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To cite this article: Mila Schwarz, Inas Deeb & Deborah Dubiner (2020): 'When they act, they speak more': strategies that encourage language production in a bilingual preschool, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2020.1719029](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1719029)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1719029>



Published online: 24 Feb 2020.



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'When they act, they speak more': strategies that encourage language production in a bilingual preschool

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ABSTRACT

The objective of two-way language programs is to promote intergroup communicative competence and cultural awareness. The purpose of the study was to explore teachers' strategies implemented to create a language-conducive classroom context. To address this purpose, we used triangulation of data sources: weekly classroom observations, video recording of teachers' reflections during periodical formal meetings; and field notes. The findings indicated the following language-conducive strategies: the classroom as a community of learners, explicit request to use Arabic, ritual repetition, teacher mediated socio-dramatic play, associative mediator and language area. These strategies brought with them a change of pedagogical approach that led to increased openness to Arabic. An analysis of teachers' critical reflections of the strategy implementation revealed that they perceived these strategies as a positive factor in the enhancement of openness to Arabic.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 July 2019

Accepted 15 December 2019

KEYWORDS

Preschool bilingual education; majority-minority languages; ecological n language learning; language-conducive contexts and strategies

Introduction

In many places where there is an incidence of majority-minority languages and communities, bilingual programs are a parental educational choice. There is a variety of such programs and various ways in which young children's minority-minority languages and cultures are supported or developed. Two-way immersion programs, for example, aim to promote intergroup communicative competence and cultural awareness. In this type of program, both the language minority and the language majority are in the same class and are taught either 50% or 90% of the time in L2. The present paper focuses on a bilingual program defined as a two-way language program that aimed at a balanced linguistic and cultural school environment, where two ethnolinguistic communities encounter and experience each other's language and culture. Although programs are established to benefit both language minority and language majority children, a growing number of studies show that combining these two groups of young children does not necessarily ensure that they will communicate in each other's language (e.g. Baker 2011; Hickey 2001; Potowski 2002; Schwartz and Gorbatt 2017). Moreover, in the case of language majority children, the overwhelming dominance of their language as the lingua franca affects their L2 progress, for lack of authentic need for communicating in L2. This phenomenon was addressed both by Baker (2011) and by Hickey (2001), who observed the marginalization of minority languages in the bilingual classroom.

In majority-minority language contexts young children are not usually motivated to learn a new language when there are clear pragmatic reasons but when learning is enjoyable. In this regard, teachers and classroom contexts are paramount in determining the success of the language learning

endeavor (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, in press). The purpose of the present study was to explore language teachers' strategies implemented in a bilingual preschool in Israel. The strategies aimed at creating a classroom context that is conducive to L2 learning and increasing Arabic input throughout the school day.

The preschool examined in this paper applied a two-way language program that incorporated instruction both in the social majority language (Hebrew) for the native Arabic-speaking children and in the minority language (Arabic) for the children whose first language (L1) was Hebrew. The Arabic-speaking children in this bilingual preschool freely and effectively used Hebrew for communication, whereas the Hebrew-speaking children in general only had some receptive skills in their L2. This different proficiency is striking in light of the fact that both groups had experienced the preschool bilingual environment for 2–3 years. Hebrew and Arabic were used by teachers in the classroom space without a time/place separation. The language separation was materialized in each teacher's use of one designated language. This approach was modified, and a unique model was conceptualized and implemented by the teachers: The preschool's dominant language became Arabic from the moment children arrived until after lunch. We expected that the project implemented by the teachers would make children more open (less reluctant) to speak and listen to Arabic.

The importance of motivation for young language learners cannot be overstated. In particular, as recently stated by Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (in press) 'the younger the learners are the more it matters what happens in the classroom'. However, in order to facilitate motivation enhancement, learners need to be *open* to the active presence of the L2 in their lives. In this paper, we theorize that, in early language education, openness is the initial stage in the development of motivation, which will eventually bring about output. This openness, we argue, is not related to personal characteristics. Rather, openness is an essential pre-requisite to the positive construction of a motivational language-learning environment. In the present study, we examined how teachers created a context conducive for the openness to Arabic as a minority language.

We also investigated how they appraised the strategies implemented as part of the project. Two theoretical concepts have inspired our work: Gass and Mackey's (2014) centrality of *input-interaction-output* as a description of L2 development process and a recently coined concept of *language-conducive* contexts and strategies (Schwartz 2018). We also draw on van Lier's concept of *ecological perspective on language learning* (2004) in classrooms, including such key aspects as children's language perception, children's agency, and language teaching quality. The importance of this exploration lies in the potential of its theoretical and practical implications. We hope that thorough identification, description, and discussion of language-conducive strategies might guide teachers struggling to encourage majority-language-speaking children to use the minority language willingly.

Theoretical background

Input, output and interaction

The 1980s were marked by an increased affinity to communicative approaches to language learning. Krashen (1985), for example, advanced the *Input Hypothesis*, which strongly reverberated in the field of language teaching and research. This hypothesis postulated that learners could acquire an L2 by conveying and understanding messages and by receiving *comprehensible input* in the L2. The input hypothesis alone, however, could not explain why immersion students were not achieving satisfactory levels of oral fluency and proficiency in the target language, despite exposure to massive amounts of input in the language. In this context, Swain and Lapkin's (1995) *Output Hypothesis* suggested that producing language output was a critical component of the language learning process. Language production is considered part of the learning process, and not an outcome of learning that took place in a previous stage in the process. In other words, language production (writing, speaking) is a step towards language mastery – and it often emerges in interactions.

When carefully planned and situated in classroom contexts, interactions ‘transcend individual factors and have been shown to be far more predictable for success among all learners, young and old’ (Pica 2010, 5). Conversations held in the target language bring about a negotiation of meaning that helps novice second-language (L2) users become attentive to how effective they are in the attempt to convey messages. This attention is vital to the learning process in an interaction, as it may lead the learner to reformulate inaccurate or unclear messages. Additionally, in an interaction, the natural occurrence of repetitions, comprehension checks, and clarification requests promotes metacognitive reflection about linguistic input (Gass and Mackey 2014). Additional studies have pointed to potential benefits of social interaction in L2 learning and classroom methodology (e.g. Akiyama and Saito 2016). Thus, classroom interaction lends itself to the enactment of several strategies that are conducive to learning.

Creating language-conducive contexts in preschool bilingual education

We define *language-conducive contexts* as classroom conditions that allow language learning by means of diverse teaching strategies, language-learning activities, as well as the physical and social environment. In general, an ecological perspective on language learning encompasses the relationships that a learner entertains with all aspects of his/her physical, social and symbolic environment (van Lier 2004). Van Lier went on to claim that an ecological language learning must be positioned in a learning environment. It goes beyond merely learning to decipher messages conveyed through words, sentences or rules of grammar. Language perception is a context-embedded process that ‘includes the combination of visual and auditory (and other: multisensory) information within a context of activity’ (84). Building upon sociocultural theory, van Lier (2004) views the process of L2 learning and its perception as mediated by diverse teachers’ strategies (e.g. elicitation, verbal and non-verbal encouragement) and physical and social environments (e.g. free play activity) which create a language-conducive context.

van Lier’s (2004) ecological perspective on language learning is applicable to our discussion of bilingual preschool classrooms and teachers’ strategies. These must be examined within a wide context and considered in view of myriad factors involved in this process. Thus, the bilingual classroom as an ecosystem might provide a language-conducive context rich in multisensory activities with a wide array of semiotic resources and diverse teacher–child and peer interactions. Teachers’ initiation of these activities can be viewed as implementation of the *language-conducive strategies* aimed ‘to enhance children’s willingness to communicate’ in an L2 (Schwartz 2018). Children’s openness to learning the language is directly connected to the extent to which teachers are motivated to create a low-anxiety atmosphere leading to self-confidence (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, in press).

In the context of Swedish as a minority language immersion in Finland, Södergård (2008) revealed that in the Swedish L2 model, the teacher used indirect approaches to prod children to use of the immersion language. The teacher avoided explicitly requesting Swedish use but applied a system of ‘signals’ such as questions (*What? What did you say?*). These signals called the children’s attention to the fact that she was expected an answer in L2 rather than L1. However, as was observed by the researcher, the signals were frequently unclear to the child, and the teacher had to repeat her signaling questions several times until the child understood the request to use the L2.

Finally, a previous study, which observed the L2 instruction strategies and teachers’ reflections on these strategies in the two-way Arabic–Hebrew-speaking preschool in Israel, highlighted the need to increase Arabic input to promote the minority language from its socially weaker status. In addition, the teachers reflected on necessity to avoid overuse of direct translation in order to boost the Hebrew-speaking children’s involvement in Arabic learning (Schwartz and Asli 2014).

Data on how teachers in bilingual schools and preschools attempt to increase language majority children’s openness to the minority language in the process of their language socialization is still limited. Therefore, we examined which language-conducive strategies were implemented by the

teachers to encourage the use of Arabic as a minority language among Hebrew-speaking children in a bilingual Hebrew–Arabic-speaking preschool.

Research questions

Based on the educational context described and, on the studies, reviewed above, the following research questions were asked:

1. Which strategies did teachers employ in order to increase children's openness to the Arabic language and willingness to produce Arabic output?
2. What is the teachers' perception regarding the effectiveness of the strategies implemented?

The context of the study

During the research period and at the time of the writing, the official state language policy in Israel acknowledged two official languages (Hebrew and Arabic). The country's population stood at over 8 million inhabitants: about 75% Jewish, about 20% Arab (including Muslims, Christians, and Druze), and about 5% other minorities (National Bureau of Statistics 2016). The educational system in Israel reflects this reality and provides Jewish and Arab children mandatory public education in their native languages from the age of three up to graduation from high school. Besides this differentiated educational system, Jews and Arabs ordinarily live in separate communities, rarely mingling until they graduate from high school and enter the workforce or pursue tertiary studies. Given the higher status of Hebrew as a majority language, Hebrew speakers in general do not attain a level of Arabic similar to the level of Hebrew that Arabic-speakers do. Most Arab-Israelis understand and speak Hebrew and use it at work and in other settings. They aim to acquire high socio-linguistic ability in Hebrew, which facilitates their functioning in the social network of the majority (Amara 2002).

Still, a number of bilingual-bicultural schools in the country bring together Jewish and Arab children from pre-school to the beginning of high school. These schools, unique in the Israeli educational scene, are the initiative of the Hand-in-Hand organization and function through co-teaching. This organization, whose mission is to promote mutual tolerance and bilingual-bicultural education that acknowledges Israel's main languages, operates bilingual preschools throughout the country. In fact, Bekerman and Tatar (2009) found that parents who enrolled their children in Hebrew–Arabic bilingual schools in Israel reported a belief in the positive impact of a bicultural environment on their children's attitude toward the other.

Our study took place in one such school, where each class has two teachers: one from the Hebrew-speaking community (Jewish) and one from the Arabic-speaking community (Muslim, Christian, or Druze). The schools' intention is to provide balanced linguistic input in both languages and equal cultural input from all communities. It is also intended that the children achieve similar proficiency in both languages. Yet, educational team of the preschool investigated in the present study were aware of the hierarchical relationship between the two languages in the wider Israeli society. This was reflected in the classroom and the teachers expressed dissatisfaction that the children produced very little Arabic, if any. This was the case with children from both communities, as they used Hebrew as the chosen 'common denominator' (Baker 2007, 138) in their communication. This undesired situation was observed in additional contexts where a language hierarchy exists within a national context such as Ireland (Hickey 2001). Teachers were also concerned that the children did not display enough openness towards receptive use of the language such as listening to stories and songs in Arabic. This pattern of linguistic behavior among the Hebrew-speaking children could be attributed to the fact that their L1 was the language of the majority in Israel, the preschool's dominant language, and of the teachers' preferred lingua franca. Before the onset of the language model modification project, children did not feel any need to use Arabic (L2) since the language education policy of the current preschool was to take for

granted that the children would not produce output in L2 and teachers simply came to terms with their receptive bilingualism. This language policy touches questions of planning and practice, as well as language ideologies (beliefs about languages and attitudes towards them). These, in turn, are intrinsically connected with the teaching and learning of languages (Spolsky 2017). Teachers, in fact, play an active role in a school's language policy (García and Menken 2010). As such, an implementation of school language education policy should not be seen as a top-down unidirectional process, but rather as a complex interaction between official policy and teacher agency. Turning back to our study, an augmentation of the amount of Arabic in the preschool served to establish an environment that does not reflect the hegemony of Hebrew as a socially dominant language.

Methodology

The study reported here is the second part of a larger research project involving the same preschool. After realizing that children were not becoming active bilinguals as expected, teachers and the principal changed the preschool's language model. In the first article, Schwartz (2018) reported on the role of teacher agency in this process of increasing the presence of Arabic in the preschool in question. The first and third authors, based on their second language acquisition expertise and experience in teacher education in a major Teachers' College in Israel, were invited by the school to accompany the teacher's initiative and assess its outcomes. The second author is the director of educational programs of the organization to which the school belongs. The purpose of the present study was to identify strategies implemented by teachers in their endeavor to increase the openness to, and output in, Arabic as L2 and to create a language-conducive classroom context. In addition, the teachers' perceptions regarding these strategies were examined. The data were collected and documented by means of qualitative tools such as observations, interviews, and field notes. Such qualitative methodology is chosen when researchers wish to situate linguistic data within a social and cultural milieu (Morse and Niehaus 2009).

Participants

Children

The data draw on an encompassing examination of life and practices in the bilingual preschool. Enrolled in the preschool were 24 children aged 4–6, of whom 17 were native speakers of Hebrew and 7 were native speakers of Arabic. The children came from diverse monolingual and bilingual linguistic backgrounds, with home languages including Spanish, Hungarian, Finish, and English. The children were enrolled in the bilingual preschool exclusively by parental initiative as an alternative to Arabic monolingual or Hebrew monolingual preschools. The school's principal reported that the children came from a middle-high socioeconomic background. This private school is subsidized by the Ministry of Education; however, in contrast with public schools, parents paid a monthly tuition.

Teachers

The teaching staff consisted of two leading teachers: the L1 Hebrew-speaking male teacher, Yoav, and the L1 Arabic-speaking female teacher, Abeer. An L1 Arabic-speaking female teacher assistant, Amal, was an integral part of the teaching staff. All three teachers were fully competent in both languages and had extensive experience in teaching this age group (4–6 years old). The L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher had a 4-year experience in teaching in bilingual settings in Israel and in Europe, as well as previous formal education in the Montessori Method. The Arab leading teacher had a degree in preschool education and vast experience in monolingual preschools. This was her first-year teaching in a bilingual preschool. The teaching staff received guidance from their supervisor but received no specific professional development in bilingual teaching.

Tools

Interviews

We explored teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies implemented by interviewing them during the follow-up meetings, which took place approximately every three weeks (overall 7 meetings). The use of reflections permits teachers to reconstruct their professional experiences, identify problems and obstacles in their practice, find solutions, and critically examine their pedagogical ideology and practice (Luttenberg and Bergen 2008). The interviews, conducted in Hebrew by the authors themselves, were held in the preschool, in the afternoon, at a time convenient for all three teachers. They were formatted as free conversations focusing on our research questions and were also the place where any issues regarding the project would be raised. Each session lasted about 60 min (overall about 400 min) and was video-recorded with the teachers' consent. Through the interviews, we elicited the teachers' reflections on a variety of topics about the process and their personal role in this process. In particular, questions inquired about possible changes in teachers' pedagogical actions; their expectations of the L2 learners; possible changes in the status of Arabic in the classroom; development and use of L2 elicitation strategies; and challenges in the project realization. These questions emerged from behaviors identified during the observations.

Observations

Video recordings were chosen for they allowed the researchers to replay the interactions and considered relevant non-verbal information in addition to language exchanges between teachers and children and amongst children themselves. The recordings were made by the authors and a research assistant, a master's student in the field of education, and aimed at documenting various settings within the preschool context, such as circle time, teacher-mediated activities, and free play indoors and outdoors. Circle time usually revolved around, and elaborated on, a theme of choice and was bound by the school curriculum. Examples of these include religious and cultural events (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian), seasonal events (weather, fruits of the season), and social events (birthdays, visits of grandparents).

Data analysis

The transcription procedure was run in two stages. In the first stage, video-recorded observations, and semi-structured interviews with the teachers were transcribed in detail, in table form, allowing inclusion of non-verbal information from the videos by the native Arabic-speaker research assistant who was highly competent in Hebrew (L2). In the second stage, the transcriptions were coded for information about children's L2 use during different classroom activities. Overall, there were 425 instances of children's L2 (Arabic) use. Each case was coded for date, name of child, name of interlocutor(s), word or utterance produced and its characteristics (e.g. telegraphic speech, formulaic speech, repetition), and context description (type of classroom activity, teacher's strategy). This thorough analysis of the children's contextual use of Arabic (L2) permitted us to identify the most language-conducive strategies and a context in which they were applied.

Procedure

The study started with an assessment period of two months (December 2015-January 2016) during which we conducted observations in the preschool. The purpose of these observations was manifold: to document teacher strategies before implementation of the language model modification project; to observe and document children's language use; and to collect teacher reflections. The project

initiated by the teachers lasted five months (February 2016–July 2016) and was accompanied by the researchers, who visited the preschool once a week. In addition to data collection over this relatively extended period, we held meetings with the teachers and carried out informal observations from December 2015 to January 2016, in order to ensure that the participants (teachers and children) become used to our presence in the classroom (overall five observation sessions during this period). This early engagement in the classroom context also allowed us to be closely familiar with the participants and with the history and the context of the project (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

To examine the teachers' strategies that create a language-conducive classroom context, we used triangulation of data sources: overall 60 h of weekly video recordings of classroom observations, including outdoor activities, from 9 am to 12 noon; video recordings of ongoing teachers' reflections during periodical formal meetings; and field notes during the beginning stages of the project.

It is important to note that our focus was on Arabic output resulting from strategy use; as such, a scrutiny of Hebrew utterances are beyond the scope of this paper. In addition, the study focuses on a presentation of the strategies. Each strategy listed is followed by an illustrative example of an interaction indicating the outcomes resulting from the implementation of each strategy, including Arabic output by children. Yet, a quantification of this output in relation to the use of strategies was beyond the scope of this study.

Findings and discussion

To address the first research question, we present a discussion of the language-conducive strategies identified. We lean on Braun and Clarke's (2006) concept that 'the "keyness" of a theme is not necessarily dependant on quantifiable measure – but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research questions' (10). It must be noted, then, that only the significantly recurring strategies during the observation period are described in this study. We were not driven by the frequency count of the strategies; rather, we elaborate on such strategies that were conducive to language use by children. Each strategy identified is corroborated by evidence from interactions that took place in the preschool. To tackle the second research question, we examine these strategies from the teachers' perspective.

The following strategies were identified:

1. The classroom as a community of learners
2. Explicit request to use Arabic
3. Ritual repetition
4. Teacher mediated socio-dramatic play
5. Associative mediator
6. Language Area

The first three strategies – the classroom as a community of learners, explicit request to use Arabic, and ritual repetition – will be illustrated in the context of the same classroom activity: a discussion of favorite vegetables that takes place during the morning circle. This particular activity was selected to highlight a frequently observed language-conducive phenomenon: *intertwining of strategies*. It seems that there exists an interaction among varied strategies, and their interplay shapes a language-conducive context. The following interaction illustrates how teacher and peer modeling (Example 1–2), explicit request to use Arabic (Example 3), and ritual repetition (Example 4) are meshed together to promote increased willingness to use L2.

1. The classroom as a community of learners

Sociocultural theory views a teacher not only as a source of knowledge but also as a model for children's linguistic behavior as well as a mediator of this behavior (Kozulin et al. 2003). Indeed, studies

focusing specifically on L2 classrooms found that teachers play a critical role as a model of language use and language learning (e.g. Cameron 2001). In this respect, our observations illuminated a second type of teacher modeling: the teacher as the model of the majority-language speaker and an adult minority-language learner and user. As opposed to previous research that usually presents teachers as a model of a target-language user, in the present study, Yoav (the L1-Hebrew-speaking teacher) used opportunities to model a 'successful L2 user' (Cook 2000, 2016). This modeling behavior stresses that it is legitimate and natural to ask for assistance from competent speakers of the target language (in this case, co-teachers and children), as previously reported by Schwartz and Gorbatt (2017). Through this pedagogical and linguistic behavior, the teacher implicitly states that it is legitimate not to know and to ask for assistance, also for the adult. This practice supports the current stance in some second language teaching contexts that legitimizes non-native speaker teachers (NNEST), stressing their effectiveness rather than their idealized (and unattainable) nativeness (Cook 2000, 2016). It also goes in tandem with Liu's (1999) claim that NNESTs and students share similar experiences regarding second language learning.

EXAMPLE 1: Observation: 9 February 2016

(In the English translation, italic text = Arabic, non-italic text = Hebrew)

Participants: The L1-Hebrew-speaking teacher, Yoav, the L1-Arabic-speaking teacher, Abeer, L1-Arabic-speaking boy, Tofeeq, and an L1-Hebrew-speaking boy, David.

Situation: Classroom activity. Yoav and Abeer discuss with the children what they like to eat for breakfast in Arabic.

Turn	Name	Utterance
1	David:	אני אוהב צנון
		I like radish.
2	Yoav:	لا بالعربي
		<i>No, in Arabic.</i>
3	Abeer:	عربي
		<i>Arabic.</i>
4	Yoav:	كيف بقولوا لادنן بالعربي?
		<i>How do you say radish in Arabic?</i>
5	Tofeeq:	انا بحب الفجل
		<i>I like radish.</i>
6	Yoav:	ديفيد انا بحب اكل فجل
		<i>David, 'I like eating radish.'</i>
7	David:	ديفيد انا بحب اكل فجل
		<i>David, I like eating radish.</i>

Second, Yoav often invited peer modeling by children, as illustrated in the following instance:

EXAMPLE 2: Observation: 9 February 2016

(In the English translation, italic text = Arabic, non-italic text = Hebrew)

Participants: The L1-Hebrew-speaking teacher, Yoav, and an L1-Arabic-speaking boy, William.

Situation: Classroom activity. Yoav and Abeer discuss with the children what they like to eat for breakfast in Arabic.

Turn	Name	Utterance
1	Yoav:	شكرا عبير احنا حكينا مباح مين بحب اي خضروات، انا بحب اكل البندورة، وويليام ايش يتحب توكل انت؟ <i>Thank you, Abeer, we talked yesterday about who likes vegetables. I like tomatoes. William, what do you like eating?</i>
2	William:	انا بحب اكل خیار.
		<i>I like eating cucumbers.</i>
3	Yoav:	قولوا معنا:
		<i>Say with us:</i>
4	Teachers and children:	انا بحب اكل خیار.
		<i>I like eating cucumbers.</i>
5	Yoav:	دانا شو يتحبني توکلي انت؟ اول اشي قولني انا بحب ... <i>Dana, what do you like eating? First say, I like eating ...</i>

As seen in this circle time activity, Yoav starts by asking a native speaker of Arabic, William, about his favorite vegetables. Yoav expects the child to provide a correct model of the formulaic utterance that other children may follow, thus providing input to the learners. This is evidenced by the fact that right after the Arabic-speaking child's answer, Yoav prompts the entire group to repeat after the Arabic-speaking model, by saying, 'Repeat with us.' The choice of the word 'us' simultaneously indicates the importance of both types of modeling – peer modeling and teacher modeling. Notably, peers as models and language 'teachers' foster equal participation in the group and offers 'a wide range of opportunities for mutual learning of pragmatic as well as linguistic skills' (Blum-Kulka and Snow 2004, 294). Similarly, Dorner and Layton (2014) observed how, during the morning circle routines in a Spanish immersion elementary school classroom, children enacted particular identities by scaffolding L2 learning of their less proficient peers by means of repeating, practicing the correct pronunciation and negotiating meanings.

2. Explicit request to use Arabic

Before the language model modification, the prevailing preschool pedagogical approach towards language was that all three teachers passively expected children to naturally produce output in Arabic. Diverging from accepted practice in many bilingual contexts (e.g. Södergård 2008) in the modified approach described here, teachers began to explicitly request Arabic output in varied classroom contexts. This strategy, perceived by teachers as fruitful, and conveying a clear message to the Hebrew-speaking children:

Amal: when I ask children 'How do you say this in Arabic?' – They answer. This is an improvement. Before then they refused to speak, today there is some readiness to speak and ask in Arabic. Yuval didn't want to speak, now he does. I divide [words] into syllables to make it easier for them to repeat. Other children also refused and now don't. (16 February 2016)

In the same favorite vegetables circle activity interaction described above, after modeling the output of a lexical chunk ('I like eating') in Arabic, Yoav, encouraging learner output, calls on Talia to share her favorite vegetable. She chooses a picture but does not express her liking in Arabic. Yoav models the chunk again and by means of scaffolding, prods, 'First, say "I like"'. Talia assertively asks to do it in Hebrew, ('In Hebrew'). Yoav acquiesces but gently suggests that she tries it in Arabic: 'OK, but it can be in Arabic.' During our observations, we witnessed how explicit requests convey the message that Arabic is important and preferred by teachers but not compulsory. The friendly prodding encourages output but respects children's volition.

This teachers' conscious respect for children's language choice is explained in the following testimony:

Yoav: I don't force them to speak [in Arabic], I saw children who said, 'I need Hebrew, speak in Hebrew'. I think that children should be allowed to speak in the language they choose. (29 March 2017)

The child-centered approach implemented by teachers during the project prevented the creation of an atmosphere of anxiety and the formation of negative attitudes towards the language as seen in studies that documented strict language separation (e.g. DePalma 2010). The teachers in our study consciously adopted an accepting behavior that embraces children's preferences regarding language output. Committing to exclusively one language was not demanded by teachers, whose objective was that children choose Arabic voluntarily. This follows the Happylingual Approach described by Kopeliovich (2013), which stresses the bilingual phenomenon as an asset and not as a difficulty by activating the two child's languages in a joyful and creative way. The context of the kindergarten promoted Arabic output due to its inherent value and not out of necessity. By means of the project, it was expected that children would perceive language 'as a resource' (Ruiz 1984).

Before the beginning of the project, teachers' strategies did not include explicit request for L2 output. As the project developed, the teachers were more adamant in their L2 output requirement, as previously reported by Schwartz and Gorbatt (2017). Towards the end of the project, they even

encouraged children to experiment with new lexical items and go beyond the confidence zone of frequently repeated formulaic utterances. This might be due to enhanced teachers' confidence in the new practice of expecting children to produce Arabic. In addition, perhaps teachers were sensitive to children's increased openness to Arabic as illustrated in the following excerpts from the circle time activity:

EXAMPLE 3: Observation: 14 June 2016

(In the English translation, italic text = Arabic, non-italic text = Hebrew)

Participants: The L1-Hebrew-speaking teacher, Yoav, and the L1-Arabic-speaking teacher, Abeer.

Situation: Circle time activity. Yoav and Abeer discuss with the children what they have learnt about Ramadan in Arabic.

Turn	Name	Utterance
1	Abeer:	يلا كلمات جديدة كلمات جديدة مبارك تعلمناها <i>The new words new words we learned.</i>
2	Yoav:	איזה מילים עוד אמרנו בנושא רמדאן? איזה מילים? אי קلمات? <i>Which other words did we learn about Ramadan? Which words? Which words?</i>

3. Ritual repetition

During the observations, we noticed the salient use of ritual repetition characterized by various patterns of model-repeater: teacher-child, child-child, teacher-teacher and child-teacher. Each morning, circle time started with a good-morning song in Arabic, during which the teachers and the children sang /sabah-l-hir le... / ('good morning to...') and went around, stopping at each child so she can complete the song. The rituality of the familiar song allowed children to provide a lexical item in Arabic to complete the verse in the song and thus produce output of the Arabic word in a 'safe' way. This was observed also by Auleear Owodally (2010), who emphasized that this ritualized, 'parrot-like' production is void of 'communicative value' (22). Nevertheless, our observations suggest that this use of Arabic positions the children as incipient users of the target language in a significant social context (the daily song during circle time).

It emerged from the observations that ritual repetitions were not just dry automatic drilling. Ritual repetition as a main concept of the second language learning entails that imitation is a springboard to the L2 acquisition in the beginning stages. It can develop into a transitional stage between formulaic language to natural production, namely the formulaic-production stage (Tabos 1997). In the initial circle discourse activity, the lexical chunks and language patterns presented by the teachers were later broken down and manipulated by learners:

EXAMPLE 4: Observation: 9 February 2016

(In the English translation, italic text = Arabic, non-italic text = Hebrew)

Participants: The bilingual model teacher, Yoav, L1-Hebrew-speaking boys, Rani and Avi, and an L1-Arabic-speaking boy, Wisam.

Situation: Classroom activity. Yoav and Abeer discuss with the children what they like to eat for breakfast in Arabic.

Turn	Name	Utterance
1	Avi:	אפשר גם? Can I join you?
2	Yoav:	یس بس بالعربي، منلعب اليوم بس بالعربي <i>Only in Arabic, today we are playing only in Arabic</i>
3	Rani:	אני אוהב לאכול עגבניות I like eating tomatoes
4	Yoav:	אنا بحב اكل بندورة <i>I like eating tomatoes</i>
5	Wisam:	אنا بحב اكل كوسا <i>I like eating zucchini</i>
6	Avi:	אنا بحב اكل خيار <i>I like eating cucumbers</i>

It can be seen that after Wisam's turn in Arabic, Avi participates in the 'game' in Arabic (Turn 6). His utterance illustrates formulaic-productive speech in that it starts with the formula 'I like eating' but continues with his own addition of a favorite vegetable, cucumber. In addition, it is interesting to notice in the example above that the structured classroom activity continued but was 'marketed' as a game. This caused children to be enticed and eager to participate. The focus on Arabic was presented as a rule of the game by which the children were willing to abide:

Yoav: the children learned the 'Parrot Game' – the strategy of repeating orally the new word the first time it is heard. They use this strategy spontaneously. They repeat after each other the new words in Arabic, like a chain. (16 February 2016)

As any routine, it appears that the ritual repetition created a language-conducive context as part of the modified pedagogical approach which provided learners with a certain degree of self-confidence in the production of Arabic output as L2. As evidenced by the example above, this teacher-mediated interaction serves as a trigger to autonomous language output. This output, in turn, seems to facilitate the passage from the formulaic to the productive stage. This impact of output on learning is corroborated by Gass and Mackey's (2014) input-interaction-output approach.

4. Teacher-mediated socio-dramatic play

Socio-dramatic play is one of the central non-structured activities in preschool age. In the recent study by Markova (2017) that focused on the Spanish-English speaking preschool context, she found that child-led sociodramatic play was characterized by children's higher linguistic engagement in English (L2) output than the structured teacher-mediated activities. Our observations showed that similar socio-dramatic play mediated by the teacher was conducive to L2 use as well. In the following example, the teacher, Yoav, plays the role of a patient being treated by several doctors (mostly the Hebrew-speaking children):

EXAMPLE 5: Observation: 17 May 2016

(In the English translation, italic text = Arabic, non-italic text = Hebrew)

Participants: The bilingual model teacher, Yoav, L1-Hebrew-speaking children.

Situation: Socio-dramatic play. The children try to poison Yoav by feeding him a poisoned apple; then they give him an antidote.

Turn	Name	Utterance
1	Orna:	תפוח, תוכל תפוח. Apple, have an apple.
2	Yoav :	לא באכל בס بالعربي. <i>No (calmly), I eat only in Arabic.</i>
3	Orna:	תפאח <i>Apple</i>
4	Eran:	זה רעל! It's poison! (Yoav pretends he is fainting)
5	Yoav:	האי דוא דוא? <i>Is this medicine, medicine?</i>
6	Children	אם! <i>Yes!</i>
7	Yoav:	דוא ילא. <i>Medicine go ahead.</i>
8	Children:	זה רעל! It's poison!
9	Yoav:	וין הדקטור עמ בחכי ערבי. <i>Where is the doctor I am speaking Arabic.</i>
10	Eran:	לא לא את את ה דקטור. No, no, call the <i>doctor</i> .
11	Yoav:	

(Continued)

Continued.		
Turn	Name	Utterance
		يلا دكتور.
12	Yoav:	<i>Go ahead, a doctor.</i>
		حطيتوا دوا؟
13	Orna:	<i>Did you put some medicine?</i>
		כן!
14	Eran:	Yes!
		ואנחנו שטיפנו אותו.
15	Yoav:	And we washed it.
		מתאكدین؟
16	Eran:	<i>Are you sure?</i>
		כן!
17	Yoav:	Yes!
		لازم اخذ دوا.
18	Eran:	<i>I need to take some medicine.</i>
		זה דוא.
19	Yoav:	<i>This is a medicine.</i>
		דוא هاي دوا؟
20	Orna:	<i>Medicine is this medicine?</i>
		הא דוא.
21	Yoav:	<i>This is a medicine.</i>
		מנין יתערף אנו هاي دوا? לא هاي מש דוא.
22	Eran:	<i>How do you know this is medicine? No, it isn't medicine.</i>
		חטית.
23	Yoav:	<i>I put it.</i>
		חטיתו איש?
24	Children:	<i>You put what?</i>
		דוא
25	Yoav:	<i>Medicine</i>
		חטיתו דוא?
26	Children:	<i>Did you put medicine?</i>
		א
27	Yoav:	Yes
		ענجد? بدون کذب؟
28	Orna:	<i>Really? No lies?</i>
		ענجد!
29	Eran:	<i>Really!</i>
		بدون کذب!
30	Yoav:	<i>No lies!</i>
		اذا بشرب من هاي يمتش.
31	Children:	<i>If I drink this I will not die.</i>
		לא!
32	Yoav:	<i>No!</i>
		بدیش اموت کمان مره.
33	Children:	<i>I don't want to die again.</i>
		لا!
34	Yoav:	<i>No!</i>
		بسمالله!
		<i>Cheers!</i>

As we can see, in the game with the food and poison, Yoav consistently produces Arabic in his acting, and his planned effort to bring about Arabic use by the Hebrew-speaking children is fruitful. From the beginning of this discourse event, Yoav explicitly positions himself as a patient who speaks Arabic (Turn 2), and immediately Orna changes the initial response in Hebrew ('apple') into the Arabic equivalent (Turn 3). Then, the children gradually become engaged in interaction in Arabic and show confidence by repeating the short utterances after Yoav. The effectiveness of this teacher-mediated socio-dramatic for L2 use, was recently discussed by Alstad and Kulbrandstad (2017) in the context of early immersion in the Norwegian language. In this study, the teachers played alternate roles of doctor and patient to model relevant formulaic language to the immigrant children. These examples underscore the mediating role of the teacher when employing a socio-dramatic play as a tool for L2 use encouragement:

Yoav: I feel that the more we let the children play and be actors (I saw this also in the work on the [end-of-the-year] play), the more they express themselves. No matter what, no matter in which language ... When they are acting or pretending they speak more – that's why I think it's a good tactic. If you ask me what's the best, most effective tactic [to elicit L2 speech], this is the one. (12 July 2016)

Why does socio-dramatic play make children 'speak more'? One possible explanation draws on Elkonin's (1978) idea that this type of play supports the development of self-regulation. To sustain play, children must voluntarily follow the rules that dictate what actions are and are not consistent with each specific role. They must act deliberately, inhibiting behavior that is not part of that specific role. In the illustration above, the teacher's established rule dictates that the language of play is Arabic, and all children have to follow this rule, thus providing an impetus for children to participate in Arabic. It is noteworthy that in their participation, at least one child felt comfortable enough to translanguage according to his needs. In turn 10 above, Eran starts his participation with Hebrew-only statements, moves on to translanguaged interaction (García and Wei 2014) and finally fully participates in Arabic. Translanguaging here seems to have served as a bridge from L1 to L2 production – a bridge built by sociodramatic play.

5. Use of associative mediators

During the project, the teachers experimented with use of *associative mediators*, defined by Liljeholm and Balleine (2010) as 'cues [that] activate overlapping representations of the sensory, or motivational, features of their common outcome' (165). We witnessed how teachers created two cues, which played a role of associative mediators. These targeted Arabic by means of multisensory activation, promoting children's motivation. This strategy resonates with van Lier's (2004) ecological approach to language learning.

One mediator identified was the fictitious character of a monolingual adult speaker of Arabic who was presented as a preschool visitor (acted by the teacher, Yoav), coming from Jenin, a city in the Palestinian Authority. He was called 'Uncle Hamudi' and he always played with the children around the swing. This area became associated with Arabic. With time, the children used Arabic around the swing without needing to be reminded by means of 'Uncle Hamudi,' the associative mediator. Granted, Arabic in this area seemed restricted to swing-related language, but there was a clear connection made by the children between the swing and Arabic.

The second associative mediator was a 'magic sash' with the inscription 'Queen of Arabic'.¹ The title 'Queen of Arabic' was intended as a reminder for children to speak Arabic whenever they put on the 'magic sash.' The teacher's reflection below illustrates the rationale behind this strategy:

Amal: After we started the project, I realized that we do not have to demand that the children speak Arabic. We needed [to lead to] spontaneous speech [in Arabic] but in the indirect way ... I'd like to use it [the 'magic sash'] for a month to create a habit [of speaking Arabic]. (10 June 2016)

The target was not to impose Arabic use but to create a language-conducive context by means of associative mediators (the 'magic sash'). The following excerpt illustrates how three girls, Orna, Hila and Tal, become serious about speaking Arabic when wearing the sash:

EXAMPLE 6: Observation: 10 June 2016

(In the English translation, italic text = Arabic, non-italic text = Hebrew)

Participants: The L1 Arabic-speaking female teacher, Abeer, and the L1-Hebrew-speaking girls, Orna, Hila and Tal.

Situation: Socio-dramatic play. Children wear the 'magic sash.' Wearing it indicates they abide by an 'Arabic-only' rule. The teacher, Abeer, encourages the girls to put on the 'magic sash,' and, as a result, to speak Arabic.

Turn	Name	Utterance
1	Orna:	אני רק אוריד את המעיל שלי. I will just take my jacket off.
2	Hila:	اورنة , بس عربي <i>Orna, only Arabic!</i>
3	Orna:	صح صح بس عربي! <i>Right, right, only Arabic!</i>
5	Abeer:	اه حلو יופי, תל בתחי תתضمי معنا כמא? <i>Oh great, great, Tal, would you like to join us too?</i>
6	Orna:	אני אביא, אני בציב אני בציב. I'll bring it (the "magic sash" to Tal). I'll bring, it (the "magic sash" to Tal). I'll bring it (the "magic sash" to Tal).
7	Hila:	אני בציב לתמא. <i>I will bring it to Tamar.</i>
8	Tal:	עביר אני כמא בדי אעמל. <i>Abeer I also want to make one (the "magic sash").</i>
11	Abeer:	בדק את כמא תעמלי זיהא? <i>Do you also want to make one like this? (Abeer points to the "magic sash" of Hila)</i>
12	Tal:	אם. כמא אני. <i>Yes. Me too.</i>

The conversation between the girls reflects the process of internalization of the sash-related Arabic-language and its application in a natural communicative context. In addition, the example presented above illustrates the implementation of the sash-mediated rule and children's self- and peer-monitoring (Turns 1–2, 6) regarding language choice. The sash functions as a trigger to initiate and sustain Arabic-language interactions. This strategy, just as the teacher-mediated socio-dramatic play described above, activates children's self-regulation (Elkonin 1978) regarding the Arabic-only rule. We also witness an increase in the Arabic-language production as a result of this language-conductive strategy.

Children's interactions and teachers' reflections described above, when analyzed against the backdrop of associative mediation research, teach us that the use of mediators in this context resulted in two positive outcomes. First, the cues *Uncle Hamudi* and the *Magic Sash* served as triggers to induce spontaneous Arabic speech. Second, this associative mediator indirectly had a significant impact on the status of Arabic. They could have written 'Arabic only' but the lexical choice 'Queen' included not only an element of socio-dramatic play ('I am a Queen and I speak Arabic') but also implied the positive image of a Queen. We estimate that word choice in this example presented Arabic presented in a positive light, stressing pride of belonging to a community of speakers. Indeed, the way the teacher, Abeer, invited children to be engaged in the play ('Who is *with us* today?'), served to strengthen group membership of the girls wearing the sashes. As we stood and watched, a group of girls enthusiastically went about wearing the sash and making clear their belonging to a group.

6. Language area

Another well-intended strategy initiated by the teachers during the project was the stipulation of a 'language area' where children were expected to play only in Arabic. A language area is a 'facility that is organized to stimulate children's natural use of the target language items that are presented in the teacher-led activities' (Robinson, Mourão, and Kang 2015, 12). Although this organization of the pre-school space is intended to generate subsequent autonomous and natural use of the target language by the children, there is a tacit agreement that children's native languages is acceptable as well.

In our context, this agreement unfortunately did not exist: children had no tolerance for any deviation from Arabic as the official language of the language area. Even though initially mediated as a potentially positive, language-conductive strategy by the teachers, the language area turned out to be fertile for the creation of negative experiences related to Arabic. The language area in the preschool we observed led to policing and shaming by the children. The interaction described below illustrates this point.

EXAMPLE 7: Observation: 16 February 2016

(In the English translation, italic text = Arabic, non-italic text = Hebrew)

Participants: The two L1-Hebrew-speaking boys, Oren and David, and an L1-Arabic-speaking boy, William.

Situation: The boys are playing in the Arabic language area with cars.

Turn	Name	Utterance
1	Oren:	לא, אני רוצה אחת אדומה. No, I want the red one (he points on the red car).
2	David:	بحكي بالعبراني، لا! He's speaking Hebrew, no (Arabic)! (David is pointing to Oren and talking nervously)
3	William:	بحكي عبراني عبراني (He) is speaking Hebrew, Hebrew! (William is pointing to Oren and talking derisively)
4	David:	يؤاف محمد بحكي بالعبراني! Yoav, Oren is speaking Hebrew!

Through the illustration above, we witness an interaction that occurred after one of the children (Oren) spoke in Hebrew in the designated Arabic area. Two boys (L1 Hebrew, David, and L1 Arabic, William) became self-appointed 'guards' ascertain that Arabic would be the 'ruling language' of the area. Not only did they ask other children to speak in Arabic, but they also decided to inform against children who spoke Hebrew while playing in the Arabic area.

We observed that children ended up taking control of the language area management, as previously documented by Schwartz and Gorbatt (2017) in the same age group in a different Arabic-Hebrew bilingual preschool. This created embarrassment and an emotionally negative ambience that was immediately perceived as maleficent. Similar pattern of data has been recently found in other studies showing that children's peer group interactions during L2 learning can lead to two possible outcomes. It can facilitate the learning process by means of peer modeling and scaffolding, as well as hamper it whenever interactions result in hierarchical positioning of a more competent L2 users (e.g. Cekaite and Björk-Willén 2013) or of native-speaking children (Bernstein 2016). In our study, given the observed offenses directed at children who spoke Hebrew, the tensions among peers, and the negativity caused (as illustrated by the interaction above), the language area was discontinued. Effective teacher mediation would have been essential to make the language area function in a more productive way.

In sum, the findings point to a significant repertoire of strategies implemented by teachers to promote positive attitudes toward the Arabic language and its use. The findings are strengthened by the triangulation of a variety of data sources: researchers' field notes, data from the video-recordings, and the teachers' reflections on specific strategies. An interpretation of these sources may contribute to our understanding of the successful bilingual education programs for early language learners.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

The set of strategies developed and implemented by teachers during the project brought with it a change of pedagogical approach that led to increased openness to Arabic and willingness to produce output in it. One clear message is that no strategy stands alone; rather, the interplay and conjoint implementation of strategies has a higher chance of making an impact. In addition, a program such as the one described here necessitates constant monitoring and self-evaluation by teachers. The complex orchestration of strategies, along with an awareness of how the strategies are accepted and perceived by children constitutes an extra burden on the teacher. It seems that teacher motivation and commitment are vital for the promotion of children's willingness to use a language that is not perceived by them as essential for communication in their immediate environment (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, in press). Finally, one clear pedagogical implication is the connection between type of activity and target language output. Some activities, such as socio-dramatic

play, render themselves to increased social engagement and target language use. Teachers need to take into account in their planning to leave space and create opportunities for socio-dramatic play.

The findings of this study might contribute to teachers' endeavors in multiple settings, despite the specificity of the context under scrutiny in this paper. Bilingual schools that involve different communities, including (but not limited to) those with complex minority-majority relationships, might benefit from the lessons learned from this project. The school's emphasis on the Arabic language is bound to convey to the children a clear message. The enhanced presence of Arabic implies the enhanced status of the language, its speakers, and their culture. The connection between target language development and cultural awareness and attitude has been discussed elsewhere (Dubiner 2010; Brown 2007). Hence, the language-conducive strategies described here seem paramount in the development of intercultural competence. We would like to point to the potential transferability of the language-conducive strategies described here into additional sociolinguistic contexts, particularly in early language educational contexts. Additionally, learnings from the present study can be employed in including pre-service teacher education, in-service teacher professional development, administrative staff in bilingual schools, and policy makers.

Our paper simultaneously exemplifies and triggers the need to constantly engage in the discussion of the SLA field. The strategies and interactions of children and teachers in one bilingual Arabic-Hebrew preschool add one more layer to the complex endeavor of conceptualizing the ultimate bilingual education practice. We point to a number of issues that concern SLA researchers. First, bilingual education continues to be a challenge for teachers and policy makers in contexts with unbalanced language input and status (e.g. Hickey, Lewis, and Baker 2014). In this context, language-conducive strategies serve exactly the purpose of minimizing differences in the classroom and the impact of the wider sociolinguistic context. Additionally, the aspired balanced presence of languages and expectation of minority-language use in the classroom is in line with the discussion on language hegemonies (Wu 2018) and may play a role in avoiding the perpetuation of language-related power struggles.

This study was not without some limitations. There was a lack of quantitative structured language tests to measure children's progress in Arabic. An experimental study including a control group, with pretests and posttests designed to assess progress by children, would enhance our understanding of the significance of the implemented strategies. In addition, further research should investigate to which extent the teacher-initiated strategic program can be sustained after the end of the research period, and how the Hebrew-speaking children reflect on their languages after increasing openness towards Arabic.

To conclude, we can learn from observing and reflecting on the project initiated by the bilingual preschool teachers that for the minority language to flourish, good intentions are not enough. Teachers must have clearly delineated guidelines and engage in periodical self-evaluation to ascertain that one of the goals of the bilingual school program is achieved successfully: openness to the Arabic language and facility in producing output in it. Within an ecological perspective on preschool additional language learning (van Lier 2004), we theorize that openness is a prerequisite for the development of additional language learning motivation in early ages. We also argue that deliberate implementation of a wide range of language-conducive strategies foment this openness. Finally, a special contribution can be made to bilingual contexts where a discrepancy in majority-minority language status is evident. It is thus crucial that teachers locate and identify successful strategies. We hope that the findings of this study will assist educators in determining a strategic curriculum that aims at L2 development and will encourage them to periodically reflect on the impact of the chosen strategies.

Note

1. It is noteworthy that since this was the initiative of one of the female teachers, who made a sash for herself, the inscription included the word 'Queen' (and not 'King').

Acknowledgements

The findings of the present study were previously presented at the European Educational Research Association Conference in Hamburg, in September, 2019. Link: <https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fecer.de%2Fecer-programmes%2Fconference%2F24%2Fcontribution%2F46755%2F&data=02%7C01%7C%7C3d8766089ed2462167e908d7934f693e%7C1faf88fea9984c5b93c9210a11d9a5c2%7C0%7C0%7C637139841586765204&sdata=Cwo609knC0vMITET5exXCFNa9j04IQqEZI%2BJ2Vv%2Fys%3D&reserved=0>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Kindermissionswerk 'Die Sternsinger' e.V. and Abrahamszelt e.V. through Hand in Hand: Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel [grant number D 17 2321 001/1].

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