"To be able to understand each other": Intercultural interactions in the Arabic–Hebrew-speaking preschool in Israel

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ABSTRACT

EN This ethnographic study expands prior understanding of the intercultural encounter process by focusing on 29 Jewish and Arab children attending bilingual preschool and two preschool teachers during 16 class sessions. The findings shed light on a developmental stage at which the seeds of intercultural interaction begin to appear along the separation between Arab and Jewish children in terms of their social preferences. The presence of second language (L2) experts in the classroom prompted the formation of two groups based on children's bilingual competence, an experts' group and a novice one. On the one hand, some experts positioned themselves as competent bilinguals and teachers, willing to assume the role of L2 mediators and interpreters. On the other hand, the relative L2 competence prompted novice learners to be flexible and go beyond their ethnic identity in order to establish new social relationships. The data show that the process of L2 acquisition might play a catalytic role in activating a social mechanism for intercultural interaction and that, despite differences in the patterns of social adaptation, all children showed developmental intercultural changes.

Key words: EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING, INTERCULTURAL INTERACTIONS, BILINGUALISM, INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCIES

ES Este estudio etnográfico profundiza en la comprensión del proceso de encuentro intercultural y se enfoca en 29 niños judíos y árabes en una escuela infantil bilingüe y dos docentes durante 16 sesiones de clase. Los resultados muestran un estadio de desarrollo en el que aparecen las semillas de la interacción intercultural junto con la separación entre niños árabes y judíos en función de sus preferencias. La presencia de dos expertos de segundas lenguas (L2) en el aula determinó la creación de dos grupos según la competencia lingüística d los niños, un grupo de expertos y un grupo de principiantes. Por una parte, algunos expertos se posicionaron como hablantes e instructores bilingües competentes, asumiendo el rol de mediadores e intérpretes. Por otra parte, la competencia lingüística limitada de los principiantes les empujó a ser más flexibles e ir más allá de su identidad étnica para establecer nuevas relaciones sociales. Los datos muestran que el proceso de adquisición de la L2 puede facilitar la activación de mecanismos sociales de interacción intercultural y que, a pesar de las diferencias en los patrones de adaptación social, todos los niños experimentaron cambios interculturales.

Palabras clave: APRENDIZAJE TEMPRANO DE UNA LENGUA, INTERACCIÓN INTERCULTURAL, BILINGÜISMO, COMPETENCIAS INTERACCIONALES

IT Questo studio etnografico approfondisce la comprensione del processo di incontro interculturale e si concentra su 29 bambini ebrei e arabi che frequentano la scuola materna bilingue e due insegnanti nel corso di 16 lezioni. I risultati fanno luce su una fase di sviluppo in cui i semi dell'interazione interculturale iniziano a comparire insieme alla separazione tra bambini arabi ed ebrei in termini di preferenze sociali. La presenza di esperti di seconda lingua (L2) in classe ha indotto alla formazione di due gruppi basati sulla competenza bilingue dei bambini, un gruppo di esperti e uno di principianti. Da un lato, alcuni esperti si sono affermati come bilingui e insegnanti competenti, disposti ad assumere il ruolo di mediatori e interpreti L2. Dall'altro, la competenza linguistica limitata ha spinto i principianti ad essere flessibili e andare oltre la propria identità etnica al fine di stabilire nuove relazioni sociali. I dati mostrano che il processo di acquisizione di L2 potrebbe svolgere un ruolo catalizzatore nell'attivazione di un meccanismo sociale per l'interazione interculturale e che, nonostante le differenze nei modelli di adattamento sociale, tutti i bambini hanno mostrato cambiamenti dello sviluppo interculturali.

Parole chiave: APPRENDIMENTO INIZIALE DELLA LINGUA, INTERAZIONE INTERCULTURALE, BILINGUISMO, COMPETENZE INTERAZIONALI

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1. Early childhood bilingual education and intercultural interaction: Introduction

Early childhood bilingual education has a central role in promoting a child's life-long love of language and bilingual proficiency (European Commission, 2011), and the cognitive and linguistic benefits of early bilingual development and education have been widely researched during recent years (e.g., Barnett, Lambert, & Fry, 2008; Hamann, Rinke, & Genevska-Hanke 2019; Hoff, 2017; Montrul, 2018; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2008). Early language learning has enormous potential for the development not only of children's cognitive and linguistic skills but also of their identity, values, empathy, and respect. Children's encounters in bilingual early education settings "can shape the way they develop their attitudes towards other languages and cultures by raising awareness of diversity and of cultural variety, hence fostering understanding and respect" (European Commission, 2011, p. 7).

Since bilingual classrooms are also bicultural due to the impact of both the children's and teachers' home and community values (e.g., Baker, 2006; Saxena, 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008), policy makers consider this diversity as a resource. The bicultural nature of bilingual schools might then be established purposefully in locations where two or more cultural-ethnic groups are living in a state of tension, in an attempt to initiate peace, work for the sake of humanity, live cooperatively, and maintain respect for each other's cultures and languages (Gundara & Portera, 2008). This need for intercultural communicative skills is particularly relevant for the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel. Similar to the English and French context in Canada, in Israel, Hebrew and Arabic are host-community languages (as opposed to immigrant languages) with an official status. However, living in the same country does not necessarily mean coexistence. Unlike in other host communities, Arabs and Jews live in separate communities and can at times experience tension. Bearing in mind that living together in mutual acceptance and respect is not an innate characteristic, children need to be taught coexistence, and schools serve as the primary institutions for this purpose.

Recent studies revealed that, in intercultural communications, children can display a strong orientation towards the majority group's language, while marginalizing others who are not proficient enough (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2013; Drury, 2000; Puskas & Björk-Willén, 2017), for example, by pretending not to understand L2 novices' talk (Bernstein, 2016). However, these challenges were documented mostly in monolingual preschool settings and the question of how the intercultural interactions between children are built in a bilingual preschool context remains under-researched. The current research focuses on peers' intercultural interactions in a bilingual preschool with a high number of children with immigrant background. The aim of this study is to explore the main aspects of intercultural interaction during the first year in an Arabic–Hebrew-speaking preschool classroom in Israel. Our focus was on the dual-language program that, as a model of bilingual education, has a *language as a resource* orientation, viewing languages other than the majority language as resources to be developed (Ruiz, 1984).

Bilingual, bicultural societies develop shared values and increase their democratic interactions through intercultural education (Gundara, 2008). In contrast, separate schooling in a bi- or multicultural society hinders social cohesion (Gundara, 2008). Thus, in the case at hand, bilingual education may give the Israeli population the opportunity of exposure to the other official, but less familiar, language and culture. Knowledge of each other's languages and cultures may lead to mutual recognition. In this study, we sought to explore the onset of this knowledge development by drawing on the theoretical perspectives presented in the following section.

2. Intercultural communication in early childhood under personal and external forces: The theoretical models of the study

The unique value of this study lies in the examination of social interaction between the majority and minority language speakers, who were preschool children and representatives of two population groups that, in most cases, live separately. In this study, we examined the behavior and interactions of children in the Arabic–Hebrew-speaking preschool from a multidisciplinary perspective, enabling a comprehensive and simultaneous analysis of various aspects of the phenomenon. For this purpose, we drew on theoretical models from different research disciplines (psychology, sociology, and child development), based on a common conceptual idea of shaping human behavior and interactions under the influence of personal and external forces.

First, we drew on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), which sees individuals' behavior and development as dynamic and changing in accordance with the way in which they understand and relate to their environment and according to their ability to control their environment. The

theory holds that the interactions between children and their environment are expressed in the circles surrounding them. On the micro level, these interactions take place in interpersonal relationships, and on the macro level, in relation to ethnic groups, either people living in a particular region or any other type of a broad social structure.

In addition, we utilized Berry's theory of acculturation (Berry, 2005), according to which, individuals' behavior in a multicultural society is dependent on four acculturation strategies, which are based on the distinction between orientations toward one's own group and toward other groups. The theory holds that a continuous cultural encounter between people of diverse cultural origins leads to cultural and psychological change of these strategies, among representatives of both the minority and the majority group.

Finally, our study was inspired by Robinson's theory of intercultural development (Robinson, 2007) that claims the intercultural behavior of representatives of diverse cultures is determined by education and choice and is characterized by the ability to change, reflected on all levels of the child's development: emotional, cultural and social.

Based on these theories, in this study, we analyzed interactions between the L1 Arabic- and L1 Hebrew-speaking children in the bilingual classroom with regard to the following three factors: their innate inclination to learning and connecting, their parents' educational environment tendencies, and their willingness to become familiar with another culture. We conducted this analysis in accordance with the level of the children's intercultural communication and development, including their degree of social suitability to the new educational framework. In the following subsection, we briefly address the existing data on intercultural communication in dual language education from a sociological perspective.

2.1. The sociological context of the study: Intercultural communication and bilingual education

In recent years, an increasing number of studies in the field of L2 learning are shifting their focus from linguistic and cognitive aspects towards cultural and social aspects (Brown 2007; Norton, 2000). With growing awareness in the education field that learning and cognition are fundamentally social in nature, sociocultural interactions in the classroom may be examined in this context. This social type of learning was theorized in the concept *community of practice* (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 2006), and defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2006, p. 1). Wenger (2006) noted that a CoP can vary in terms of group size, location, status of the individuals involved and format for interaction. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), in CoPs, less experienced members learn from interacting with more experienced members (experts) and with each other. To illustrate this, in an ethnographic study, Angelova, Gunawardena, and Volk (2006) addressed intercultural interactions by examining peer mediation in L2 by young L2 experts in a bilingual classroom, in a dual Spanish−English language program in the United States. Angelova et al. (2006) found that, through their interaction with L2 experts, the novices develop linguistic, cultural and social competence in L2. Thus, in addition to their role as language *teachers*, the experts might also play the role of social mediators in the bilingual classroom. Blum-Kulka and Snow (2004) also defined language learning classrooms as CoPs, referring to children learning the L2, who are more competent in L2 than their peers and can play the role of L2 teachers, as language experts.

Current research points to many possible effects that L2 learning in classroom as a potential CoP may have on individuals' development, from changes in worldview and ways of thinking to how they communicate with others on personal, cultural, and social levels (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Razmeh & Davoodi, 2015). Furthermore, L2 learning enables a reexamination of people's original culture, as well as of their roles in the group and in the social hierarchy of the larger community in which they live (Pishghadam & Ordoubody, 2011; Ricento 2005). These findings underscore the importance of intercultural and social interactions provided by bilingual education during the early years of children's intensive social development in multicultural societies.

Nonetheless, only few studies to date have addressed the intercultural aspects of early dual language education. One example is Freeman (1996) who, in her comprehensive ethnographic study, described how the minority and majority language groups in a Spanish−English-speaking bilingual school in the United States "collaborate in their efforts to define linguistic and cultural differences not as problems to be overcome but as resources to be developed" (Freeman, 1996, p. 564). Freeman showed that, by means of thorough planning of curriculum and social interactions in cooperation with policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents and children, the school promoted collaboration between the majority and minority language groups toward bilingualism and cultural pluralism.

In light of the limited data on intercultural interactions between young majority- and minority-language speaking children in dual language programs, this study sought to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon through children's ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), acculturation strategies, encouragement of their cultural environment (Berry, 2005) and characteristics of their intercultural development (Robinson, 2007). Bearing in mind that one widely-recognized benefit of CoPs is their members' ability to comprise a community by means of building relationships and regularly interacting and learning together by shared practice (Wenger, 2006), we sought to explore how the young L1 Arabic- and L1 Hebrew-speaking children build their CoP through intercultural relations and with the support of their teachers.

2.2. Arabic–Hebrew-speaking bilingual education in Israel

When this study was conducted, the official state language policy in Israel acknowledged two official languages (Hebrew and Arabic). Yet, while Arabic was recognized as the second official language in Israel by force of legislation in 1948, it is not a competing partner in a dyadic bilingual state because Hebrew is the dominant language in Israeli public spheres. Arabic is a minority language and is the main language for most Arabs (including Muslims, Christians and Druze), who comprise 20% of the population. Israel has separate Hebrew-speaking and Arabic-speaking education systems, and Arab and Jewish children are, therefore, educated in different schools. Hebrew is studied as a second language in Arab schools and is part of their curriculum from first or second to twelfth grade. Most Arab-Israelis understand and speak Hebrew and use it at work and in other settings. At the same time, the level of Jewish children's competence in Arabic is relatively low, even though the study of Arabic is obligatory in the Jewish secular-school curriculum from fifth grade on.

In 1997, the Center for Bilingual Education was established to promote bilingual and bicultural education and the development of both Jewish and Arab ethnic communities. The Center believes in equal representation of both language groups in schools on all levels. From the outset, the Center's policymakers have consistently chosen a teaching and management staff that represents both groups equally, with each class having two homeroom teachers—one Arab and one Jewish.

Several studies on bilingual schools in Israel have revealed their main objectives (e.g., Bekerman & Tatar, 2009; Hertz-Lazarowitz et al., 2008). The first is to help the Arab and Jewish children develop a high level of mutual tolerance, respect and acknowledgment, taking into consideration that these children belong to two groups with a longstanding history of mutual intolerance. The second is to provide the children with a setting that offers the two cultures an opportunity to meet, in contrast to what happens in the external society. The third objective is to provide the children with both Arabic and Hebrew—the languages they need to live in Israel. The fourth is to help familiarize the children with customs and cultural traditions of a second ethnic group. The fifth objective is to strengthen their self-identity, as well as their pride and loyalty regarding their own culture.

2.3. The sociolinguistic context of the study: bilingual communication and identity

In addition to the sociological and developmental context of CoP, the present study dealt with the sociolinguistic context of a community of bilingual kindergarten children. According to Cooley (1922) and Mead (1934), socialization is a process whereby individuals shape their identities, develop their personalities, and learn to be members of society, in our case, in bilingual kindergarten communities. In this process, the children adopt values, norms, and skills that enable them to integrate socially through interaction with the teacher and the other kindergarten children, through interpersonal communication with them and the social learning that ensues. Interaction, or mutual influence, among children, comparison with the other and test of belonging, are described in the theory as expressed in a variety of ways, reproduced in the children's thoughts when choosing a relevant response. Thus, interpersonal communication—discussion—is created with other children and with the teacher in the kindergarten and is essential for an intact socialization process. Interpersonal communication is made possible through signs, symbols and other symbolic systems, including language.

Sociolinguistics perceives language as social activity and a key instrument of socialization (Paulston & Tucker, 2003). Language characterizes both the society's culture and the individuals within it—their status, gender, values, and their ethnic, social and religious identities (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). The choice of one language or another as a socialization tool within the community of practice of the bilingual kindergarten constitutes a choice of a system of accepted codes for thinking, expression and interpersonal communication. The bilingual speaker's choice of a specific language derives from a

combination of socialization components such as identity, interaction, interpersonal communication, learning and their social and cultural context (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

2.4. Research questions

The main research question of this study was as follows: How are the intercultural interactions between bilingual children built during the first year of dual language education? To answer the main research question, we formulated three secondary questions: (1) How are intercultural relations formed between the L1 Arabic- and the L1 Hebrew-speaking children? (2) How do preschool teachers support the intercultural relations in the classroom? (3) How does early bilingual education contribute to the acculturation process in the classroom?

3. Method

This longitudinal ethnographic study was part of a large-scale project aimed at examining early bilingual Arabic–Hebrew education in Israel with a focus on teacher–children and peer interactions and their role in L2 acquisition.

3.1. The target bilingual preschool

The setting for this study is a bilingual preschool, established in 2004 as an integral part of a bilingual Arabic–Hebrew-speaking school located in central Israel. The preschool has a dual language program incorporating classroom instruction in the majority (Hebrew) and minority (Arabic) languages. The teachers coordinate their daily instructional practices and share responsibilities. They share the same classroom space and teach both languages together. Time is not allocated separately for each individual language. Even though each teacher acts as a language model for her designated languages and is responsible for delivery in this language as a medium of instruction, both teachers sometimes use Hebrew and Arabic and apply flexible language practices. During their co-teaching, the teachers do not build on translating each other, but on elaborating, extending and continuing each other's speech in their designated language (Schwartz & Asli, 2014).

3.2. Participants

3.2.1. Children

The children were 5-to-6-year-olds who had entered the target preschool at age 5 (one year before entry into elementary school at age 6) and were observed by the researchers during one year (for details, see the Procedure section). There were 29 children in the class, of whom 19 were L1 Arabic-speaking and 10 were L1 Hebrew-speaking. We noticed six L1 Arabic-speaking children, three girls and three boys, who spoke Hebrew well and could be defined as L2 experts. The three girls had entered the preschool with a relatively high level of competence in spoken L2 Hebrew (speech understanding and production) (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004). Two of them, who were cousins, had spent two years at a monolingual Hebrew-speaking kindergarten before entering the target setting. As reported by the L1 Arabic-speaking teacher, Lillian, the other four experts had received early exposure to L2 Hebrew through TV and radio at home. The presence of the L2 experts in this classroom was a phenomenon that could be attributed partly to their (Arab) parents' language policy of taking practical steps to promote their children's exposure to L2. Some of their family language policy might be attributed to their belief that their children's competence in Hebrew is a primary predictor of their future academic and economic success in Israel (Bekerman & Tatar, 2009).

In addition, one boy in this classroom was from an ethnically mixed family, in which the mother was an L1 Hebrew speaker and the father was an L1 Arabic speaker. Since the dominant language of communication in this family was Hebrew, the child self-identified as an L1 Hebrew speaker and at the beginning of the academic year, his Arabic understanding skills were much better than his Arabic speaking skills. In the course of time, he showed willingness to communicate in Arabic with his Arabic-speaking peers and teacher, and, as will be presented later, excelled in his L2-expert role.

3.2.2. Teachers

The study participants were two preschool teachers: one L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher, Dina, and one L1 Arabic-speaking teacher, Lillian. The teachers expressed their willingness to participate in the study. Dina was a novice teacher, who had joined the preschool in September 2013, and did not have any previous knowledge of Arabic. Prior to entering the preschool, Dina had obtained a bachelor's degree in preschool

education, and then gained rich pedagogical and bilingual teaching experience as an L2 Hebrew teacher for adults and as a teacher in a monolingual preschool. Lillian was an Arabic-speaking teacher, who had a bachelor's degree in preschool and first-grade teaching. She had been teaching in the preschool since its establishment in 2004, had more than 10 years of professional experience, and spoke fluent Hebrew.

3.3. Procedure

Data were collected during one academic year, from October 2013 through June 2014. Throughout the research period, 16 observational sessions were conducted (two to three times each month for seven months) including six sessions of field note taking from October 2013 to January 2014 and 10 sessions of video recording from February to June 2014. Interviews with the children were held between October 2013 and May 2014. Interviews with the teachers took place in November 2013 and in March 2014. We chose observation as a method in order to see the children in their natural setting, while interacting in situations of language acquisition and play, since it has been shown that the urge to create interpersonal relationships and the need to share emotionally with other children encourages acquisition of another language (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004).

Each observation session lasted about four hours, from early morning to midday. The process of data collection included selected focus of the video recordings on a) group interactions between the experts and the novices while engaged in joint play in various areas of the classroom, and b) expert-novice-teacher interactions during classroom activities and spontaneous communications.

3.4. Instrumentation, data generation, transcription, and analysis

To investigate the phenomenon of L2 experts' mediation, we used multiple sources of data (video-recorded observations, field notes and semi-structured interviews with the children and teachers). We applied methodological triangulation, which entails a comparison of the findings derived from different data sources to interpret the phenomenon under study and to reduce observer or interviewer bias. In addition, the methodological triangulation increased the scope, the validity and the consistency of our data (Shenton, 2004).

3.4.1. Field notes and video recordings and their transcriptions

We received permission to perform video recordings in the preschool from the Israeli Ministry of Education. We informed the teachers that the purpose of the cross-cultural project was to examine characteristics of the children's intercultural interactions within everyday preschool situations. They were asked to allocate a suitable time-point for observation that included diverse daily planned activities (e.g., circle time) and unplanned activities (e.g., free play).

The video-recorded observations were transcribed in detail, in table form, which allowed for the inclusion of nonverbal information from the videos. Each transcription was made by two transcribers, a native Hebrew speaker and a native Arabic speaker. A second transcription was made, following conversation analysis transcription conventions, to permit a detailed microanalysis of the transcriptions. This served as the basis for our understanding and interpretation of the observed interactions (Hamo, Blum-Kulka, & Hacohen, 2004).

3.4.2. Semi-structured interviews with the L2 experts and their teachers

During the research project, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each child and each teacher individually. The interviews with the children were held in a quiet area of the classroom. They were conducted by the second author and a research assistant in Hebrew and in Arabic. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Our goal was to examine the children's social preferences (who their friends were and which languages they spoke) and their awareness of their social role in the classroom. In addition, we asked them about the advantages of learning languages, the similarities and differences between the use of Arabic at home and in the environment, and about the children's ideas on the best way to teach L2. In the case of the language experts, we sought to obtain their reflections on the sociolinguistic behavior patterns observed during the study and, in particular, on how they acted as L2 mediators for their novice peers.

The second author conducted two interviews in Hebrew with the teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the interviewees' consent. Regarding our study aims, the teachers were asked to reflect on their role of encouraging intercultural interaction in the classroom and specifically on their strategies observed by the researchers.

3.4.3. Data generation and analysis

Based on Braun and Clarke (2006), we applied a theoretical thematic analysis of the collected data. We analyzed the classroom observations and the interviews with the children and the teachers using the following thematic analysis steps:

1) Transcribing the data corpus (all observations and interviews collected for the study), which comprised a first transcription version.
2) Familiarizing ourselves with the data by reading and rereading the classroom observation transcriptions and interviews and discussing them between the researchers. During the discussion meetings, we began to search for the data set that addresses the topic of the current study.
3) Identifying teachers' strategies aimed at encouraging the intercultural interactions and patterns of intercultural behavior.
4) Coding teachers' possible strategies and children's behavior patterns and organizing all relevant extracts of the entire data set into a table.
5) Reviewing the coding and the relevant extracts through an interrater to enhance the analysis by defining and naming the thematic categories.

The thematic tree (Figure 1) presents the defined categories and subcategories for the analysis:

- Educational environment
- Teachers' mediation in construction of intercultural interactions
- Teachers' behavioral modeling
- Encouraging intercultural interaction
- Acculturation strategies of the L2 experts
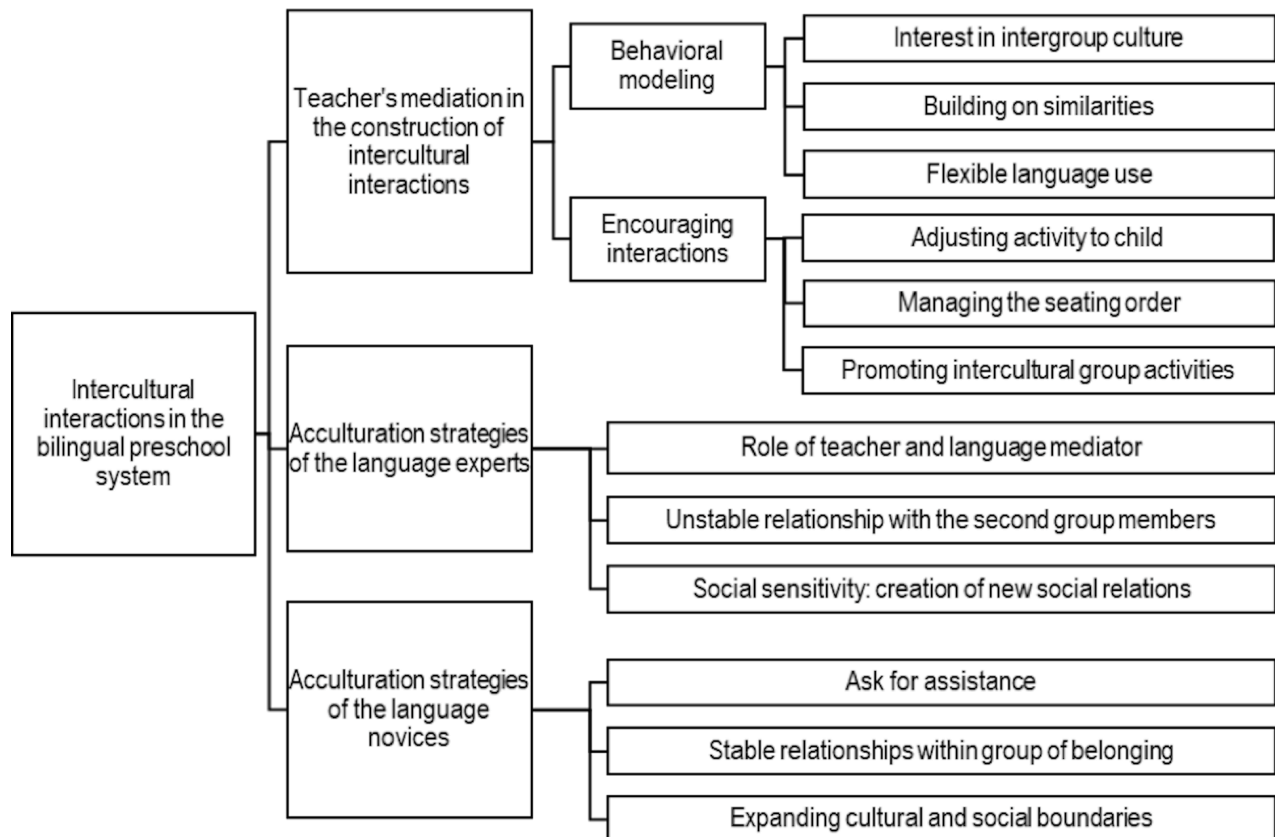- Acculturation strategies of the language novices

Figure 1. Thematic tree with categories and subcategories for the analysis

4. Results

4.1. Educational environment: Teachers' mediation in constructing intercultural interactions

In this study, we observed the first stage, an emergent process of intercultural interactions between the L1 Arabic- and the L1 Hebrew-speaking children. At this stage, the children's familiarity with another culture and language occurred in parallel to the identification of their social preferences and, as a result, contributed to their rejection of involvement with peers from another ethnic group (Barkan, 2003; Berry, 2005; Wright, Stetson, Rourke, & Zubernis, 2003). However, after nearly a year of encounters between two ethnic groups of children, we found some initial signs of intercultural interaction between the Arab and the Jewish children. During this emergent process, the teachers considered themselves as representatives of the bilingual educational environment (Schwartz, Mor-Sommerfeld, & Leikin, 2010), who should facilitate a process for the children's acculturation. Two main types of support emerged from the findings: behavioral modeling and encouraging intercultural interaction.

4.1.1. Teachers' behavioral modeling

The study showed that the teachers strove to be personal examples for the children in terms of their intercultural and bilingual behavior. They were interested in the other language, used both languages, and sought similar and common features in the languages and cultures. More specifically, from the interviews with the teachers, it appeared that both of them conveyed the message of L2 significance to the children and, in the case of Dina, the willingness for L2 acquisition, as illustrated by the testimony by Lillian in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

Look, we also serve as a model for the children. For example, Dina serves as a kind of model for the Jewish children [...] and if she speaks Arabic and shows them that she is learning just like them, they will start thinking that it is good, which is encouraging.

In Dina's view, this message motivated children's L2 learning, despite the inevitable mistakes, and helped them to understand the rules of the social system for the present and for the future, as shown in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2. (Dina, L1 Hebrew speaking teacher)

The goal of the society is that they will grow up and be good citizens. So how do you show [the children] that you are learning the language, show the Jewish children that you are interested in Arabic? And they see me asking Lillian how to write in Arabic [...] The message [to the children] is that it is OK to make mistakes, that it is OK to learn, that the teacher does not say "I know everything." On the contrary, she is saying: "I want to you to know that I still don't know what you already know." [...] It gives them a terrific boost.

The observational findings show how interaction among children, who spoke different native languages, was characterized by the linguistic behavior that they learned from their teachers. Thus, in a spontaneous conversation as Situation 1, when sitting out on the terrace, the children offered to help each other with learning both languages:

Situation 1. Free play outside the classroom.

Ofra (L1 Hebrew-speaking girl):	[speaking in Hebrew] You will teach me; you will teach me Arabic, and I will teach you Hebrew.
Bassal (L1 Arabic-speaking boy):	[speaking in Hebrew] But I know Hebrew.
Ofra:	[speaking in Hebrew] Yes, but you don't know everything.

Through her desire to learn Arabic, Dina expressed her deep interest in the Arabic culture and language. Indeed, our observations attested to the effect of this modeling on the L1 Hebrew-speaking children's openness to the novel language, Arabic. For example, we frequently observed evidence of Dina's efforts to understand Lillian based on the context and gestures, when she addressed Dina in Arabic. The fruitfulness of these efforts was manifest through the children's reactions to Dina's modeling and their imitation of her behavior, demonstrating their significant efforts to understand Arabic. Thus, it appeared that the L1 Hebrew-speaking children were accustomed to word-for-word repetition of Dina's slogan: "I did not understand but I think that you said that..." This modeling behavior reflected Vygotsky's (1978) concept of

the adult as children's mental development mediator, not only as a source of knowledge but also as a model for children's linguistic behavior.

This idea is reflected in many observations of interactions among the children. Throughout the day, the children not only imitated the teachers' behavior, but also felt proud that they succeeded in understanding what was said in both languages and that they were able negotiate the novice learners' comprehension by translating. Both teachers emphasized that the dynamics between them also characterized mutual intercultural familiarity (Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

Dina worked in Jewish kindergartens, so she wants to bring in everything she knows and everything she used to do. For example, now, during Passover she wanted to make wine for them. I told her: "Sorry, but wine is forbidden here." The good thing about her is that she is interested in culture. For example, she learns about every holiday.

The dialogue in Excerpt 3 between Dina and Lillian regarding the different cultures was pleasant and friendly, indicating willingness to learn about and accept another culture, without relinquishing their original culture. This set an example to the children, as shown in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4. (Dina, L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher)

It is fantastic how we work with Lillian simultaneously on the material. It makes the child and me—me first of all—learn about patience and tolerance. It means taking a deep breath, working on delaying gratification—which is, in fact, what we are educating here.

As behavioral models, the teachers used both languages, Hebrew and Arabic, both of which were heard regularly in the preschool during the learning sessions and during the day (Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

[The children] are interested in the language. They hear the language and constantly think about the language.

The children cooperated with the use of both languages and tried to help each other, both with pronunciation and with understanding either unclear words or sentences in the other language. For example, in Situation 2, Nur (L1 Arabic-speaking girl) took the initiative to teach Oded (L1 Hebrew-speaking boy) some Arabic words.

Situation 2. Free play, Nur teaches Oded the words in Arabic.

Nur:	[gesturing with her hands while learning to say the word *heart* in Arabic]
	[speaking Hebrew] Lev, Lev [speaking Arabic] قلب that is Lev in Arabic.
Oded:	[repeats after Nur in Arabic] قلب

In addition, the teachers looked for shared features in the target languages and cultures to show the children. Some of the two target cultures' traditions and religious narratives have similarities, and there is considerable linguistic proximity (semantic and grammatical) between the two Semitic languages. The teachers believed that they brought the two groups of children closer together by highlighting these similarities.

Excerpt 6. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

If there are similar words, we keep on saying: "Like in Hebrew […] like in Arabic." We keep repeating it. This is common. We are constantly looking for the common ground because through the common we can learn everything and bring the cultures together. They [the children] talked about the common stories we heard about the holidays, that Muhammad was a shepherd like Moses, that the Prophet Muhammad was also persecuted and unwanted at first when he brought the religion.

This finding is consistent with the *Hand in Hand* educational model, which advocates for bilingualism as a means of introducing and respecting another culture, while preserving the original one. According to this model, L2 is a tool for breaking cultural and linguistic barriers between the two ethnic groups (Amara, Azaiza, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Mor-Sommerfeld, 2009).

Finally, the observed teachers' behavioral modeling and its role in the children's intercultural development is in line with findings of developmental psychology studies, stressing the importance of the educational environment and the impact of teachers' modeling behavior on the development of preschool children's social abilities (Dehart, 2004; Solberg, 2012).

4.1.2. Encouraging interactions

The findings show that the teachers actively supported intercultural communication and that supporting intercultural interactions among children required special attention to their individual and cultural differences. They encouraged interactions between the children of the two ethnic groups by adjusting activities to each child, managing the seating order and promoting intercultural group activities.

4.1.2.1. Adjusting activities to each child

The teachers arranged activities while considering the differences in the children's individual developmental and adaptation patterns (Excerpts 7 and 8) and paid attention to gender differences in the intercultural communication patterns (Excerpt 9).

Excerpt 7. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

This year, the children are very special. Both the Arabs and the Jews. They need a lot of help, a lot of mediation, a lot of attention. There are children with social problems, there are children with emotional problems, and these things take a lot of time.

Excerpt 8. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

This year, many of the children who came to us, both Arabic speakers and Hebrew speakers, studied in bilingual frameworks or in a Jewish kindergarten, especially the Arab children. So, this really brings the Jewish and Arab children very, very close together.

Excerpt 9. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

It is hard for the boys [to create intercultural interactions]. For the girls, not so much. Not for all of them.

In addition, they were aware of the cultural differences between the Jewish and Arab children with respect to adults and acceptance of authority (Excerpts 10 and 11), and regarding boundaries, discipline and order (Excerpt 12).

Excerpt 10. (Dina, L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher)

Arab children address me as "mualema" [teacher]. The Jewish children address me as: "Dinahhhh!" They don't call me "teacher" or anything else. "Dinahhhh! Come here now!"

Excerpt 11. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

An [Arab] child would not come to me and say: "You cannot decide for me." Among the Arab children, there is less impudence.

Excerpt 12. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

For the Arab children, discipline is a clearer concept, displayed more, as well as respect, and, I would say, a little order. Because we raise children to be organized, with better organization, with respect for adults. For instance, food or appearance. Children are always neat and tidy, the food is always presented in an orderly way; with Jews, it's less orderly.

Moreover, the teachers reflected on differences between the groups regarding how they made requests and expressed their feelings (Excerpt 13) and addressed the differences between the Arabs and the Jews in their manner of play (Excerpt 14).

Excerpt 13. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

The Jewish children come and say everything. With a sort of confidence. They know what they need. They know what they want. They know what to ask for. Among Arab children, shyness is also a matter of honor. Do not talk about your feelings too much; do not express yourself. It's something cultural.

Excerpt 14. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

They play in a completely different way. With the Arab children, the play is always accompanied by a physical game, for example, running, soccer. It requires more physical activity. With the Jewish children, there is dialogue, a lot of tabletop games, assembly games, construction.

4.1.2.2. Managing the seating order

The findings show that considering the differences in the children's intercultural development, the teachers elaborated on diverse strategies to increase, in Lillian's words: "the opportunity for more interaction between the Arab and the Jewish children." For example, during the academic year, they reorganized the seating arrangements by placing the Jewish and Arab children together at the dining table or during the small-group table activities. The results of this reorganization were intriguing and not unambiguous. On one hand, mixed-seating initiated bridging between the speakers, via children who understood the instructions and translating them into the other language for children who did not, as in Situation 3.

Situation 3. Classroom table painting activity run by Dina.

Dina (L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher):	[in Hebrew] Rolla, would you like to take some paints?
Rolla (L1 Arabic-speaking girl):	[Nods her head]
Dina:	[in Hebrew] Wash your hands very, very well, and then come to Dina.
Rolla:	[Does not move and stares at Dina]
Zohar (L1 Hebrew-speaking boy):	[realizes that Rolla has not understood Dina and translates into Arabic] Wash your hands very, very well.
Rolla:	[Goes wash her hands]

On the other hand, we noticed in our observations that during a mixed seating arrangement, the children who had been separated from their friends from the same ethnic group continued to interact with them across the tables, by moving the tables closer together to facilitate communication. The children also began to eat more quickly, to reduce the amount of time in which they were separated from their friends, and then went out to the yard, where they were free to choose their activities and whom to play with. These findings were consistent with developmental psychology research, stressing the importance of belonging to the peer group. This belonging develops a sense of high self-esteem (Barkan, 2003; Wright et al., 2003). However, over time, the observations also showed initial signs of intercultural interaction in Hebrew between the Arab children, as novice Hebrew speakers and the Jewish children.

4.1.2.3. Promoting intercultural group activities

The observations showed that the teachers applied a strategy aimed at promoting intercultural integration and socialization by engaging the children in certain activities. For example, in Excerpt 15 they tried to forge a connection between the children, based on a common hobby or activity of shared interest.

Excerpt 15. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

We try to find out what two children have in common. A type of game, kind of [...] it can be anything; either a hobby, or a child who has not really found his niche and this is also an opportunity to find him or her a friend. Whether through a game, a joint activity, a task; when it happens, it keeps going, it keeps happening. Meanwhile, the goal is to connect them more, to get them to play with each other more, to enjoy each other's company.

As found in the developmental research, at the age of 5 or 6, children understand the rules of play, adhere to them, and even explain them to others (Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000). As shown in Situation 4, during language acquisition, the children made rules that enabled learning and understanding both languages. In

Situation 4, the teachers' efforts to encourage L2 use was supported by Ahmed, the simultaneous bilingual child, who through his clear claim about language choice, searched to establish classroom language policy concerning languages' use.

Situation 4. Circle time (teachers worked as a team to promote the use of the Arabic language by the L1 Hebrew-speaking children)

Ahmed, (Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking boy):	[in Hebrew] Arabic speakers will say it in Hebrew and Hebrew speakers will say it in Arabic.

In addition, it has been found that shared interests and play activities create an opportunity for interpersonal communication and accumulation of new social and, in our case, intercultural experiences (Ding & Littleton, 2005). This leads to openness to a novel language through a social partnership. In other words, listening to the otherness leads to an interest in learning the language because it brings a social reward, as in Situation 5.

Situation 5. Circle time (the language instruction topic was Israeli flora; teachers discuss protected flowers in Israel with the children)

Abed (L1 Arabic-speaking boy):	[in Arabic] These are protected flowers. We are not allowed to pick them.
Lillian (L1 Arabic-speaking teacher):	[in Arabic] Excellent, Abed, say that again.
Dina (L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher):	[in Hebrew] Abed, I didn't understand everything, can you maybe tell me a little in Hebrew?
Abed:	[in Hebrew] The flowers, the flowers that we're not allowed to pick.
Dina:	[in Hebrew] Oh, thank you! I thought I understood, but now I understand much better. Did you [all] hear?
Jewish children:	[in Hebrew] We're not allowed to pick them!

Notably, the findings of our study are inconsistent with Bernstein's (2016) data regarding misunderstandings or erroneous interpretations in intercultural interactions, which may be an outcome of either political or social power relations. This is apparently due to the uniqueness of the present study population, in which majority–minority relations differ from in the external reality. Even though the kindergarten is in Israel, where Arabs are a minority, within the kindergarten, the Arab children are the majority, and both these facts are clear to the participants. Thus, the study findings support those of Bernstein's (2016) research, which claim that all participants in the sociocultural interaction are required to make an effort to bring the sides closer together and to prevent misunderstandings.

Hence, the findings point to the existence of three main actors, who interact in the intercultural process in this bilingual preschool: teachers as representatives of the educational environment and two groups of children as representatives of two ethnic groups in society. Keeping in mind the sociocultural and linguistic distance between these ethnic groups, through their agentic behavior, the teachers encouraged the intercultural interactions between the children by applying diverse and creative strategies. Within the field of social theory, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) defined agency as "the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). This implies that agency occurs within a social framework (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015). Biesta et al. (2015) argue that people's agentic behavior needs to be linked to a particular situation and that agency is achieved in a particular ecology (Biesta et al., 2015). Our study revealed that the teachers' observable partnership and a keen interest in each other's language and culture created an ecological condition for shared thinking and promotion of the children's intercultural interactions.

4.2. Acculturation strategies of the L2 experts

As mentioned above, the presence of the L2 experts in the classroom indicated the formation of two groups based on the children's bilingual competence; namely, the L2 experts' group, comprising 11 bilingual L1 Arabic-speaking children, and the novice group, comprising 18 children without prior L2 knowledge. We found that some of the L2 experts not only positioned themselves as competent bilinguals but also as

teachers, who were willing to assume the role of L2 teachers, mediators and interpreters, and as a result, became leaders in the classroom (Excerpts 16, 17, and 18).

Excerpt 16. (Dina, L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher)

Ahmad took on the role of a teacher, a leader. This kid is a real leader, I would say. He always has to have the last word. We always have to listen to him.

Excerpt 17. (Nur, L1 Arabic-speaking and L2 expert girl)

I taught Lynn to sing the song [Shana Tova – Happy New Year] in Arabic, and she sang… After Lynn, I taught Amira Hebrew.

Excerpt 18. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

These children are mediating. They are very helpful because they manage to speak both Arabic and Hebrew, telling some children what he (she) is saying and telling others what he (she) means… Ahmad helps in the sessions when I speak, and he translates. He helps children. He connects them all together. This is amazing. He is amazing.

These findings are consistent with the descriptions of the experts' social role in the research on the "others," emphasizing the importance of the experts as leading classroom mediators, their readiness to help peers, as well as the model they provide for other children (Langman, Hansen-Thomas, & Bayley 2005; Nehm & Ridgway, 2011). In this study, Lillian recognized that the experts' modeling presented bilingualism as a social advantage and helped the teachers to encourage the novices to use L2 (Excerpt 19).

Excerpt 19. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

Children who speak both languages demonstrate this to the [other] children. This is modeling. And that sparks the other children's motivation to speak the language as well. I say this because the place where this [modeling] really helps . . . This really triggers the other children's interest in the language.

Indeed, the novice L2 learners asked the experts for help, both in terms of negotiating meanings in L2 and improving their social competence, as shown in Excerpts 20 and 21.

Excerpt 20. (Abed, L1 Arabic-speaking expert boy)

Once, Joseph [the novice L2 learner] did not know how to speak Hebrew, so I taught him.

Excerpt 21. (Mary, L1 Arabic-speaking expert girl)

Once they [the novice L2 learners] asked me how they say, for example, if someone is playing on the swing and Somia [L1 Arabic speaking novice girl] is counting for him, and Dina [L1 Hebrew speaking teacher] comes and calls her, so I tell Somia how to say [in Hebrew] "I'm sorry" or "I want to stay longer."

Regarding unstable social contacts between the children of the two ethnic groups compared to the relatively stable social contacts inside the groups, our findings show that, in general, the experts were more open to new social experiences (Excerpt 22).

Excerpt 22. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

Nur [L1 Arabic-speaking expert girl] has an excellent knowledge of Hebrew and she did not go to a Jewish kindergarten. She learned from the television. And she does a great job, this girl. She plays as if it's something normal, as if she's always done it. She plays with both the Jewish and the Arab children and connects them, and they plan and construct. Amazing to see it! Really!

At the same time, despite some experts' declarations that they were friends with all children, their reflections on relationships with the second ethnic group showed some ambiguity. Thus, in parallel to their openness to initiating intergroup communication, such as playing together, all experts except one (Situation 6) reported, in their interviews, facing challenges in developing friendships with the members of the other ethnic group.

Situation 6. (Interview)

Interviewer:	[in Arabic] Do you have friends who speak Hebrew?
Malek (L1 Arabic-speaking expert boy):	[in Arabic] No.
Interviewer:	[in Arabic] So, you speak Hebrew to Ofra, Hila and Lynn, but they are not your friends?
Malek:	[in Arabic] Yes.
Interviewer:	[in Arabic] I understand; why are they not your friends?
Malek:	[in Arabic] They do not always play with me.

4.3. Acculturation strategies of the novice L2 learners

Our observations showed that, like the L2 experts, the novice children had stable relationships within their ethnic group of belonging. In Excerpt 23, Lillian reflected on these social preferences.

Excerpt 23. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

They are a group of boys [the Hebrew speaking group], who came together. They do not wish to accept others into the group; they are occupied among themselves.

Similar to what was presented above about the L2 experts, novice L2 speakers reported having a preference for friendships with the children from their own ethnic group (Situation 7).

Situation 7. (Interview)

Interviewer:	[in Arabic] Do you have friends who speak Hebrew?
Rula (L1 Arabic-speaking girl, novice Hebrew learner):	[in Arabic] No, I have none.
Interviewer:	[in Arabic] Who are your friends in the preschool?
Rula:	[in Arabic] Nur.
Interviewer:	[in Arabic] Does Nur not speak Hebrew?
Rula	[in Arabic] She does, but she is an Arab.

These similarities in the acculturation patterns between the novice L2 learners and the L2 experts might be attributed to the fact that, along with the relatively high level of competence in spoken L2 Hebrew, and even, in some cases, a higher level of social sensitivity, the tendency to build friendships with group members was very strong. At the same time, the study shows that relative competence in a new language of the "other" was a condition for readiness to become flexible and to go beyond their ethnic identity to establish new social relationships. This tendency is reflected in Situation 8 from our classroom observation and its interpretation in Excerpt 24 from the interview with Dina.

Situation 8. (Class observation)

Dina (L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher):	Maybe Khaled [L1 Arabic-speaking boy] would like to tell us what he did during the weekend?
Khaled (L1 Arabic-speaking boy):	[in Hebrew] I visited Hanna [L1 Hebrew-speaking girl].

Excerpt 24. (Dina, L1 Hebrew-speaking teacher)

Now it starts happening [the intercultural communication]. There is our mediation here as educators in order for it to happen. I mean, we have a role here, and once you are persistent, it happens. And both Khaled and Hanna are very strong in both languages.

In addition, as addressed in Excerpt 25 from the interview with Lillian, a gradual progress in L2 learning results in intercultural influences, such as expanding the Arab children's ability for self-expression, which shapes their personality.

Excerpt 25. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

They [the L1 Arabic-speaking children] are also beginning to learn how to express [emotions]. Learning new cultural patterns. I think they [the parents] want their children to get there. Not to the level of impudence, but they are very pleased that the children are working on themselves and are gaining self-confidence.

The children's intact socialization was created by the sociocultural context of bilingualism and by the integration of the appropriate language. In the bilingual kindergarten, building socialization was based on the children's sociocultural attempts as a result of their interpersonal communication and interaction with the teachers and the environment. Both of these together led to the children's learning or to changes for their adjustment in kindergarten. An outcome of this process was that the children began to form their personal identities, which were maintained through negotiation in social situations or through their internalized social roles (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

Notably, this pattern of data reinforces the previous findings indicating a link between L2 acquisition and emotional, cultural and social changes in the learner (Barkhuizen, 2008; Feger, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2011). According to the literature, these changes are a result of the integrated and sometimes conflicting activity of different gender, ethnic, cultural and social identities during the learner's interactions with the target language speakers.

The current study showed that the L2 experts' knowledge of both languages, in addition to social mediation, enhanced their self-confidence and their social and cultural identity. However, due to their fixed ethnic and gender identity, they did not change their main modes of play, which would have significantly undermined their sense of belonging to their own cultural group. Thus, our observations provided evidence that the expert girls were more open than the expert boys to new intercultural social experiences, whereas the expert boys preferred to play mostly with members of their own ethnic group.

4.3.1. Changes in the novices' acculturation patterns

Interestingly, the novice L2 learners gradually expanded their cultural and social boundaries. These changes were reflected in their spontaneous use of L2 with the teachers and the peers and in their initiative of interaction with the peers in free play and mealtime contexts. These facts were observed by the researchers and were reported in the teachers' interviews (Excerpt 26) after three months of intensive exposure to their novel language.

Excerpt 26. (Lillian, L1 Arabic-speaking teacher)

There is a breakthrough. They [the novice L2 learners] remember more words and they repeat the words. Words are not sentences. No sentences yet, but you see that these children have gone through a process of language learning ... I think they got together more, got to know each other, learned how to play with each other more, and I think we contributed to it too… I see more interaction in free activities. In the yard, in the corners. In the household corner, with toy blocks, during meals. Many children connect during meals. Talking about all sorts of things.

Thus, we found a reciprocal and circular connection between L2 learning and changes in the learner's identity. In other words, the more the learners enriched their identity, the greater was their command of L2, and vice versa (Clarke, 2008; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the ways in which children become acquainted with a novel culture. We sought to expand our understanding of the process of the intercultural encounter between young children from two different ethnic backgrounds, Jewish and Arab, who attended the bilingual preschool in order to be educated together and to create the CoP (Wenger, 2006). This case was particularly fascinating because this preschool was intended to create a micro model of coexistence between the two ethnic groups, who experience tension within the wider macro context of Israel.

Our data show that the process of L2 acquisition might play a catalytic role in activating a social mechanism for intercultural interaction and comprising community (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). The main findings from the interviews and longitudinal classroom observations point to the combined activation of the

personal, cultural and social forces in shaping the children's interactions in the bilingual preschool. Like studies in which Berry (2003, 2005) examined the relationship between the ethnic minority and majority groups, this study showed that, even among 5-year-olds, the ongoing intercultural encounter was a longitudinal process aimed to achieve acculturation or a cultural and psychological change. The findings also supported a theoretical claim by Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Robinson (2007) that, among young children who undergo their natural multidimensional development in parallel with the intercultural encounter, a variety of factors influence their mode and degree of acculturation. These factors can be defined as ecological (immediate environment, socioeconomic situation, ideology, and culture of the society), supportive (teachers' encouragement of acculturation in the educational environment) and developmental (specific cognitive, emotional, and social development changes during the intercultural encounter) (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Robinson, 2007).

In addition, we found that the interactional patterns between L2 experts and novices are consistent with the claim by Lave and Wenger (1991) about the role of experts in the learning of less experienced members through interaction in the CoP and with what was shown in previous research of older language mediators (Angelova, Gunawardena, & Volk 2006; Kopke & Nespoulous, 2006; Langman, Hansen-Thomas, & Bayley, 2005). Moreover, the findings showed that the ability to move from one language to another means the ability to change social identities and thus to achieve high social status (Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani, & Martin, 2006).

The special status of "mediators," "helpers," and "teachers," which the L2 experts obtained, created a situation in which bilingual knowledge becomes worthwhile and promoted. It is noteworthy that the innovation of our findings lies in identifying similarities as well as differences in the way in which the L2 experts and their L2 novice peers developed their intercultural interactions. More specifically, it appeared that despite the differences observed in the patterns of social adaptation to the bilingual preschool between the expert and the novice L2 learners, all children showed developmental intercultural changes (Robinson, 2007). These changes were identified in the three main developmental areas: cognitive and language development (development of different modes of thinking, progress in L1 and L2 acquisition), social development (emergence of interactions within and outside their sociocultural group of belonging) and emotional development (expressing empathy and caring for others). These developmental changes shaped the children's acculturation strategies (Berry, 2003, 2005) during the intercultural encounters. At the initial stage, the L2 experts chose the integration strategy, initiating intercultural relations while preserving the original culture, whereas the novice L2 learners maintained their original culture and avoided intercultural interaction. However, despite the initial differences, later on, both the L2 experts and the novice L2 learners showed a common trend toward intercultural integration. In light of these findings, we can conclude that a bilingual preschool experience might reduce the interpersonal, linguistic and cultural distance between the Jewish and Arab children when mutual accommodation is encouraged by the educational-social environment, i.e., the preschool teachers.

The study also highlighted that while acquiring a novel culture and language, the children's sense of belonging to the ethnic group was strengthened. Moreover, both ethnic groups showed a tendency toward membership categorization. In this case, Sacks's idea (Sacks, 1972) of social classification is especially relevant to the analysis of these intergroup interactions. According to Sacks, the tools of social classification (resources and strategies) allow people to define their affiliation groups. Moreover, as in the case of our study, membership categorization seems to consolidate the children's cultural identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

6. Conclusions and implications for practice

The observed process of intercultural interaction was influenced considerably by the teachers, who served as personal models of fruitful intercultural communication as well as of coexistence between the two ethnic groups. Concerning the L2 early learning process, Nikolov (1999) found that the teachers' own motivation has an impact on the children's motivation. Indeed, our highly motivated teachers played a key role in initiating, developing and maintaining the children's enthusiasm for intercultural interaction through an endless reflective process and implication of diverse and creative strategies. Their reflections and observed behavioral patterns could be defined as an expression of their agency enactment, which included teachers' beliefs, professional and personal experience and identity.

Within a wider international framework, the observed emergent process of the intercultural interactions during the first year in the Arabic–Hebrew-speaking bilingual classroom, as well as the teachers' reflections on it, could provide a model for bilingual educators who are working in dual language education, to promote encounters and interaction between two ethnic groups of children. Moreover, the examples and their analysis might help policy makers and educators in ethnic majority–minority contexts to view themselves as part of a community of reciprocal learning and repair.

Finally, we need to address some limitations of our study. First, we were limited in obtaining a representative sample in our ethnographic study (Nurani, 2008), and hence, our conclusions can be defined as preliminary. In addition, we need to address the fact that the children in our study were not starting their bilingual education from the same point. Among 29 children in the class, 22 had either no L2 knowledge or very low L2 competence, six had entered the preschool with a relatively high level of spoken L2 competence, and one boy was from an ethnically mixed family, in which the mother was an L1 Hebrew speaker and the father was an L1 Arabic speaker. On one hand, this diversity of linguistic histories created a unique case of enquiry. On the other hand, due to this uniqueness, we must be cautious when generalizing our findings. This notwithstanding, we hope that this study will be a springboard for a multidisciplinary examination of the intercultural and social interactions between preschool children from majority and minority groups. This examination also has implications for the social relations between the ethnic groups, who sometimes live with tension and with limited social contact, but who are seeking a model of coexistence in their lives.

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