to engender literacy practices reminiscent of what Blommaert (2008) terms *grassroots literacies*. These texts are typically produced by writers who possess limited access to standard linguistic resources and to the dominant economies of literacy; they exhibit fluid orthographies, hybrid genre conventions, and locally salient semiotic repertoires. Crucially, their normative value is internal to the communities that generate them, yet when assessed through institutional lenses such writings are often pathologized as errors rather than recognized as orderly under alternative regimes of literacy. Although frequently regarded as marginal, grassroots literacy is underpinned by a robust social infrastructure that secures its transmission and conventionalisation, thereby conferring legitimacy upon it. The concept thus foregrounds the ways in which sociolinguistic inequalities shape the circulation and evaluation of texts, illustrating that non-standard graphic heterogeneity constitutes a semiotic resource rather than a deficiency.

The study, observation, and documentation of these written interaction practices have steered our research towards a pedagogy of writing that privileges flexibility and cultivates dynamic interaction among linguistic repertoires, thereby allowing multiple codes to co-exist functionally within the same text. The underlying premise is that the writing practices migrants develop in digital and informal settings can emerge organically in the classroom and be re-appropriated for the literacy-learning process.

Enhancing Learners’ Existing Resources

Drawing on the living patterns of language acquisition and continuous use that shape migrants’ multilingual practices—both in their countries of origin and along their migratory trajectories—our model dismantles the traditional divide between the language of instruction and everyday languaging. It challenges the prestige hierarchies that still govern educational settings and affirms that learners can, and should, develop reading and writing skills in Italian and their heritage languages simultaneously. Within this same framework, literacy is conceived not as a process anchored exclusively to the target language but as a genuinely cross-lingual

experience that mobilises the full range of linguistic knowledge and strategies learners have acquired elsewhere. This dual movement legitimises their prior experiences while helping them organise and connect their competences. The model consequently pursues two operational aims. First, it foregrounds and valorises participants' languages and interactional practices—mixing, repetition, text modelling—as legitimate classroom resources, thereby constructing a learning environment that respects linguistic diversity and individual histories. Second, it ensures that all existing writing practices feed into a robust literacy pathway: one that meets learners' immediate reading and writing needs in Italian while simultaneously laying the groundwork for literacy in other repertoire languages.

The model is inspired by the LILIEMA project, developed in Casamance (Senegal) under the scientific supervision and coordination of Lüpke (Lüpke et al., 2020), which led to the development of a literacy model centered around some of the most widely spoken languages in the Senegalese region, including Joola, Mandinka, Bainunk, Mankanya, Konyagi, and Pulaar. Our model shares this multilingual orientation, but adapts it to the exceptional linguistic heterogeneity of Italian L2 classrooms of the school, where former colonial languages (i.e. French, English, among all) and *linguae francae* such as Wolof or Tunisian and Libyan Arabic. Rejecting prescriptive norms for all languages other than Italian, our model draws on grassroots and digitally mediated writing practices, treating divergent spellings not as errors but as valuable semiotic resources. To accommodate learners' diverse competences and sociolinguistic backgrounds, we expand the range of languages and varieties recognised in the classroom and employ teaching materials that interconnect resources that might initially seem unrelated. In doing so, the model preserves its multilingual foundation while adapting to the highly polycentric reality of Italian L2 courses, which serve migrants from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe. Developed under the supervision of Professor Mari D'Agostino, Director of ItaStra, the literacy model presented here stems from a multi-phase program of empirical observation and applied research, whose stages are outlined in the sections that follow. It builds on ItaStra's earlier sociolinguistic work—most notably the ethnographically grounded studies by D'Agostino & Mocciaro (see 2021 and in press) and the volume edited by D'Agostino & Amenta (2022)—the project opened with a needs-assessment phase calibrated to the ethnographic and digital-ethnographic protocols refined in those studies. This preliminary inquiry pursued two interdependent aims: first, to chart the emergence, distribution, and stratification of participants' multilingual repertoires (of which Italian is likewise progressively becoming an integral part) across interactional domains; and second, to document the grassroots literacies through which those repertoires are instantiated and circulated in both analogue and digital environments. The resulting sociolinguistic cartography furnished the empirical basis for instructional design. On the strength of these results, the new intervention targeted the learners' most pressing literacy demands as they crystallise in three intersecting arenas: (i) everyday and institutional encounters with Italian speakers, (ii) intra-diasporic exchanges within migrant networks in Italy, and (iii) transnational communication—largely digitally mediated—with relatives and friends who remain in the country of origin. Two primary requirements emerged. First, learners need early autonomy, achieved through accelerated instruction and pragmatic competences enabling effective interaction with Italian speakers in workplaces, rail stations, public offices and shops. Second, they must strengthen existing multilingual resources so as to operate across intra-diasporic networks in Palermo and in long-distance exchanges with kin and friends abroad.

In light of these considerations, we deemed it essential to re-examine the literacy-learning model and undertake its revision.

Literacy Model Re-design

The new literacy model utilized in this study stems from a critical re-examination of previous experiences developed within ItaStra, particularly the *Ponti di Parole*⁴ model. This earlier model emerged from a critical reassessment of all Italian teaching materials designed for adults with limited or no literacy skills. It was conceived as a monolingual pathway to adult literacy in Italian L2, rooted in the conviction that working with texts is essential from the very first stages—even for learners who have only low reading and writing abilities. In the *Ponti di parole* model, learners are engaged with authentic documents—identity cards, public notices, administrative forms—with the twin goals of activating comprehension processes and fostering autonomy in navigating everyday textual genres. This textual focus was complemented by metacognitive scaffolding and explicit reflection, enabling learners to monitor their own progress and develop strategic competencies in reading and writing. Building on this foundation, the new ItaStra model was also developed through a comparative reflection with the LILIEMA model (see foreword). Whereas LILIEMA promotes literacy by drawing on a relatively circumscribed cluster of West-African heritage languages, ItaStra adopts a far broader view, activating the full multilingual repertoire that migrants bring with them to Italy. This spectrum ranges from heritage languages—Wolof, Pular, Arabic, Bengali, Urdu, Mandinka—to languages acquired en route, and finally to Italian, the language of the host country. Both programs share the conviction that learning accelerates when it builds on students' existing linguistic resources, yet the sociolinguistic landscapes in which they operate differ sharply. LILIEMA works within a largely cohesive speech community, whereas ItaStra moves in a densely multicultural urban setting, where divergent migration histories, linguistic biographies, and cultural backgrounds intersect to create an exceptionally rich—yet complex—learning environment. Accordingly, the new model does not rely on a fixed set of local languages but incorporates the actual languages spoken by the migrant population in the host context—including Arabic and the Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian varieties, Bangla, Fula, Mandinka, Naija, Urdu, Yoruba, and Wolof. In this model, these languages are not taught, but strategically mobilized as resources for learning and meaning-making in Italian, which remains the sole target language. The multilingual approach recognizes the legitimacy and complexity of learners' communicative repertoires and positions their languages not as pedagogical obstacles, but as tools for comprehension, metalinguistic reflection, and interlinguistic mediation. This is particularly effective in adult literacy contexts, where many learners possess strong oral competences in multiple languages but have limited experience with alphabetic writing systems—especially those based on the Roman alphabet. The integration of learners' multilingual resources enables a non-linear and dynamic literacy process, in which prior knowledge is not overwritten but reactivated and recontextualized. Literacy in Italian is thus redefined as a socially situated and collaboratively constructed competence, where alternation between Italian and community languages (comprising heritage languages, lingua Francas, and languages acquired during transcontinental mobility) is not merely a form of scaffolding but a central cognitive strategy that supports conceptual development and fosters inclusive participation.

Within this framework, reading and writing are seen not as mere technical proficiencies but as indispensable tools for engaging with social life beyond the classroom. Accordingly, the

⁴ *Ponti di Parole*, literally "Bridges of Words", is a teaching model developed in 2017 by ItaStra for the teaching and learning of Italian as a second language (L2), designed for students with low levels of schooling. The system offers a progressive learning path that starts with basic literacy and extends up to A1/A2 levels of the CEFR. For an in-depth analysis of the model's origins, linguistic choices, and didactic implications, refer to Arcuri (2022). More details are available on the official website: www.pontidiparole.com.

revised model preserves the two methodological cornerstones of *Ponti di parole*: the primacy of textuality and the cultivation of strategic competence. Learners are encouraged to treat texts not only as linguistic artefacts but as social instruments—extracting key information, recognising communicative functions, and interacting with them strategically even in linguistically unfamiliar contexts. These principles inform both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) skills.

Translating these principles into classroom practice, the pedagogical implementation unfolds along two complementary axes. On the one hand, structured lessons follow a sequenced syllabus that foregrounds orality and phonological awareness. On the other, extension activities build on textbook content through interlinguistic mediation strategies. These are aligned with the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020), particularly its three mediation macro-categories: mediating a text, mediating concepts, and mediating communication. Tasks include summarizing texts for peers, interpreting visual data collaboratively, and facilitating multilingual discussions—activities that activate multilingual repertoires, promote metalinguistic awareness, and embody the action-oriented perspective of the learner as a social agent. This integration of mediation and multilingual practice goes beyond mere language acquisition: it repositions the learner within a broader semiotic and sociolinguistic ecosystem, one that reflects their lived experiences and recognizes the diversity of their linguistic identities. The alternation between Italian and other languages is not a fallback strategy but a didactic principle that sustains meaning-making and supports knowledge construction across multiple languagings. From this perspective, the multilingual literacy model and the *Ponti di Parole* framework do not function as separate or hierarchically ordered models. Rather, they intersect fluidly, dissolving the boundaries between monolingual and multilingual approaches and redefining the scope of literacy itself. The outcome is a model that validates learners' linguistic resources, promotes sociolinguistic inclusion within the classroom, and aims to accelerate the development of reading and writing skills across their entire repertoires.

Methodology

Research Context

The experience discussed in this study was carried out in 2024 at the Italian Language School for Foreigners (ItaStra) and stemmed from a highly fruitful collaboration among professionals with diverse roles and expertise. The working group is the result of the long-running documentation work and sociolinguistic and applied-linguistic research that have engaged ItaStra since 2012. It brought together university professors, teacher of Italian as a second language, doctoral students, and members of the local migrant community—among them former ItaStra students who now serve as language mediators and advocates for migrant rights.⁵ The involvement of mediators whose migratory trajectories paralleled those of the learners enabled the pedagogical intervention to be attuned more precisely to the learners' communicative needs, thereby fostering the development of materials and strategies closely linked to the linguistic practices the participants already employ in their daily lives. The group's shared aim was to identify and test instructional models and resources capable of valuing and integrating the full range of learners' assets—cognitive, linguistic, experiential, and emotional. During the preliminary phase, which began in January 2024 and continued for several months

⁵ We gratefully acknowledge the outstanding dedication and ongoing contributions of the language mediators — Sharif Asik, Aliou Ba, Samar Gamil, Md Mosharaf Hossain, Moustapha Jarju and Happy Osiagede— together with the Italian-as-a-second-language teachers Giulia Calandra and Giulia Campisi. Their unwavering support has been indispensable to this research, and we extend to them our deepest gratitude.

until May, teaching materials were created, and ten participants were selected for a pilot implementation.

Materials

All literacy materials were collaboratively developed by the Italian language instructors and the language mediators. They were developed in direct response to the learners' linguistic and educational profiles. Among the resources produced were a set of audiovisual materials and a worksheet, both intended to serve as foundational tools for the literacy pathway. The audiovisual content was recorded by linguistic and cultural mediators in the heritage languages most widely represented among the migrant communities attending ItaStra, and more broadly among undocumented migrants residing in Palermo. To date, materials have been produced in Modern Standard Arabic, Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan Arabic, Urdu, Bangla, Naija, Mandinka, and Wolof. In each video, the mediator explains—in the respective heritage language—the aims, phases, and pedagogical foundations of the literacy model, offering concrete examples of its writing approach and classroom practices. These videos function not only as an introduction to the course, but also as a means of making its structure and objectives immediately intelligible to learners in a language they understand. Designed for use during the first session of the course, these materials aim to provide students with direct, autonomous access to the educational approach, helping to reduce the initial disorientation that may arise from previous gaps in schooling or unfamiliar learning environments. By foregrounding transparency and linguistic accessibility, the materials foster engagement from the outset and support the learners in bridging the distance between their past experiences with literacy—whether formal, informal, or absent—and the new pedagogical context into which they are entering.

In parallel with the production of the introductory videos, a worksheet-based literacy workbook was developed in close collaboration with the linguistic mediators. Their role was essential not only in providing linguistic and translation support, but also in ensuring the cultural and contextual relevance of the materials. Drawing on their lived experiences and in-depth knowledge of the learners' communities, the mediators contributed to aligning the pedagogical content with the actual communicative practices and needs of the target population. The worksheet workbook is organised into self-contained didactic units, each of which weaves together reading, writing, listening and speaking tasks in Italian and in the community languages most widely spoken by the learners (Arabic, Bangla, Fula, Mandinka, Naija, Urdu, Yoruba and Wolof). Building on the *Ponti di parole* model, every unit places authentic texts—identity cards, public notices, business cards, administrative forms—at the centre of the learning sequence. From the very first lesson, students learn to extract key information, infer communicative purposes and reuse textual conventions, thereby accelerating their autonomy in navigating the written genres that shape everyday life in Italy. Each unit is accompanied by a rich iconographic apparatus that functions as a cognitive anchor. Photographs and illustrations of religious objects, domestic settings, familiar foods and other culturally salient artefacts activate learners' prior knowledge, trigger semantic associations and facilitate rapid code-switching between languages. In practice, these visuals invite students to mobilise their full semiotic repertoire—linguistic, cultural and experiential—when speaking and writing. Languages are never presented in isolation. In the classroom, teachers and learners are encouraged to move fluidly among all available codes to co-construct meaning, negotiate form and clarify content. The combined use of languages and varieties is not perceived as an obstacle or a waste of time, nor is it sanctioned; rather, it is seen as a resource that facilitates collective understanding of shared content.

Pilot Implementation and Participants

In June 2024 we launched a 40-hour pilot study to assess both the soundness of the new model and the practicality of the materials in the context of ItaStra’s literacy courses. The pilot involved five learners—a deliberately mixed group that included migrants who had lived in Palermo for years alongside others who had only just arrived—so that we could observe how the approach performed across different stages of settlement.

Table 1. Sociolinguistic data of pilot course participants

Student’s acronym	Age	Nationality	Linguistic repertoire	Length of stay in Italy	Length of schooling in Italy	Length of schooling in Italy
A	22	Bengalese	Bangla, Hindi, Urdu, Tunisian Arabic	1	2 years	0
F	30	Nigerian	Igbo, Edo, English, Naija, Yoruba	5	0	3 months
H	35	Nigerian	Edo, Shona, English, Naija, Tunisian Arabic	10	0	2 months
M	38	Egyptian	Egyptian Arabic, Libyan Arabic	8 months	0	0
N	20	Gambian	Mandinka, Bambara, Wolof, Pular, English, Naija, Tunisian Arabic	1	3 years (Quranic school)	0
S	34	Senegalese	Wolof, Mandinka, Pular, Socé, Naija, Libyan Arabic, Italian	10	2 years (Quranic school)	3 months

All the information presented in the table above was collected prior to the start of the literacy course, through a sociolinguistic interview designed to discursively reconstruct each participant’s linguistic biography and prior educational experiences—both formal and informal. As the data illustrate, the teaching experience discussed in this study involves adults and young adults from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Bangladesh, all of whom had been residing in Italy for varying lengths of time. When the project began the pilot cohort was characterized by a highly multilingual repertoire that included heritage languages, lingua francas (such as Wolof and Naija), and languages acquired along migratory routes (e.g. the Arabic varieties indicated in the table). For many of the learners, the literacy course offered by ItaStra represented their first extended experience of formal education—and, in many cases, of literacy instruction itself. As the table indicates, only one participant had experienced even fragmented formal schooling in the country of origin. Two others had attended Quranic schools only

intermittently, and any subsequent schooling in Italy was sporadic and short-lived for three of the learners. In every case, prior literacy instruction—whether delivered in English or Classical Arabic abroad, or in Italian after arrival—took place in a language largely unfamiliar to the learners and therefore failed to produce functional reading or writing skills.

From the very start of the pilot we instituted a systematic program of classroom observation and audio-video documentation. Adopting a participant-observation design, we recorded approximately 45 hours of interaction: 40 hours from scheduled lessons and a further 5 hours from informal exchanges in corridors and common areas during breaks. Both spontaneous and teacher-guided episodes were captured, with and without the instructor present, so that student–student as well as student–teacher talk was represented. All sessions were video-recorded, and the 10 most information-rich hours were transcribed verbatim.

The resulting qualitative corpus served two analytic aims. First, it enabled real-time and retrospective tracking of how learners developed decoding strategies and produced parallel texts across their languages. Second, it shed light on gains in metalinguistic awareness and on the degree to which skills transferred across linguistic systems. Because observation and analysis ran concurrently with teaching, the findings fed directly into classroom decision-making, allowing instructional strategies to be adjusted on the fly. Consequently, the learning trajectory remained highly adaptive and responsive to the evolving needs of each group. Although preliminary and quantitatively limited, modest but consistent pre- to post-intervention gains emerged in decoding accuracy, orthographic control and performance on the metalinguistic awareness scale. Improvements in reading fluency were positive yet remained within the margin of measurement error. Because the sample was small and the intervention brief (40 contact hours), these results cannot be generalised and require further investigation. However, the data collected highlight the potential of an integrated multilingual literacy model in contexts of high socio-linguistic diversity, underscoring the need for an expanded study.

First Results and Discussion

Adopting a literacy framework that systematically acknowledges every language spoken by the learners in a classroom entails far more than merely legitimising their use in instructional settings. It compels us to confront several interrelated questions: How do existing schooling paradigms accommodate (or fail to accommodate) multilingual repertoires? What is the pedagogical value of explicitly engaging with languages that have seldom been subject to formal study, especially those that are primarily mastered orally rather than in writing? And to what extent does a multilingual approach risk—at least in the eyes of some students—slowing or postponing the acquisition of Italian as the language of wider communication? Each of these issues warrants a dedicated, in-depth treatment, which will be undertaken in the coming months as the ItaStra programme continues to refine and expand its model.

Guided by these underlying questions—which have consistently informed our critical reflections on classroom practice—and motivated by pragmatic considerations, the model and its accompanying materials adopt the Roman alphabet. This choice streamlines the literacy process even for learners whose heritage languages employ non-Latin scripts, such as Arabic or Bangla. This methodological choice aligns with digital writing practices, where transliteration is widely used in informal contexts, particularly within diasporic communities and in situations of intense linguistic contact. The model enforces a standardized orthography only for Italian. This decision is motivated by the need to provide learners with a) stability in transcription and access to formal literacy networks, which is essential for subsequent socio-educational integration and autonomy in diverse urban sociolinguistic contexts; b) flexibility in adapting to different linguistic systems, thanks to the possibility of transliterating additional graphic symbols to represent specific sounds without imposing a fixed orthography. For other

languages, which are transliterated into Roman characters, non-standardized spelling variations are accepted.

This approach enables literacy to be framed as an inclusive process, reducing the gap between formal learning and the informal writing practices with which participants engage outside the school environment. On one hand, this fosters more spontaneous, authentic, and less anxiety-inducing participation. On the other, it helps develop a sense of ownership of the written code, facilitating the construction of stable and transferable linguistic competencies.

Unlike models applied in more typologically homogeneous contexts, this model engages with a wide range of diverse languages and languagings, including Edo, Naija, Mandinka, Wolof, Urdu, Bangla, Tunisian Arabic and Egyptian Arabic, Italian, English and French. In such a multilingual environment—such as in Palermo, where this model is implemented—Italian serves as the primary language of instruction, but it coexists with other languages within learners' repertoires. The adoption of a "language-independent"⁶ orthography is a strategic choice in this context, as it allows for overcoming the rigidity of standardization while developing a writing system that is more accessible, flexible, and adaptable to the communicative needs of the classroom and the multilingual settings in which students interact. Rather than teaching the alphabet in relation to a specific language, as in traditional mother-tongue literacy programs, this model introduces the phonetic values of letters through examples drawn from all the languages present in the classroom. The goal is not merely to facilitate the acquisition of a single language but to make written competencies transferable. Consistent with this perspective, the model prioritizes the processual dimension of literacy learning—understood as the ability to guide learners in transferring and integrating written skills acquired across various contexts, adapting them both to Italian and to the other languages in their repertoire. This approach is embedded within a broader enterprise, *Ponti di parole*, which is strongly grounded at all levels in metalinguistic awareness. Within this framework, textuality plays a crucial role, emphasizing the different phases of text planning, revision, and reworking. This process fosters genuine communicative autonomy across a multiplicity of linguistic contexts.

The literacy model we follow is based on the systematic association of phonemes and graphemes. In the initial stages of instruction, the shared sounds from students' linguistic repertoires are gradually introduced, with their graphic correspondences collectively established. This process enables learners to develop decoding and writing skills not just in a single language but across all the languages in their repertoire.

Figure 1 illustrates an example of an introductory activity aimed at the oral presentation of the syllable /ka/. After a listening phase, students are guided in identifying its graphic representation across the different languages they speak. Through a collaborative process, they arrive at the written form of *casa* in Italian, *kano* in Mandinka (an orthographic variant of the standard spelling *kanoo*, meaning "love"), *qanuni* (a divergent orthography of the standard spelling *qānūn*, meaning "law"), and its equivalent in Edo, highlighting the orthographic variations across the considered languages.

⁶ Here, we draw on Lüpke (2020), who categorizes multilingual writing practices in West African contexts into two distinct types. "Language-based literacy" is associated with a codified and recognized linguistic system and can be analyzed in relation to writers' intentional use of a specific language. In contrast, "language-independent literacy" is characterized by the absence of clearly defined linguistic boundaries, employing linguistic resources fluidly and without adherence to predefined systems.

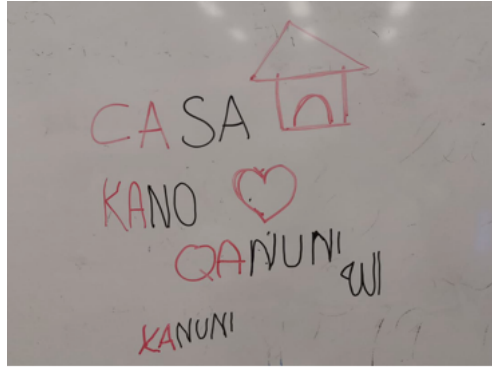


Figure 1. Class activity aimed at the oral presentation of the syllable /ka/

The presence of multiple spellings is not merely a manifestation of didactic flexibility but also serves as an indicator of emerging orthographic variation in multilingual learning contexts. This variation develops according to criteria such as accessibility, transparency, and the transferability of linguistic resources across different writing systems.

Another emblematic example of this dynamic is the variation in the representation of the phoneme /ʃ/, for which students employ different orthographic conventions:

1. Shekh
2. Chekh
3. Shaikh
4. Sceicco

The forms proposed in (1), (2), and (3) are all variants of the standard Arabic orthography *shaykh*, meaning an authoritative figure within the Muslim community. These forms originate from different orthographic traditions, reflecting the variation across writing systems of reference. In the classroom, students transcribed the Arabic standard word *shaykh* using three distinct spellings, corresponding respectively to the conventions of Mandinka, Wolof, and Egyptian Arabic. These orthographic systems are significantly influenced by the spelling traditions of English and French, languages in which the representation of the phoneme /ʃ/ follows distinct principles shaped by centuries of graphemic evolution. Conversely, form (4) represents a possible realization of the phoneme in Italian. This case illustrates how different orthographic traditions coexist in classroom practice, fostering a shared linguistic space for discussion. This coexistence generates variability in graphic choices and stimulates debates on the legitimacy of different proposed spellings.

The analysis of these forms highlights three primary sources of orthographic variation:

- Different orthographic conventions for transcribing the same phoneme, depending on the language of reference;
- Phonetic variations in oral realizations, which influence the perception and transcription of sounds, leading to divergent spellings;
- Interference between standardized and non-standardized orthographies, which coexist in multilingual contexts and result in alternating graphic representations.

The coexistence of multiple forms for representing the same phoneme is not perceived in the classroom as an error but rather as an inherent characteristic of the group's everyday linguistic practices. This variation reflects the flexible and negotiated nature of written

practices, in which linguistic boundaries are not rigidly defined but continuously reshaped through usage. Within this framework, writing itself becomes an open and adaptable tool that does not impose strict linguistic borders but instead embraces continuity and interaction between languages. These variations can be attributed to several linguistic and sociolinguistic factors, including processes of phonologization, phonotactic adaptations, and the absence of a unified graphic standard, which contribute to variability in transliteration. All of this demonstrates how linguistic contact and borrowing phenomena are often accompanied by processes of phonetic restructuring, reflecting the adaptive dynamics of languages in contact and the actual linguistic practices of speaker communities. The choice of a particular sign largely depends on speakers' repertoires, their learning experiences, and the context of use. At times, this may trigger discussions among participants—particularly when the perception of a supposed "purity" of one variant over another emerges. However, at the same time, the growing acceptance of orthographic variability enhances metalinguistic awareness and fosters a positive evaluation of local linguistic diversity.

The migrant community under study engages in fluid and translingual linguistic practices, which, as widely acknowledged, include the integration of lexical elements of Arabic, French, and English origin into the community's languages. Table 2 presents several transcriptions produced by the students, reflecting different phonetic realizations used alongside standardized French and English spellings. Throughout the course and within the materials of the literacy model, these heterogeneous and "non-standard" realizations are accepted, incorporated, and reused.

Table 2. Divergent orthographies of loanwords produced by pilot course participants

Divergent orthographies of loanwords	Recipient language	Donor language	Standard orthography
Soko	Edo	Arabic	Suq (market)
Fren	Mandinka	English	Friends
Boio	Mandinka	English	Boy
Kul	Maninka, Wolof	English	Cool
Moni	Naija	English	Money
Skul	Naija	English	School
Gari	Urdu	English	Car
Tasu	Wolof	French	Tasse (cup)
Marse	Wolof	French	Marché (market)
Biskito	Wolof	French	Biscuit
Sapo	Wolof	French	Chapeau (hat)

The adoption of an orthography independent of language enhances diversity, reframing orthographic variation from a constraint into a resource. Rather than sanctioning or eliminating it, this approach integrates variation into the learning process, promoting a literacy that is

grounded in real linguistic practices, both inside and outside the classroom, and reinforced through classroom use.

Conclusions

Language is not a fence but a moving territory. In the classroom, the sound of words escapes the boundaries set by textbooks, intertwining with gestures, settling onto pages with marks that resist, hesitate, and reinvent themselves. Here, orthographic variation is not an error, not a deviation, but a living, pulsating substance that tells the story of the writer, the speaker, the one who remembers. Not a divergence, but a possibility. Rejecting prescriptive norms means opening doors to silenced languages, to knowledge rendered invisible. In teaching practice, everyone's languages emerge, are acknowledged, and gain legitimacy within the collective fabric of discourse built together. These words weave into the testimonies of learners, into their existing knowledge, into their desire to name the world from their own experience. In this sense, linguistic boundaries are not rigid lines but zones of transition. Writing in one's own languages means breaking the silence imposed by cultural erasure policies that often accompany transnational migrations. In the classrooms of ItaStra, literacy is not merely a matter of letters and graphemes; it is a political space. The classroom becomes a site of affirmation, where language is not just a tool but an act of belonging, of resistance. Every word, every orthographic choice, thus becomes a gesture that challenges categories, transforming writing into an act of mutual recognition and validation.

The people behind and within languages constantly find ways to assert themselves, as seen in this Wolof text recorded during a classroom activity reflecting on the learning journey we were undertaking. The speaker is S., a 30-year-old Gambian who has been in Italy for five years. He has no prior formal schooling experience in either Italy or Gambia but attended a daara in Serrekunda, the largest city in Gambia, for two years. At the beginning of the course, he neither read nor wrote the Roman alphabet but was literate in Arabic. He speaks Wolof, Mandinka, Socé, Nigerian Pidgin, Tunisian Arabic, English, French, and Italian. At the end of the course, S. addresses Aliou Ba in Wolof, a language that is part of both of their family heritage, reconstructing the entire learning path undertaken.

[...]

Ah: model bii de bax na trop / because lolu day tax nag mena della xam lingay jang

because lo xamul bun lako wone sa language / model bii waaye day tax nga men a xam lingay jang bu nex.

Et puis bina newe fin bobu ba legi giss na yokute ak jem jem xanam.

Te luma xamul won xam nano legi / wax deg yalla.

[...]

Ah, this model is truly beautiful because it allows you to understand what you are studying.

because if you are not aware of what you are learning, you cannot fully express your language.⁷ But this model, instead, pushes you to know better what you are studying.

Moreover everything that is here [in this course] encourages you to be aware of what you are learning and to know it even better.

If you don't understand now, you will understand later—God willing.

⁷ During the course, S. consistently refers to the languages he speaks using the singular form, doing so intentionally, as emerged when we pointed it out in class. He never explicitly explains why, but the emphasis with which he repeats the form could suggest that he perceives them as a single entity: diverse—as he demonstrates awareness of their internal differences—yet unified.

Suma demee ekol damat gis ni dama am bânneex ba noppi jàng lu ma xamul woon.	Since I started attending school, I have been happy because I have learned things I did not know before.
[...]	[...]
Wolof la / bu fekene ki may lakkal wolof la / wolof kesse lakoy lakkal.	[Outside the classroom] When I speak with someone who understands Wolof, I use Wolof.
Bu fekene koku socé la / socé kesse lakoy lakkal.	If they are Socé, I speak in Socé.
Bu fekene italian la / italian kesse lakoy lakkal.	If they are Italian, I speak in Italian.
Ci Palermo // ay jamono bu ma wax ci italian languano yi dina mix ndax du cam italian bu neex.	In Palermo, sometimes when I speak Italian, the languages mix because I don't know Italian very well.
Waaye ci klas / language yi dina mix bu nekk te dafa neex // dama bëgg na: / ndax maa ngi jàng / te damaa gis ni neex na it bu ma wax ci klas.	But in class, the languages always mix, and that's fine—I am happy because I am learning that it is okay, even in the classroom.
Dama mix language yi / ndax dama amal a wax ay language yu bari ci jamono ju nekk // te dama jàng it ci Italian.	I mix languages because I am used to speaking multiple languages at the same time, and now I am learning Italian as well.
Ci kanam, jàng Italian du facile / bu walaa Wolof, c'est trop difficile / waaye jii ci bii, dafay plus simple // plus naturel.	Before, learning Italian was not easy—without Wolof, it was too difficult. But now, here, it is simpler, more natural.

Note: The sections *Introduction*, *Multilingual practices in digital platforms and in Facebook in Italy*, and *Conclusions* are attributed to D'Agostino. The sections *From the Global South to the Global North: the Invisibility of 'other' languages and learning practices*, *Rethinking literacy practices in multilingual education in the Global South*, *Literacy model re-design*, *Methodology*, *First results and discussion* are attributed to Farina. The section *Enhancing learners' existing resources* and the translations of the interviewee *S* included in the conclusions are attributed to Ba.

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