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PARENTAL IDEOLOGIES AND LANGUAGE OUTCOMES IN ROMANIAN-ITALIAN BILINGUALS. A CASE STUDY ON BI-LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. This study investigates the role of heritage language (HL) literacy in shaping phonological awareness and reading skills among Romanian-Italian bilingual children in Italy. Drawing on data from 81 children aged 8-10 and their families, the research compares the performance of bi-literate bilinguals (exposed to formal literacy instruction in Romanian) with that of mono-literate bilinguals (literate only in Italian) and Italian monolinguals. Children completed tasks measuring phonological awareness and word and pseudoword reading in both Romanian and Italian. Parental attitudes toward HL transmission were also assessed through Likert-scale questionnaires and thematic analysis of open-ended responses. Results showed that bi-literate bilinguals outperformed mono-literate peers on phonological tasks in both languages and on Italian pseudoword reading, highlighting the cognitive benefits of dual literacy. Parental attitudes revealed strong support for oral HL maintenance, but divergent views on the value of written Romanian, often shaped by concerns about cognitive load and perceived utility. The findings underscore the importance of institutional and familial support for biliteracy as a driver of linguistic development in multilingual contexts.

Keywords: heritage language transmission; biliteracy; parental attitudes; Romanian-Italian bilingualism; family language policy

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1. Introduction

In an era marked by global migration and growing linguistic diversity, the preservation of heritage languages (HLs) among immigrant families has become both a cultural priority and an educational challenge (Fishman 1991; Guardado 2002). The intergenerational transmission of the home language plays a central role in shaping children's cultural identity, maintaining transnational ties, and fostering a sense of belonging. However, language maintenance is far from straightforward in multilingual contexts, where the dominant language often governs formal education, social integration, and pathways to economic mobility (De Houwer 2007).

This study focuses on Romanian immigrant families in Italy, currently the largest foreign population in the country (MIUR 2023). Despite their numbers and the linguistic proximity of Romanian and Italian, no bilingual programmes exist in the Italian educational system to support Romanian as a heritage language. Consequently, HL maintenance typically occurs informally and primarily through oral transmission, with little institutional support for literacy in the heritage language (Barni, Bagna 2008). Although initiatives such as the LCCR (Romanian Language, Culture, and Civilization) programme provide weekly Romanian instruction in some schools, national participation remains limited.

Within this context, Family Language Policy (FLP) provides a critical lens for understanding how immigrant families make decisions – explicitly or implicitly – about language use and transmission (Spolsky 2004; King, Fogle, Logan-Terry 2008). FLP emphasizes the influence of parental ideologies and sociopolitical conditions on language practices in the home. Parents' beliefs about the relative importance of oral versus written language – shaped by factors such as utility, cognitive burden, or cultural identity – significantly affect the development and sustainability of HL literacy (Curdt-Christiansen 2009; Schwartz, Verschik 2013).

Despite the prevalence of oral HL use, biliteracy – the ability to read and write in both the heritage and majority languages – has been shown to yield important cognitive, linguistic, and academic advantages (Cummins 2000; Bialystok 2001; Verhoeven 1994). According to the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins 1978, 2000), literacy-related skills acquired in one language can transfer to another, especially when the two languages share

similar orthographic and phonological structures. This transfer enhances phonological awareness, decoding ability, and metalinguistic insight, especially in alphabetic writing systems.

Indeed, research has consistently highlighted the role of phonological awareness (PA) as a key predictor of early reading success (Bradley, Bryant 1983; Goswami, Bryant 1990; Stanovich 2000). PA – the ability to identify and manipulate the sound structures of language – is closely tied to literacy development, with strong reciprocal effects (Serrano, Defior, Martos 2003; Anthony, Francis 2005). Bilingual children, in particular, have been shown to outperform monolinguals on phonological tasks, likely due to increased metalinguistic awareness fostered by exposure to two languages (Campbell, Sais 1995; Barac, Bialystok 2012). However, much of this research focuses on English-speaking populations, limiting generalizability to more transparent orthographies such as Romanian and Italian (Seymour, Aro, Erskine 2003; Share 2008).

Romanian and Italian, while both Romance languages, present important contrasts in phonological complexity and orthographic representation. Romanian uses an extended Latin alphabet with diacritics and includes phonemes not found in Italian, such as central vowels and dense consonant clusters (Chițoran 2002; Sclifos 2008). Italian, in contrast, has a simpler syllabic structure and highly transparent grapheme-phoneme correspondences (Bertinetto, Loporcaro 2005). These typological features may facilitate cross-linguistic transfer among biliterate children and offer a unique testing ground for exploring phonological awareness in contexts of balanced bilingualism.

The present study investigates the relationship between heritage language literacy and cognitive-linguistic development among Romanian-Italian bilingual children. Specifically, it explores whether children exposed to formal literacy instruction in Romanian – through participation in the LCCR program – demonstrate superior performance in phonological awareness and reading in both their heritage language and Italian, compared to peers who learned Romanian only orally. In parallel, the study examines how parental attitudes toward written and oral language use influence heritage language transmission and biliteracy outcomes.

2. Literature review

A robust body of research supports the central role of phonological awareness (PA) in early reading development. PA is recognized as both a predictor and facilitator of literacy acquisition (Bradley, Bryant 1983; Goswami, Bryant 1990). Some scholars even consider the identification of PA as a critical factor in reading to be one of the most significant educational findings of the past century (Stanovich 2000).

PA involves the ability to identify and manipulate the sound structures of spoken language, including phonemes, syllables, and rhymes and it is essential for learning to decode written language in alphabetic systems. The relationship between PA and reading is reciprocal and developmental: a basic level of phonological sensitivity supports decoding, while literacy instruction further refines phonological processing (Serrano, Defior, Martos 2003; Anthony, Francis 2005). Children must understand that words consist of discrete sounds and that these sounds correspond to letters (Geudens 2006).

Bilingualism is linked to elevated metalinguistic awareness, including enhanced PA and morphological sensitivity. Studies have found that bilingual children often outperform monolinguals in sub-lexical awareness tasks (Campbell, Sais 1995; Andreou 2007; Barac, Bialystok 2012). Research has also documented phonological transfer across languages, such as from French to English (Comeau *et al.* 1999) or Italian to English (D'Angiulli, Siegel, Serra 2001). According to Bialystok (2001), bilinguals' experience with two phonological systems increases their attention to structural features of language. However, as previously mentioned, much of this research is based on English-speaking populations. Given English's irregular orthography, findings may not apply to more transparent systems such as Romanian or Italian (Seymour, Aro, Erskine 2003; Share 2008). Further studies in bilingual contexts with consistent orthographies are needed to clarify how biliteracy supports decoding and PA.

2.1. Romanian and Italian: phonological and orthographic comparisons

Romanian and Italian, both Romance languages, share many lexical and grammatical features but differ in phonological and orthographic structure.

Romanian employs a Latin-based alphabet with 31 letters, including five modified graphemes (ă, â, î, ș, and ț) that reflect its distinct phonology. Its vowel inventory includes rare central vowels like /ə/ and /ɨ/ (Chițoran 2002), and the language permits complex diphthongs, glides, and consonant clusters in both onset and coda positions (Sclifos 2008).

Italian, in contrast, features a simpler syllable structure and highly transparent orthography, facilitating early decoding. While the consonant inventories of the two languages largely overlap, Italian includes geminates and palatals not present in Romanian (Bertinetto, Loporcaro 2005). Although both languages are phonemic, shared sounds are often represented with different graphemes – such as /ts/ being spelled as ț in Romanian and zz in Italian, or /ʃ/ appearing as ș in Romanian and sci in Italian. These cross-linguistic correspondences can either support biliterate learners or introduce interference.

These structural characteristics underscore the cognitive and educational value of biliteracy. The overlap and contrast between Romanian and Italian phonology and orthography may facilitate metalinguistic growth and phonological awareness, particularly for children exposed to literacy in both languages. However, the degree to which these advantages materialize depends heavily on both home practices and institutional support – highlighting the critical role of parental beliefs in shaping children's opportunities for biliteracy development.

2.2. Literacy and heritage language maintenance

Although oral fluency in the heritage language (HL) is often emphasized within immigrant families, literacy development in the HL is less commonly supported. The ability to read and write in the HL is frequently seen as unnecessary or burdensome, especially when children are already navigating challenges in the dominant language (Carroll 2017). However, the absence of HL literacy may restrict access to broader cultural and informational content and hinder identity construction.

While parental perceptions are inherently subjective, studies suggest that parents can offer valuable insights into their children's bilingual development (Bedore *et al.* 2011). However, exploring language use and

transmission solely through quantitative methods such as Likert scales risks oversimplifying bilingual practices, which often include dynamic strategies such as code-switching and translanguaging (Gardner-Chloros 2009; García 2009).

To better understand the transmission of HLs, additional sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic research is required, especially in underexplored communities like Romanian families in Italy. Such research should examine both cognitive outcomes and the social, emotional, and ideological factors influencing intergenerational language practices.

The theoretical foundation for this study draws on Family Language Policy (FLP), a framework that addresses the intersection of language practices, management, and ideologies within family settings (Spolsky 2004). According to King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry (2008), FLP shapes not only which languages are spoken at home, but also how they are maintained – whether orally, in writing, or both. While earlier FLP studies focused on language choice and identity, more recent research has emphasized the influence of parental ideologies and sociopolitical conditions (Schwartz, Verschik 2013).

Parental language ideologies are particularly influential in HL maintenance. Myers-Scotton (2006) distinguishes between explicit ideologies, often tied to cultural preservation, and implicit ones, which reflect beliefs about a language's practical value or prestige. These ideologies affect children's bilingual trajectories. For example, when parents prioritize oral fluency over literacy, they may unintentionally restrict access to formal registers and academic resources in the HL (Curdt-Christiansen 2009).

Biliteracy – the ability to read and write in two languages – is associated with diverse cognitive, linguistic, and academic benefits (Cummins 2000; Bialystok 2001). Research has shown that HL literacy can enhance second-language acquisition through cross-linguistic transfer, particularly when the two languages share typological similarities, as is the case with Romanian and Italian (Verhoeven 1994). Biliterate children tend to demonstrate stronger metalinguistic awareness, superior phonological processing, and improved academic outcomes (Bialystok 2001).

However, achieving biliteracy requires coordinated support from both families and institutions. In many immigrant contexts, the absence of formal HL instruction means that children may develop oral fluency without corresponding literacy skills (Montrul 2016). This gap is often

shaped by parental education levels, socioeconomic status, and access to educational resources. Examining how these factors interact in the Romanian-Italian bilingual context can offer insights into broader issues of inclusion and equity in multilingual education.

2.3. Romanian as a heritage language in Italy

In non-additive bilingual environments, HLs are often used at home but not taught in formal education. This is true for Romanian-speaking children in Italy, where Romanian is not an official or regional language and is thus excluded from the national curriculum. Despite being the language of the most numerous immigrant group in the country, Romanian is still viewed simply as an "immigrant language" (Barni, Bagna 2008).

Broader sociolinguistic research emphasizes the intricate dynamics between heritage language maintenance and identity construction among Romanian migrants in Italy. Hybrid linguistic practices frequently arise as a response to integration pressures, shaping community and individual linguistic identities in complex migration contexts (Botoșineanu *et al.* 2007). Additionally, studies on the linguistic characteristics of Romanian spoken by migrants in Italy have highlighted ongoing structural changes and contact-induced phenomena, particularly among second-generation speakers (Cohal 2014, 2019; IDOS 2022). Cohal (2019) further highlights that second-generation Romanian speakers frequently demonstrate partial or incomplete acquisition of Romanian, characterized by interference and hybrid linguistic forms heavily influenced by Italian.

Nevertheless, many Romanian parents endeavour to preserve the HL through in-home language practices and community initiatives. Family input remains the most influential factor in HL maintenance (Fishman 1991; Lanza 2007; Spolsky 2012), and early exposure to the HL within the household predicts its continued use in adulthood (Winsler *et al.* 2014).

However, when children begin school in the majority language – Italian – parental efforts often face competing societal pressures. Italian quickly becomes the dominant medium for instruction, social interaction, and identity formation, which can lead to HL attrition, especially as regards its written form. Structured opportunities for developing literacy skills

in Romanian remain limited, with the primary institutional initiative being the Language, Culture and Civilization of Romania (LCCR) programme. Implemented since 2007 by the Romanian Language Institute (ILR) in cooperation with the Romanian Ministry of Education, the LCCR programme operates across multiple EU countries – including Italy, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Ireland, and France – offering weekly Romanian instruction for children of Romanian origin in pre-university education (from preschool to secondary level). In Italy, LCCR is active in 14 regions, and groups are typically formed upon parental request in schools that meet minimum participation thresholds (e.g., 7 preschoolers or 15 school-aged children). The course is optional, free of charge, lasts around two hours per week, and is often delivered by qualified teachers of Romanian origin or certified by the ILR. Although the programme emphasizes Romanian literacy, cultural identity, and support for reintegration into the Romanian educational system, national enrolment levels remain modest relative to the size of the Romanian student population in Italy.

The present research investigates how Romanian immigrant parents in Italy perceive the transmission of their heritage language, distinguishing between a preference for oral-only versus full (oral and written) language maintenance. It also examines whether children's literacy exposure in Romanian is associated with enhanced phonological awareness and decoding abilities, not only in their heritage language but also in Italian, the majority language.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods design to explore the relationship between children's biliteracy in Romanian and Italian and their phonological awareness and decoding skills. In parallel, it examined parental attitudes toward heritage language (HL) literacy. A battery of standardized and adapted cognitive and linguistic tests was administered to the children, while qualitative and quantitative data were collected from parents through two online questionnaires.

3.2. Participants

The sample included 61 bilingual children (ages 8-10, grades 3 and 4), recruited from 15 classrooms across 7 public schools in medium-sized northern Italian cities. All schools offered Romanian Language, Culture and Civilization (LCCR) courses.

Children were divided into two groups based on their reported literacy skills in Romanian:

(1) Bi-literate bilinguals (group BB; n = 40): children enrolled in LCCR courses, reported to have both oral and written competence in Romanian.
(2) Mono-literate bilinguals (group MB; n = 21): children who did not attend Romanian classes and were literate only in Italian, with only informal exposure to spoken Romanian.

All participants had early exposure to both Romanian and Italian and were reported to have no cognitive, sensory, or neurological impairments. Most of the children were born in Italy or had arrived before the age of four.

To serve as a comparison group, a sample of 20 monolingual Italian-speaking children (group MM) was also recruited from the same schools. These children were matched with the bilingual participants on key demographic and socio-economic characteristics, including age, gender, parental education, and SES. All had no significant exposure to a second language and were developing Italian as their only language.

One parent per bilingual child participated in the survey (n = 61, Group A = BB children's parents, Group B = BM children's parents), the majority of whom were mothers (88%). The parents' ages ranged from 31 to 53; over 85% had lived in Italy for more than a decade. Most had completed secondary education, and 23% held a university degree.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Parental questionnaires

(1) Language Background Questionnaire: This collected demographic information and language exposure histories. It included items on

parental education and occupation, used to derive each family's socioeconomic status (SES).

(2) Online Attitudes Survey: The first part consisted of Likert-scale items assessing parents' attitude towards their children's knowledge of both Romanian and Italian. The second part included an open-ended question: "How important is it to you that your child learns to read and write in Romanian? Please explain your answer." Responses were analysed thematically.

3.3.2. Child assessment battery

(1) Language Background Questionnaire: This collected demographic information and language exposure histories. It included items on parental education and occupation, used to derive each family's socioeconomic status (SES).
(2) Non-verbal Intelligence: Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices (CPM; Italian adaptation by Belacchi *et al.* 2008).
(3) Vocabulary Knowledge: Italian – Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – Revised (PPVT-R; Dunn, Dunn 1981; Stella, Pizzoli, Tressoldi 2000); Romanian – Adapted version of PPVT-4 (Petrescu, Helms-Park 2018), with 175 items of increasing difficulty.
(4) Phonological Awareness (PA) Tasks: Administered in both Italian and Romanian, using matched structures adapted for phonological differences.
    a. Phoneme Segmentation (PhS): Identify individual phonemes in 1-4 syllable words. Max score: 20.
    b. Phoneme Blending (PhB): Combine isolated phonemes to form words. Max score: 20.
    c. Onset-Rime Oddity (ORo): Identify the odd word based on initial phoneme in a 3-word set. Max score: 20.
    c. Syllable Blending (SyB): Combine syllables to form target words. Max score: 20.
(5) Decoding Skills
    a. Word Reading (WR): Italian – List of 20 high-frequency words (D'Angiulli, Siegel, Serra 2001); Romanian – List of 20 common

words selected with LCCR teachers, covering a variety of phonotactic structures (e.g., "rău", "stupi", "ghem"). Max score: 20.

b. Pseudo-word Reading (PWR): Italian – 20 pseudo-words (e.g., "pando", "scimiaro") from Sartori *et al.* (1995), D'Angiulli, Siegel, Serra (2001); Romanian – 20 pseudo-words compliant with Romanian orthographic rules, including consonant clusters, diphthongs, and glides (e.g., "sporee", "lăicou", "oaspure"). Max score: 20.

3.4. Procedure

Data collection was carried out in schools. All parents first completed the background questionnaire. Based on their responses, children who met inclusion criteria were divided into BB and MB groups.

Testing was administered individually. Children first completed the Raven's matrices. Vocabulary and phonological awareness assessments were given in both languages, in separate sessions scheduled four weeks apart to minimize language interference. Instructions were provided in the target language by the same trained researcher. Parents completed the online surveys in a second moment.

4. Results

4.1. Child performance

All participating children had comparable demographic profiles. Three-quarters of the bilinguals were born in Italy; 80% of parents from both bilingual groups had lived in Italy for over ten years. Parental education was similar across the groups: secondary school completion was universal, with ~20-24% holding university degrees. Groups were matched for child age (~98 months, SD ~4-6), gender distribution, Italian literacy length, parental education, nonverbal intelligence (Raven's CPM), and vocabulary in Italian and Romanian – except HL proficiency, where bi-literate children outperformed mono-literate peers ($t = 10.06$, $p < .01$).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) for participants' demographic characteristics and cognitive measures

Variables	BB (n=40)	BM (n=21)	MM (n=20)
Age (months)	98.3 (3.1)	98.5 (5.8)	98.2 (4.7)
Gender (M:F)	8:10	12:10	10:10
Non-verbal intelligence	24.3 (2.6)	23.4 (3.6)	23.3 (3.4)

Note: BB = Bilingual Bi-literate; BM = Bilingual Mono-literate; MM = Monolingual Italian. Non-verbal intelligence measured using Raven's CPM test.

Descriptive scores for both bilingual groups on the Romanian tests are presented below.

Table 2

Group performance (% correct answers, standard deviation) and ANOVA comparisons on Romanian phonological awareness and reading tasks

Variables	BB (n=40)	BM (n=21)	*t*	*p*
RPhS	74.18 (15.5)	62.16 (11.6)	12.97	<.001*
RPhB	88.23 (14.1)	71.14 (2.4)	41.77	<.001*
RORo	68.54 (2.1)	47.32 (1.9)	59.99	<.001*
RSyB	78.97 (1.8)	66.84 (1.6)	33.96	<.001*
RWR	65.5 (19.3)	-	-	-
RPWR	54.4 (16.4)	-	-	-

Note: RPhS = Romanian Phoneme Segmentation; RPhB = Romanian Phoneme Blending; RORo = Romanian Onset-Rime Oddity; RSyB = Romanian Syllable Blending; RWR = Romanian Word Reading; RPWR = Romanian Pseudoword Reading. BM did not perform reading tasks in Romanian. * indicates statistical significance ($p < .05$).

Bi-literates (BB) scored significantly higher than mono-literate bilinguals (BM) on all Romanian PA tasks (RPhS: t =⌾12.97*, RPhB: t =⌾41.77*, RORo: t =⌾59.99*, RSyB: t =⌾33.96*). Within BB, decoding scores in real words (65.5%) exceeded pseudo-words (54.4%), though not statistically compared due to lack of BM scores in these tasks.

A Raven-controlled analysis found no significant correlation between Romanian proficiency and PA within BB, suggesting their high PA results were less influenced by proficiency and more likely by literacy exposure. However, within BM, Romanian proficiency correlated significantly with RPhS ($r = .56^*$, $p < .05$) and RORo ($r = .41^*$, $p < .05$), indicating that without literacy instruction, oral proficiency played a larger role in PA.

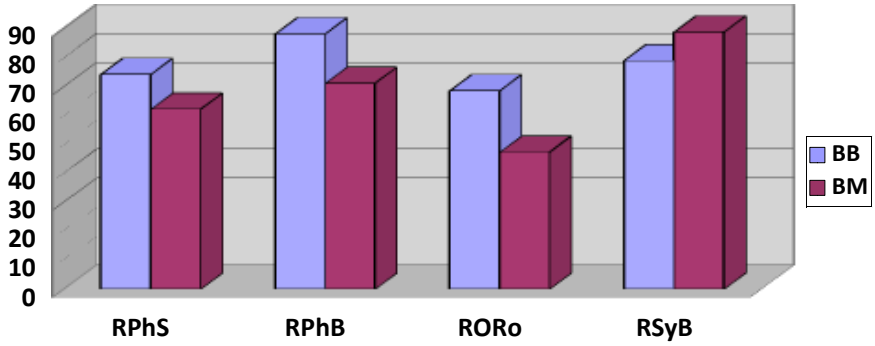

Figure 1. BB vs BM: Romanian PA accuracy (% correct)

The Italian tasks performance of both bilingual groups and the control group is detailed in the descriptive statistics below.

Table 3

Group performance (% correct answers, standard deviation) and ANOVA comparisons on Italian phonological awareness and reading tasks

Variables	BB (n=40)	BM (n=21)	MM (n=20)	*t*	*p*
RPhS	79.18 (15.5)	60.16 (16.6)	76.1 (11.9)	12.97	.037*
RPhB	88.23 (17.1)	86.14 (20.4)	89.4 (13.7)	0.777	.071
RORo	78.54 (2.1)	57.32 (1.9)	66.85 (1.3)	59.99	<.001*
RSyB	88.97 (1.8)	72.84 (1.6)	75.05 (2.1)	33.96	<.001*
RWR	88.6 (13.4)	84.4 (13.2)	89.3 (14.8)	0.867	.94
RPWR	78.4 (12.1)	59.7 (6.6)	62.2 (11.7)	12.743	<.001*

Note: IPhS = Italian Phoneme Segmentation; IPhB = Italian Phoneme Blending; IORo = Italian Onset-Rhyme Oddity; ISyB = Italian Syllable Blending; IWR = Italian Word Reading; IPWR = Italian Pseudoword Reading. * indicates statistical significance ($p < .05$).

ANOVA tests revealed significant group differences in phoneme segmentation (IPhS, $F(2,78) = 2.97^*$, $p = 0.037$), onset-rhyme oddity (IORo, $F = 59.99^*$, $p < .001$), and syllable blending (ISyB, $F = 33.96^*$, $p < .001$), but not in phoneme blending (IPhB). Post hoc Tukey comparisons revealed that for phoneme segmentation (IPhS), the BB group outperformed the BM group ($p < .001$), and the MM group also scored higher than BM ($p = .012$), while BB and MM did not differ significantly. For onset-rime oddity (IORo) and syllable blending (ISyB), the BB group performed significantly better than both MM and BM ($p < .05$), and MM outperformed BM. In syllable blending, BB also exceeded MM ($p = .001$).

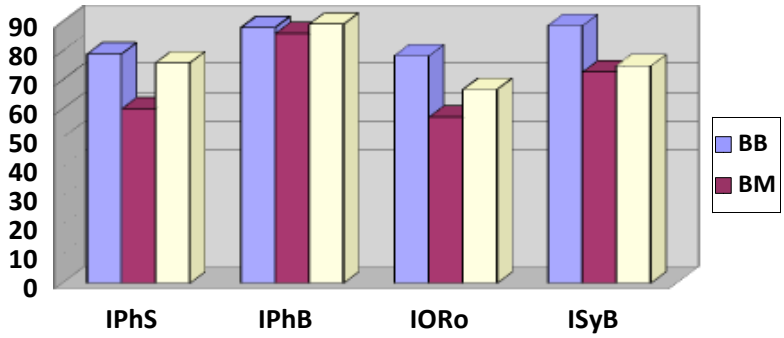

Figure 2. Mean accuracy on Italian PA tasks (% correct)

In reading tasks, IPWR scores displayed a significant group effect ($F = 12.74^*$, $p < .001$), with BB outperforming both MM ($p = 0.036$) and BM ($p = 0.043$), and no difference between BM and MM. IWR showed no group differences.

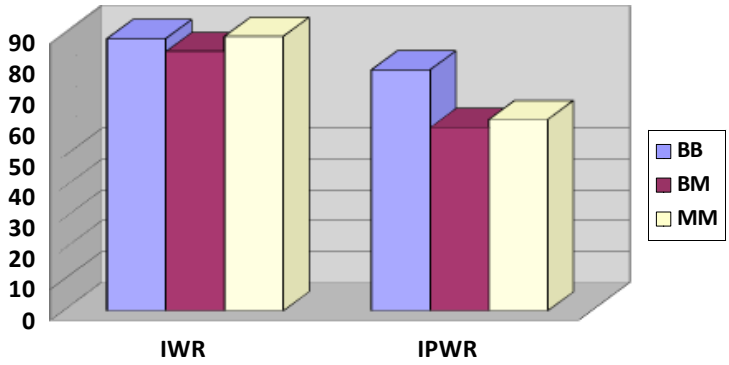

Figure 3. Mean accuracy on Italian reading tasks (% correct)

4.2. Parental attitudes

4.2.1. Quantitative ratings

All parents prioritized Italian oral and written competence at maximum importance (5.0), reflecting a strong consensus on the value of the majority language. Romanian oral competence also ranked highly. However, BB parents rated Romanian literacy and culture significantly higher than BM parents, who showed a more Italian-centric orientation. Results are reported in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Parental Importance Ratings (1-5 Likert Scale)

Skill/Aspect	Group A (BB parents)	Group B (BM parents)
Romanian oral	5.0	4.8
Romanian reading	4.3	3.2
Romanian writing	4.3	3.2
Romanian culture	4.5	4.1
Italian oral & literacy	5.0	5.0
Italian culture	4.1	4.1

Finally, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006) of parents' responses to the open-ended question in the second questionnaire. This methodological choice allowed for a systematic categorization of responses, emphasizing the identification of conceptual themes emerging from the data rather than testing predefined hypotheses.

Below are the categories of motivations that emerged from the analysis, grouped by thematic type. The categories are expressed as percentages of responses that included each theme, with each response potentially containing one or two thematic types.

(a) Positive motivations

A significant number of parents from both groups expressed a favourable attitude toward the transmission of Romanian in its written form. The motivations for these beliefs were divided into three subcategories:

1. Cultural reasons (50% of Group A and 20% of Group B):

   Examples:
   "I want my child to know how to read and write in Romanian so that they can learn more about our country and culture on their own."
   "It's important for their Romanian cultural identity."

2. Connection with other Romanians (28.1% of Group A and 13.3% of Group B):

   Examples:
   "So (the child) can write to relatives living abroad."
   "So I can send messages (to the child) in Romanian without any problems."

3. Complete language acquisition (21.9% of Group A; no responses from Group B):

   Examples:
   "Because that way I can say they've truly learned the language."
   "(Because) if you can't read and write, it's as if you can't really speak it."

(b) Negative motivations

A smaller number of parents expressed negative opinions about transmitting Romanian in written form. Their motivations were grouped as follows:

1. Unnecessary overload (40% from Group B):

   Examples:
   "I don't want (my child) to feel overwhelmed."
   "(The child) already struggles with reading in Italian – imagine Romanian..."

2. Low perceived utility of the written form (26.6% from Group B):

   Examples:
   "(The child) already knows the Romanian they need."
   "I don't see why (the child) should learn to write it if they can already speak it."
   "We're not going back to Romania, so it would be useless. It's not worth it."

In conclusion, parents whose children attend Romanian language courses show a more positive attitude toward transmitting their language in written form. Their reasons range from literacy as a bridge to cultural heritage, to fostering social connections, to the belief that full language acquisition includes the written form.

By contrast, parents whose children do not participate in Romanian courses show less appreciation for literacy as a resource, often viewing written language transmission as unnecessary or even detrimental.

5. Discussion

The present study set out to investigate the impact of bi-literacy on both phonological awareness and reading skills among Romanian-Italian bilingual children. By analyzing both cognitive performance and parental attitudes, we sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between literacy practices and language development in a bilingual context.

Our quantitative findings demonstrate a significant bi-literacy advantage. Bilingual children who had acquired literacy skills in both Romanian (heritage language) and Italian (societal language) outperformed their mono-literate peers – who had literacy only in Italian – on tasks assessing phonological awareness in both L1 and L2, as well as on non-word reading in Italian. This supports Cummins' (1978, 2000) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, which posits that cognitive academic language proficiency developed in one language transfers to other languages, facilitating skills such as phonological segmentation, decoding, and metalinguistic awareness.

Bi-literate children demonstrated stronger performance in phoneme segmentation, onset-rhyme discrimination, and syllable blending – skills known to predict early literacy success. Their superior performance on the Italian pseudo-word reading task also reflects enhanced phonological processing efficiency. These results underscore the importance of literacy instruction in both languages and highlight the role of Romanian-as-a-heritage-language classes (LCCR), where bi-literate children received formal instruction in reading and writing Romanian, unlike their mono-literate peers who learned Romanian only informally at home.

Romanian's phonological complexity, including consonant clusters and unique phonemes not present in Italian, likely contributed to bi-literate children's more advanced phonological awareness. Exposure to these structures through reading and writing may have heightened their sensitivity to phonological structures, enabling better performance across both languages. In this sense, Romanian's extended alphabet, including graphemes for /◎/, /ts/, /ə/, and /◎/, provided bi-literate children with an expanded orthographic and phonological repertoire, deepening their metalinguistic insight and strengthening decoding abilities even in Italian.

Importantly, our findings indicate that bi-literacy, not bilingualism per se, explains this advantage. The mono-literate bilinguals, despite being raised in Romanian-speaking homes and exhibiting comparable Italian proficiency, did not outperform monolinguals on Italian reading or phonological awareness measures. In fact, their performance was lowest on some phonological tasks. This suggests that oral bilingual exposure, without formal literacy in both languages, may not be sufficient to yield cross-linguistic transfer effects in early reading.

The interplay between language exposure, proficiency, and literacy is further evidenced by vocabulary findings. While bi-literates showed no significant correlation between Romanian vocabulary and phonological awareness, mono-literates' lower vocabulary knowledge in Romanian was significantly associated with weaker performance on phoneme segmentation and onset-rhyme tasks. This supports the Lexical Restructuring Model (Metsala, Walley 1998), suggesting that richer vocabulary facilitates more detailed phonemic representations. Bi-literates, however, appeared to bypass this dependency due to the additional support provided by Romanian literacy.

Furthermore, the results resonate with research showing that formal heritage language instruction can enhance metalinguistic skills and contribute to L2 literacy (Bialystok, Luk, Kwan 2005; Schwartz, Moin, Leikin 2012). The Romanian LCCR curriculum, which emphasizes explicit phoneme-grapheme correspondence and cross-linguistic comparison, may foster children's awareness of language structure, supporting transfer from L1 to L2.

Parental beliefs and practices added crucial context to the children's performance. Quantitative Likert data revealed that all parents strongly

valued Italian language and literacy, viewing them as essential for integration and academic success. Romanian, as a home language, was also deemed important, but predominantly in its oral form. Parents across both groups wanted their children to maintain spoken Romanian, highlighting its emotional and cultural significance within the family.

However, perspectives diverged on written Romanian. Parents of bi-literate children (Group A) tended to express more positive attitudes toward reading and writing in Romanian, citing motivations such as cultural transmission, communication with relatives, and a sense of linguistic completeness. For instance, some parents remarked, "I want my child to be able to read and write in Romanian so they can learn more about our country and its culture" or "It's important for their Romanian identity".

By contrast, several parents from the mono-literate group (Group B) viewed Romanian literacy as unnecessary or even detrimental. Some expressed concerns about cognitive overload – "My child already struggles with reading in Italian, imagine adding Romanian" – or doubted its utility – "We are not going back to Romania, so it's not worth the effort". These findings were supported by our thematic analysis of open-ended responses, which showed a clear division between positive motivations (cultural connection, linguistic completeness) and negative concerns (overload, lack of perceived usefulness).

These results point to an important socio-cultural disconnect: oral maintenance of the heritage language is often encouraged, while its written form is viewed as optional or burdensome. The perception that written Romanian lies outside the emotional domain of family interaction – *i.e.*, that Romanian is "the language of the home" only in its spoken form – could limit children's opportunities to develop balanced bi-literacy. Formal instruction, as provided by LCCR courses, appears to be essential in bridging this gap.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the limitations of our data collection methods. Attitudes and beliefs were measured via self-report questionnaires, which may introduce biases or oversimplify nuanced perspectives. The use of semi-structured interviews might have provided richer insights into parental ideologies, allowing us to explore their views on language and literacy development more deeply.

Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this study prevents causal inferences. Longitudinal research is needed to explore how literacy practices

and beliefs evolve over time and affect children's language outcomes. Factors such as home literacy environment, parental education, and translanguaging practices may also mediate the observed effects and should be investigated in future work.

Moreover, the sociolinguistic questionnaires may not fully reflect the actual linguistic competence of the children studied. Future research would benefit from supplementing attitudinal data with linguistic analyses based on oral production. For instance, researchers could collect semi-structured narrative data from both mono-literate and bi-literate children using a standardized storytelling task. Subsequent analyses could examine word counts, speech rate, lexical diversity, syntactic complexity (e.g., prevalence of subordinate vs. main clauses), and morphological patterns (e.g., case marking, verb inflection). Such methods would offer a more objective, fine-grained picture of bilingual language development across literacy contexts.

In conclusion, our findings underscore that heritage language literacy – especially when supported by formal instruction – offers cognitive, linguistic, and cultural benefits for bilingual children. It not only enhances metalinguistic and decoding skills in the societal language but also affirms children's bilingual identity. Promoting bi-literacy is not just a pedagogical choice but a social imperative, fostering equity, inclusion, and continuity across generations.

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