

Perceived Proficiency in a Second Language and Immigrant Integration: Evidence From Naples, Southern Italy

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Abstract

This study examines the determinants of perceived second language proficiency among immigrants, focusing on Italian-language proficiency in the urban context of Naples, Southern Italy. While migrant integration has been widely investigated, the linguistic dimension remains comparatively underexplored, particularly with regard to the interaction between structural conditions and identity-related factors. The analysis is based on original survey data collected from people of foreign origin living in Naples belonging to different national groups. A composite index of perceived Italian-language proficiency is constructed from self-assessed skills (understanding, speaking, reading, and writing) using a principal component approach. The determinants of perceived language proficiency are examined through weighted multiple linear regression models including demographic characteristics, migration trajectories, social networks, socio-economic integration, and ethnic identity profiles. The results show that proficiency is positively associated with earlier age at arrival, longer duration of residence (with diminishing returns), and higher educational attainment. Exposure-related factors, particularly the composition of friendship networks, are also strongly associated with language outcomes. Socio-economic integration emerges as a significant predictor, while identity profiles display differentiated effects, with an integrated profile associated with higher proficiency. Overall, the findings indicate that perceived language acquisition is shaped by the combined influence of demographic, socio-economic, and relational factors.

Keywords: Perceived second language proficiency, Migration, Linguistic integration, Identity, Social networks, Socio-economic integration, Italy, Naples

1. Introduction

The presence of foreign nationals has become a structural component of Italian society. As of January 1, 2025, the number of foreign residents in Italy exceeded 5.4 million, accounting for 9.2% of the total population. This population is highly heterogeneous in terms of country of origin, socio-demographic characteristics, sectors of labor market participation, and patterns of territorial settlement, and is also markedly stratified, as it comprises at least two migratory generations (Colombo and Dalla Zuanna 2019; Strozza 2019). This presence is unevenly distributed across the national territory: it is more consolidated in the Centre-North, particularly in large metropolitan areas, and more recent and less structured in the South and the Islands (Strozza et al. 2016). In these latter areas, although they no longer function solely as transit zones but increasingly as places of stable settlement for a growing share of immigrants, more challenging conditions persist. These are linked to lower economic competitiveness, stronger territorial disparities in socio-economic development, and a generally higher level of structural fragility (Benassi and Buonomo 2025).

Overall, this is a “complex” population which, on the one hand, represents a crucial resource for the country’s demographic and economic sustainability, while on the other hand is often perceived with concern, frequently fueled by narratives that are at best ambiguous and at times overtly distorted. Within this context, one of the key issues is the integration of foreign nationals into their various contexts of settlement - a particularly salient topic in Italy due to

its significant political, as well as socio-economic, implications. A substantial body of literature has addressed the integration of immigrants in Italy, both at the national (Bonifazi et al. 2012; Fokkema and De Haas 2015; Panichella et al. 2021) and sub national levels (Pane and Strozza 2000; Berti and Valzania 2011; de Filippo and Strozza 2015; Buonomo et al. 2025). However, within this rich scientific framework, the linguistic dimension of migrants remains only partially explored, especially in reference to specific ethnic groups (Macchetti and Rocca 2017; Bianco et al. 2019; Ghio et al. 2023; Buonomo et al. 2025a; Di Salvo 2025a). This is also due to the difficulty of accessing appropriate data: language proficiency is a crucial factor in fostering inclusive processes—extending beyond economic integration to encompass social and relational dimensions—and requires specific information, often subjective in nature, that is typically obtainable only through ad hoc sample surveys (Buonomo et al. 2025a).

This study contributes to the literature by addressing an important gap: the determinants of language acquisition among immigrants. It draws on original survey data from foreign residents in Naples—the largest urban area in Southern Italy, the third largest municipality in the country, and a major hub for international migration (Benassi et al. 2025; Vitale et al. 2026). The empirical analysis focuses on selected groups defined by country of citizenship at birth: Ukraine, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Senegal.

Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates insights from migration economics and linguistics, the study examines the factors influencing the acquisition of the Italian language. In line with the economic model of language acquisition, particular attention is paid to the role of demographic characteristics (age at arrival, years since migration, gender, level of education), exposure to the target language, and broader socio-economic conditions. At the same time, the analysis incorporates relational and identity-related dimensions, which have been shown in the literature to shape both language practices and opportunities for interaction. Within this framework, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do demographic characteristics, exposure to the Italian language, and socio-economic conditions explain variation in migrants' perceived language proficiency?

RQ2. To what extent do identity-related factors condition and interact with the other determinants, producing differential effects across migrant groups?

To address the research questions and make use of the available sample data, a quantitative analysis is proposed based on the construction of a composite index of perceived Italian-language proficiency. This index, developed using a well-established statistical approach based on the responses provided by the foreign respondents, is first analyzed in terms of its distribution with respect to selected variables. Subsequently, its determinants are examined through a weighted multiple linear regression model, in which the index is related to a set of explanatory variables related to demographic characteristics, migration trajectories, social networks, socio-economic integration, and ethnic identity profiles.

The results obtained make it possible to provide well-argued, precise, and evidence-based answers to the two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). They also represent an initial contribution to a field of study that is still in its early stages but has the potential for further

development, also through studies of this kind.

This study also contributes to the growing body of research on heritage languages in Italy, which has increasingly emphasized the role of family practices, intergenerational transmission, and identity in shaping migrants' linguistic repertoires (e.g., Marcelo Guardado 2010; Abdelsayed & Bellinzona 2024). While this literature has primarily focused on the maintenance and development of migrants' first languages within domestic and community contexts, less attention has been devoted to how these processes interact with the acquisition of Italian as a second language. In particular, the relationship between heritage language maintenance and host-country language acquisition remains underexplored in the Italian context, especially from a quantitative and comparative perspective. By focusing on the determinants of perceived Italian-language proficiency across different migrant groups, this study complements existing research by examining how structural, relational, and identity-related factors shape second language acquisition in a context where heritage language practices are also likely to play a significant role. In doing so, it adopts a broader perspective on migrants' linguistic repertoires, viewing second language acquisition and heritage language maintenance as interconnected dimensions of multilingual development.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a review of the literature; Section 3 describes the territorial context in which the survey was conducted; Section 4 outlines the data and methods of analysis; Section 5 presents the results; finally, Section 6 offers the concluding discussion and some final remarks.

2. Literature Review

Understanding second language acquisition (SLA) in migration contexts requires an explicitly interdisciplinary framework that integrates insights from SLA, sociolinguistics, and migration economics. While early SLA models prioritised cognitive mechanisms, subsequent scholarship—particularly within post-structuralist traditions (e.g., Pavlenko 2002)—has demonstrated that language acquisition is embedded in broader social, economic, and relational contexts. Accordingly, language learning cannot be adequately explained without accounting for the structural conditions and social practices that shape migrants' opportunities for interaction.

This shift marks a departure from socio-psychological and acculturation-based models (e.g., Schumann 1986; Giles et al. 1977), aligning instead with the “third wave” of sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012), which foregrounds identity construction and the situated use of linguistic resources. Within this perspective, variability in language acquisition reflects not only differences in exposure but also unequal access to, and participation in, socially meaningful interactions (Tarone 2007; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000). In parallel, Norton's framework (1995; Darwin and Norton 2015) conceptualises language learning as shaped by investment and access to social and cultural capital, thereby linking linguistic outcomes to migrants' social positioning and to the symbolic value of languages (Rampton 2017). Taken together, these approaches converge on a common premise: language acquisition is a socially embedded and stratified process.

Despite these theoretical advances, the empirical literature remains fragmented and unevenly cumulative. A substantial body of work identifies extra-linguistic factors shaping language use and transmission, yet it is predominantly based on in-depth analyses of specific groups. While analytically rich, this strand limits comparability and does not allow for systematic evaluation of how determinants vary across migrant populations. Macro-sociolinguistic approaches offer a more generalisable alternative by modelling the interaction between individual characteristics and broader demographic and institutional contexts. Building on Fishman's formulation ("who speaks what language to whom and when"), this perspective highlights the role of social networks, community structures, and institutional environments in shaping linguistic outcomes.

A complementary perspective is provided by migration economics, where language acquisition is modelled as a function of economic incentives, learning efficiency, and exposure to the destination language (Chiswick and Miller 1994, 1998, 2001). Empirical evidence shows that linguistic outcomes are shaped by the joint effect of individual and contextual factors, although linguistic dimensions are often incorporated only indirectly. At the same time, sociolinguistic research demonstrates that structural conditions do not operate uniformly: their effects are mediated by identity-related processes. In particular, identity configurations can moderate the impact of contextual constraints, implying that the relationship between exposure and language proficiency is conditional rather than additive.

In the Italian context, however, large-scale explanatory studies remain scarce. Existing research is divided between socio-demographic analyses and micro-sociolinguistic studies, often focusing on single groups and small, non-comparable samples. Although these studies identify relevant determinants—such as age at arrival, length of residence, and social networks—they rarely provide a systematic assessment of their relative importance or enable cross-group comparison. Moreover, linguistically oriented research has predominantly relied on descriptive approaches, with limited use of inferential modelling capable of capturing the combined effects of structural, relational, and identity-related factors.

Against this background, three gaps can be identified. First, there is a lack of studies that explicitly model the role of extra-linguistic factors—such as demographic characteristics, exposure, and socio-economic conditions—in shaping migrants' Italian language proficiency. Second, the interaction between these structural determinants and identity-related dimensions remains largely unexamined. Third, the joint and potentially non-additive effects of these factors are still poorly understood, particularly in Southern Italy.

This article addresses these limitations by proposing an integrated analytical framework that moves beyond additive models and explicitly captures the interplay between structural conditions, social relations, and identity processes. In doing so, it contributes to the literature by providing a more systematic and empirically grounded account of language acquisition outcomes across different migrant groups.

This article makes three specific contributions to the literature. First, it provides a systematic and comparative assessment of the role of extra-linguistic factors—such as demographic characteristics, exposure to the destination language, and socio-economic conditions—in

shaping migrants' Italian language proficiency, building on and extending existing approaches in migration economics (Chiswick and Miller 1994, 1998, 2001). Second, it explicitly incorporates relational and identity-related dimensions, drawing on sociolinguistic perspectives (e.g., Eckert 2012; Norton 1995; Darvin and Norton 2015; Rampton 2017), and examines how these factors interact with structural determinants rather than treating them as separate influences. Third, it advances an integrated analytical framework that moves beyond additive models by capturing the interplay between structural conditions, social relations, and identity processes, thereby addressing limitations identified in previous research (e.g., Pavlenko 2002; Tarone 2007; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000) and providing a more comprehensive account of variation in language acquisition across different migrant groups.

3. The Territorial Context

The empirical application proposed in this study focuses on immigrants of selected foreign nationalities residing in the municipality of Naples, the regional capital of Campania (Figure 1). Naples is the largest municipality in Southern and Insular Italy in terms of population (nearly 910,000 inhabitants at the start of 2024) and the third most populous city in the country.

Foreign settlement in Naples is a relatively recent but now consolidated phenomenon. While the city was long viewed mainly as a place of arrival or transit, foreign residents increased from fewer than 10,000 in the early 2000s to about 60,000 in 2025, equal to 6.6% of the resident population (Figure 2). Although this represents only 1.1% of foreign residents in Italy, Naples accounts for 22% of those living in Campania.

The foreign population in Naples also differs markedly by origin. Unlike the national pattern, where Romanians, Albanians, Moroccans, Chinese and Ukrainians are the largest groups, Naples is characterized by a strong Sri Lankan presence: over 15,000 residents, or one quarter of the city's foreign population. They are followed by Ukrainians, Chinese, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (Table 1).

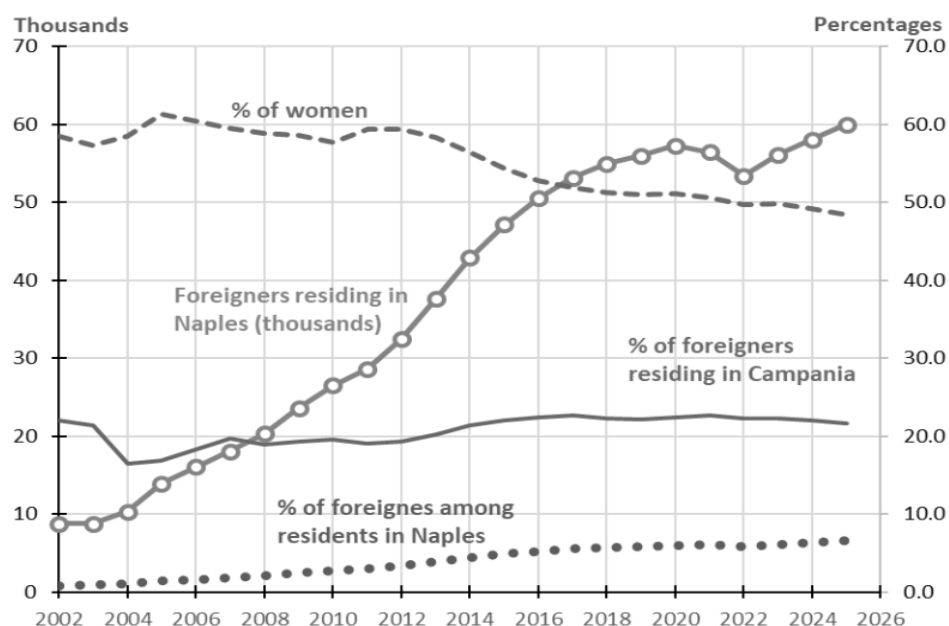


Figure 1. Foreign nationals residing in the municipality of Naples, at the start of the years 2002-2025 (absolute values in thousands and percentages)

Source: own elaborations on ISTAT data (<https://demo.istat.it/>).

Furthermore, the main national groups differ from one another in terms of the timing and reasons for migration, their demographic and social characteristics, and their behaviors—aspects that cannot be explored in depth here, except with regard to gender composition. The substantial gender balance observed among the total foreign population residing in Naples—where women have become fewer in number in recent years (Figure 2: from over 60% in the first five years of the 2000s to 48.4% at the start of 2025) compared to men—is the result of often marked imbalances within individual national groups. Among the ten largest groups, only Sri Lankans and Chinese show a substantial gender balance, while women are in the majority among Ukrainians, Filipinos, and Romanians, and men among Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Senegalese, Indians, and Nigerians.

Table 1. Top ten nationalities by number of foreign residents in the municipality of Naples, at the start of 2025 (absolute figures in thousands and percentages)

Rank	Country of citizenship	Residents (thousand)	% by citizenship	cumulative %	% of women	% of residing in Italy	Rank at Italian level
1	Sri Lanka	15.0	25.0	25.0	47.9	13.2	15
2	Ukraine	7.9	13.2	38.2	79.3	2.8	5
3	China	4.2	7.0	45.2	48.2	1.3	4
4	Pakistan	4.0	6.6	51.8	9.7	2.3	9

5	Bangladesh	2.9	4.9	56.7	12.4	1.4	6
6	Romania	2.3	3.8	60.5	57.3	0.2	1
7	Nigeria	1.7	2.8	63.3	36.9	1.3	11
8	Philippine	1.6	2.7	66.0	60.2	1.1	10
9	Senegal	1.3	2.2	68.1	17.7	1.1	13
10	India	1.1	1.8	69.9	32.0	0.6	8
	Others	18.1	30.1	100.0	51.7	0.7	
	Total	60.0	100.0		48.4	1.1	

Source: own elaborations on ISTAT data (<https://demo.istat.it/>).

In general, the prominence of Asian migration is therefore particularly evident, as is the linguistic distance between Italian and the languages spoken by many migrant groups, who in most cases do not belong to the Romance language family. Furthermore, the strong heterogeneity of the communities present—many of which have distinct migration histories and settlement trajectories—makes the issue of linguistic competence especially relevant for understanding processes of integration and language acquisition in the local context.

From an analytical perspective, this socio-demographic configuration makes Naples a particularly relevant case study for examining the determinants of migrants' language acquisition. The diversity of linguistic backgrounds, combined with differing migration histories and levels of socio-economic integration, provides a suitable context for comparing multiple migrant groups within the same local setting. For this reason, the Neapolitan case offers an opportunity to explore how external factors—such as demographic characteristics, social networks, and labour-market integration—may shape patterns of language competence and use.

4. Material and Methods

The analyses draw on data from the SCIC (Sistema Cittadino per l'Integrazione di Comunità) survey, a local sample survey carried out in Naples in 2022 by the Dedalus Social Cooperative (in collaboration with the Department of Political Science at the University of Naples Federico II) within the broader SCIC project (see Buonomo et al. 2025). The survey was designed to provide original evidence on the social conditions and integration processes of people with a migratory background in a city where locally grounded data remain limited. It focused on four major origin groups in Naples, namely Sri Lankans, Ukrainians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and Nigerians and Senegalese, with a planned allocation of 150 interviews for each group.

The SCIC survey was designed to focus on four major origin groups in Naples. Sri Lankans and Ukrainians were treated as single-origin groups because they represented the first and second largest foreign-resident communities in the city. The other two groups were

constructed as composite analytical categories: Nigerians and Senegalese were grouped as a Sub-Saharan African origin group, while Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were grouped as an Indian subcontinent origin group. This aggregation followed a methodological and sampling rationale: in total, 602 interviews were completed with adults (18 and older) whose citizenship at birth was attributable to one of the selected groups, including respondents who had subsequently acquired Italian citizenship. The survey adopted the centre sampling technique, a well-established strategy for sampling migrant populations in local settings (Blangiardo, 1996; 2004; Baio et al. 2011). To account both for differential probabilities of inclusion and for the relative demographic weight of the groups in the city, the data were weighted using two connected systems of weights; in the analyses presented here, only weighted data are used in regressions.

From this broader survey base, the analytical sample was defined by excluding respondents with missing information on ethnic identity (7 cases), those classified in the marginalised profile (8 cases), and respondents born in Italy (39 cases). The resulting final analytical sample consisted of 548 cases.

The dependent variable is a synthetic indicator of Italian-language proficiency based on four self-assessed items covering understanding, speaking, reading, and writing. Each item was measured on a five-point ordered Likert scale ranging from “not at all” to “very well”; no reverse coding was therefore required, as higher values already indicate better proficiency. The final score was derived within the restricted sample by estimating a one-factor principal-component solution and predicting the corresponding factor score. In the final analytical sample, the score is centred on zero and has unit variance, consistent with a standardised latent factor score.

The key explanatory variables were a categorical ethnic identity profile and a continuous indicator of socio-economic integration, used here as a proxy for socio-economic status. The latter captures the economic dimension of a broader multidimensional integration framework and was constructed by combining six elementary variables into four intermediate indicators (Note 1). After harmonising all response categories so that higher positions consistently reflected more favourable economic integration, category-specific empirical scores were assigned on a scale theoretically bounded between -1 and +1. These scores were calculated as the difference between the relative frequency of respondents in worse categories and that of respondents in better categories (Blangiardo et al. 2013; Blangiardo & Mirabelli 2018). The final indicator was obtained as the arithmetic mean of the four intermediate components.

The ethnic identity profile follows Berry’s bidimensional acculturation framework (1997) and distinguishes integrated respondents, who report a strong sense of belonging both to Italy and to their origin group; assimilated respondents, who report a strong identification with Italy and a weaker attachment to their origin group; separated respondents, who report a strong attachment to their origin group and a weaker identification with Italy; and marginalised respondents, who report a weak sense of belonging to both, although the latter were excluded from the analytical sample. The model by Berry (1997) was chosen for its implication on linguistic analysis. According to Esser (2006, p. 7-8), four corresponding configurations can

be identified for the linguistic dimension: limited bilingualism (or linguistic marginality), monolingual segmentation, monolingual assimilation, and competent bilingualism. These configurations mirror different combinations of integration into the host society and the ethnic group and can be interpreted as distinct outcome categories in models of language acquisition. All four represent relevant explanatory cases for theories of second language acquisition, particularly with regard to the acquisition of the host-country language. Importantly, accounting for competent bilingualism—as opposed to monolingual assimilation—requires extending the analytical framework to include not only L2 acquisition, but also the maintenance or development of the first language (L1).

The multivariable analysis was organised in three nested models, all estimated using weighted linear regression models with robust standard errors. Model 1 included country of citizenship at birth, gender, age at arrival in Italy, years since migration and its quadratic term, household type, and educational attainment. Model 2 added two indicators of socio-cultural status, namely the ethnic composition of friendship networks and frequency of attendance at places of worship. Model 3 further incorporated the ethnic identity profile and the indicator of socio-economic integration.

Descriptively, in the weighted final analytical sample, Sri Lanka represented the largest citizenship group (41.5%), followed by Ukraine (29.1%), Pakistan and Bangladesh (18.8%), and Nigeria and Senegal (10.7%). The gender distribution was nearly balanced, with men accounting for 50.6% of respondents. Household arrangements were distributed across single-person households (10.4%), couples with or without children (35.6%), transnational families (37.1%), and other arrangements (16.9%). In terms of educational attainment, 26.8% had at most a lower-secondary education, 55.4% had completed upper-secondary education, and 17.9% had attained tertiary education. Friendship networks were most characterised by a predominance of foreign friends (44.1%), followed by an equal mix of foreign and Italian friends (28.6%) and exclusively foreign friends (19.8%), whereas the shares reporting mostly Italian friends (6.4%) or only Italian friends (1.2%) were much smaller. Attendance at places of worship was low for 32.2% of respondents, moderate for 51.4%, and frequent for 16.4%. As regards ethnic identity profiles, 29.9% were classified as assimilated, 42.9% as integrated, and 27.2% as separated. Finally, the indicator of socio-economic integration remained centred around zero, consistent with its construction as a relative measure within the analytical sample, with the highest average scores among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis and the lowest among Nigerians and Senegalese.

5. Results

The multivariate analyses reported in Table 2 examine whether these compositional differences remain associated with perceived Italian-language proficiency once the full set of covariates is considered simultaneously. Taken together, the models make it possible to distinguish the independent role of migratory, socio-demographic, socio-economic, and identity-related factors, while also assessing the extent to which their associations are stable across specifications.

Table 2 shows a clear and coherent pattern across the three models. In the baseline model

(Mod. 1), perceived Italian-language proficiency is already strongly structured by demographic and migratory characteristics. Earlier arrival is associated with better perceived proficiency, whereas a longer period since migration is positively associated with the outcome, although at a diminishing rate, as indicated by the highly significant negative quadratic term. Educational attainment also displays a clear gradient: compared with respondents with lower levels of schooling, those with upper-secondary and especially tertiary education show significantly higher perceived proficiency. By contrast, differences by citizenship group are more selective: respondents from Ukraine consistently display highly significant advantages relative to the reference group, whereas the initial weak advantage observed for those from Pakistan and Bangladesh disappears once additional controls are introduced, and no statistically significant difference emerges for respondents from Nigeria and Senegal. Gender differences are also persistent, with women showing lower proficiency than men. The pattern observed for citizenship partially aligns with earlier findings by Chini (2004) and by Chini and Andorno (2018) for Northern Italy (Pavia and Turin), who identifies an implicational scale of proximity to Italian in which North African groups tend to display higher proficiency than Asian groups, followed by Latin American and Eastern European groups, with further differentiation within the latter. Although the present data do not include all the groups considered by Chini—most notably North African populations—and are therefore not directly comparable, it is nonetheless possible to identify a similar ordering across the groups included in this study. In particular, the results suggest a revised implicational scale oriented toward Italian proficiency in the Neapolitan context, in which respondents from Pakistan and Bangladesh (Asian groups) display lower relative outcomes, followed by those from Senegal and Nigeria, then Sri Lanka, and finally Ukrainian respondents, who consistently exhibit the highest perceived proficiency. Importantly, this ordering does not map neatly onto broad continental groupings, suggesting that linguistic outcomes are not reducible to region of origin alone but reflect a more complex interplay of migration histories, linguistic distance, and socio-economic and interactional conditions.

Once indicators of social exposure are introduced (Mod. 2), the explanatory structure becomes clearer. The composition of friendship networks is one of the most robust predictors in the table: compared to having only foreign friends, all other categories are positively associated with perceived Italian-language proficiency and are highly statistically significant, even after the inclusion of identity and socio-economic conditions in the fully adjusted model (Mod. 3). This suggests that exposure to mixed or predominantly Italian-speaking networks is closely linked to (perceived) Italian-language proficiency. By contrast, attendance at places of worship does not operate as a straightforward integrative resource. Moderate attendance is not statistically significant, while frequent attendance is negatively associated with proficiency and reaches moderate significance in Model 2 and high significance in Model 3.

Taken together, these findings are consistent with approaches that emphasize the role of language exposure, opportunities for interaction, and the structure of social networks in shaping second-language acquisition, not merely as facilitating conditions but as constitutive dimensions of the learning process itself (Chiswick & Miller 1994, 1998; Stevens 1992; Norton 1995; Darwin & Norton 2015). Within this framework, such factors can be explicitly

incorporated into multivariate models as proxies for language input and use, allowing researchers to estimate their independent and combined effects on linguistic outcomes while controlling demographic and socio-economic characteristics. In line with variationist and quantitatively oriented sociolinguistic research, differential access to interactional contexts translates into systematic variation that can be captured through regression-based approaches (Tarone 2007; Bayley & Preston 1996; Bayley & Escalante 2022). At the same time, these results reinforce a growing body of more qualitative research showing that extra-linguistic factors—such as patterns of social interaction, network composition, and communicative domains—can shape not only overall proficiency but also the acquisition and distribution of specific linguistic features (Sacco et al. 2020). From this perspective, not all forms of social participation provide equivalent affordances for language development: rather, their impact depends on the extent to which they enable sustained, functionally meaningful engagement with the target language.

The full model (Mod. 3) is especially important because it brings the two key analytical dimensions into view. Socio-economic integration emerges as a highly significant positive predictor of perceived Italian-language proficiency, even after controlling for several characteristics. This indicates that more favourable socio-economic level is associated with better linguistic outcomes, in line with frameworks that link language acquisition to resources, opportunities, and also returns in the host context. Moreover, the identity profile matters, but not symmetrically. Compared with the assimilated profile, the integrated profile is positively and highly significantly associated with higher perceived proficiency, whereas the separated profile does not differ significantly from the reference group. This pattern suggests that a dual sense of belonging may constitute a more advantageous configuration than an only one sense of belonging. In this respect, the results are consistent with a substantial body of work in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics that conceptualizes language acquisition as a socially situated process, shaped not only by exposure but also by motivation, investment, and patterns of social interaction. In particular, models of L2 motivation and investment highlight how learners' engagement with the target language is conditioned by their access to symbolic and material resources and by their positioning within social structures (Clément & Kruidenier 1985; Darvin 2019; Norton 1995; Darvin & Norton 2015). Moreover, also in light of Berry's acculturation model (see Section 4), integration is understood as involving both the acquisition of the host-country language and the maintenance of the first language, a pattern that has been confirmed in subsequent empirical studies on migrant and heritage populations (Guardado 2010). From this perspective, linguistic development emerges from the interplay between attitudinal factors, opportunities for interaction, and identity construction, rather than from exposure alone.

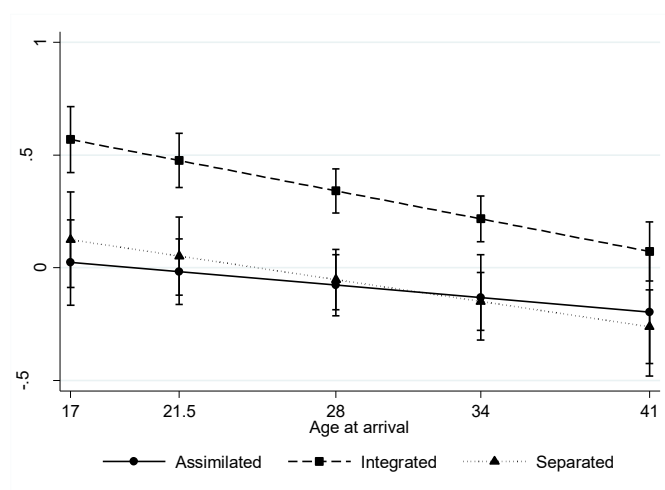
Table 2. Weighted linear regression models of Italian-language proficiency among foreign-born respondents: Naples 2022

Covariates	Mod.1		Mod.2		Mod.3	
	Coef.	p-value	Coef.	p-value	Coef.	p-value
Citizenship (Ref. Sri Lanka)						
Ukraine	0.620	***	0.739	***	0.595	***
Pakistan and Bangladesh	0.246	*	0.169		0.111	
Nigeria and Senegal	-0.099		-0.071		-0.129	
Gender (Ref. Males)						
Females	-0.217	**	-0.153	*	-0.196	**
Age at arrival	-0.025	***	-0.017	***	-0.016	***
Years since migration	0.126	***	0.111	***	0.090	***
Years since migration squared	-0.003	***	-0.003	***	-0.002	***
Household (Ref. Single)						
Couple with/without children	0.230	*	0.179		0.174	*
Transnational family	0.256	**	0.259	**	0.287	***
Other	0.455	***	0.353	***	0.397	***
Educational attainment (Ref. Lower secondary or below)						
Upper secondary diploma	0.225	**	0.228	**	0.291	***
University degree	0.361	***	0.299	***	0.307	***
Friends you spend time with (Ref. Only foreigners)						
More foreigners than Italians			0.574	***	0.361	***
Italians and foreigners equally			0.932	***	0.660	***
More Italians than foreigners			0.700	***	0.446	***
Only Italians			1.310	***	0.848	***
Frequency of attending places of worship (Ref. Little/none)						
Quite often			0.110		0.015	

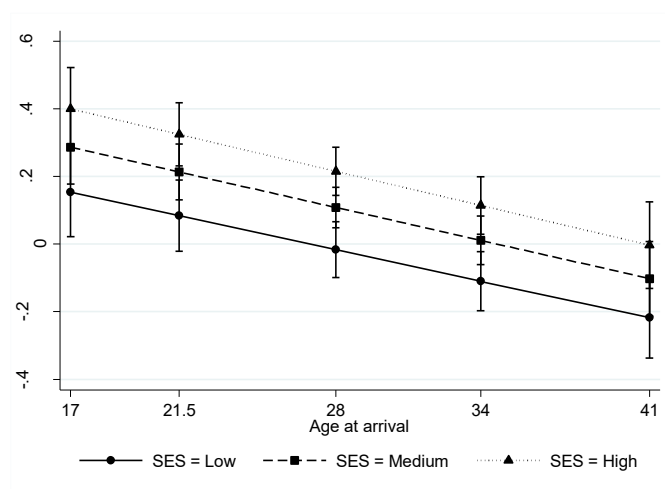
Often		-0.272 **	-0.307 ***
Ethnic identity (Ref. Assimilated)			
Integrated			0.433 ***
Separated			0.038
SES indicator ^a			0.741 ***
Constant	-0.729	-1.405	-1.207 ***
N	548	548	548
R ²	0.366	0.491	0.560

Notes: a. indicator of socio-economic integration used as a proxy for socio-economic status. Statistical significance of the relationship is marked by * if $p < 0.1$, ** if $p < 0.05$, *** if $p < 0.01$.

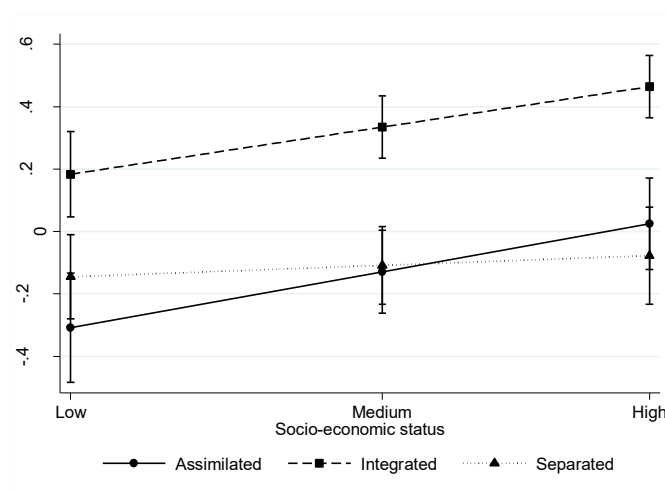
Source: our elaborations on SCIC data.



a. age at arrival and ethnic identity: Joint test of interaction: p -value = 0.382



b. socio-economic integration and age at arrival: Joint test of interaction: p-value = 0.697



c. socio-economic integration and ethnic identity: Joint test of interaction: p-value = 0.048

Figure 2. Predicted Italian-language proficiency by age at arrival, ethnic identity, and socio-economic integration: selected interaction effects

Source: our elaborations on SCIC data.

Overall, Figure 3 reinforces the central role of the two key analytical dimensions identified in the fully adjusted model, ethnic identity and socio-economic integration, while also showing that their association with perceived Italian-language proficiency is not uniform across all combinations of migration timing and identity positioning. Specifically, Figure 3.a shows that predicted Italian-language proficiency declines as age at arrival increases across all identity profiles, which is fully consistent with the highly significant negative main effect of age at arrival reported in the regression models. The integrated profile remains systematically above

the assimilated and separated profiles throughout the observed range, in line with the highly significant positive association of integrated identity in Model 3. However, the joint interaction test is not statistically significant, suggesting that identity does not substantially alter the slope of the age-at-arrival gradient. Therefore, the figure points less to a differential age-at-arrival penalty across identity groups than to a stable advantage associated with an integrated profile across the arrival-age distribution.

Figure 3.b shows a clear socio-economic gradient across the full range of age at arrival: higher socio-economic integration is associated with higher predicted language proficiency at earlier as well as later ages of arrival. This visual pattern is coherent with the highly significant positive main effect of socio-economic integration in Model 3. However, the interaction between socio-economic integration and age at arrival is not statistically significant, and the plotted lines remain broadly parallel. This indicates that socio-economic integration operates primarily as a strong additive resource rather than as a factor that meaningfully reshapes the effect of migration timing. Put differently, better socio-economic positioning is associated with better perceived linguistic outcomes across the board, but not disproportionately so for earlier or later arrivals.

Figure 3.c shows that the positive association between socio-economic integration and language proficiency is not identical across identity profiles, and in this case the formal interaction test confirms that the heterogeneity is statistically significant. More specifically, the figure suggests that the integrated profile remains consistently advantaged across the socio-economic continuum, whereas the assimilated profile appears more strongly stratified by socio-economic position. The separated profile, by contrast, displays a flatter gradient, and the corresponding interaction term indicates that the positive association between socio-economic integration and perceived language proficiency is significantly weaker for this group than for the assimilated reference category. Taken together, these patterns suggest that socio-economic resources do not translate into linguistic gains in a uniform way; rather, their returns are conditioned by identity-related positioning. This interpretation is consistent with the broader theoretical framework outlined above, which conceptualizes language acquisition as a socially embedded and dynamically mediated process rather than as the outcome of exposure or individual learning efficiency alone. From this perspective, linguistic development reflects the interaction between structural conditions—such as access to resources and opportunities for language use—and socially situated processes of positioning, network participation, and identity-based investment (Norton, 1995; Darwin & Norton, 2015; Darwin, 2019). In this sense, the effects of socio-economic resources and exposure are not uniform but are mediated by learners' social trajectories and orientations toward the target language, in line with both variationist and usage-based approaches to (perceived) second language acquisition.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on second language acquisition (SLA) in migration contexts by bridging two strands of research that have largely developed in parallel: economic approaches and linguistic perspectives. While the former has focused on

measurable determinants such as exposure, learning efficiency, and economic incentives, often through large-scale quantitative analyses (Stevens 1992; Chiswick & Miller 1994, 1998, 2001), the latter have emphasized identity, investment, and motivation at the individual level (e.g., Norton 1995). By integrating these perspectives within a common analytical framework, the study advances an understanding of SLA as both structurally conditioned and socially mediated.

The Italian context remains comparatively underexplored from a quantitative and comparative perspective (Ghio et al. 2023), and existing research is largely concentrated in Northern regions (Chini 2004; Chini and Andorno 2018). In this respect, Southern contexts such as Naples represent a critical testing ground for assessing the external validity of theoretical models developed elsewhere. By combining original survey data with a theoretically informed approach, the present study provides both a methodological and an empirical contribution.

The findings show that perceived language proficiency is shaped by a combination of demographic, socio-economic, and relational factors. Age at arrival, years since migration, and educational attainment emerge as robust predictors, while the composition of social networks stands out as a key determinant, suggesting that exposure operates not merely as input quantity but as access to meaningful interaction. At the group level, variation in proficiency is confirmed but does not fully align with previously proposed hierarchies (Chini 2004). In particular, Ukrainian respondents display consistently higher levels of perceived proficiency, pointing to the need for explanations that go beyond broad geographical classifications and consider the interaction between migration trajectories, socio-economic positioning, and possibly linguistic distance.

A central contribution concerns the role of identity. An integrated profile is associated with higher levels of perceived proficiency, whereas a separated profile does not differ significantly from the assimilated one. This finding challenges strong assimilationist assumptions and supports models that conceptualize bilingualism and dual affiliation as resources (Norton 1995). Socio-economic integration also emerges as a strong and consistent predictor; however, its effects are not uniform across identity profiles. The interaction analysis shows that the returns to socio-economic resources vary depending on individuals' positioning, indicating that language acquisition is not a linear process but one mediated by socially embedded configurations. These results support a shift from additive to interaction-based models of SLA.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Language proficiency is measured through self-assessment; the data are cross-sectional; socio-economic integration is captured through a composite proxy; and direct measures of language use are not available. Despite these constraints, the study represents a step toward a more systematic and quantitatively grounded analysis of SLA in the Italian context, particularly in Southern regions. Another limitation concerns the absence of a direct measure of linguistic or typological distance between migrants' first languages and Italian. Previous research has shown that linguistic distance may affect both the speed and the outcomes of second language acquisition, as it captures

structural similarities and differences across languages (Crystal 1987). Although the heterogeneity observed across nationality groups in this study may partly reflect such differences, linguistic distance was not explicitly operationalized in the empirical models. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating more refined measures of typological proximity, thereby allowing for a more precise assessment of its role relative to socio-demographic, relational, and identity-related factors.

With regard to the research questions, the results show that (RQ1) variation in Italian-language proficiency is largely explained by demographic characteristics, exposure, and socio-economic conditions, and that (RQ2) identity-related factors both exert an independent effect and condition the impact of structural determinants, leading to differentiated outcomes across migrant groups. Together, these findings support a model of SLA as a socially embedded process shaped by the interaction between structural conditions and identity-related orientations.

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Note

Note 1. The indicator of socio-economic integration was derived from six underlying variables: income, ownership of a bank account, housing conditions, satisfaction with housing conditions, employment status, and satisfaction with employment status. These were organised into four intermediate indicators. Income and ownership of a bank account were retained as separate components, whereas housing conditions and satisfaction with housing conditions were combined into a composite indicator of housing conditions, and employment status and satisfaction with employment status were combined into a composite indicator of employment conditions.

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