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Cross-Border Education: Students from Slovenia in Austrian Minority Schools

The article deals with increasing cross-border education, namely students from Slovenia attending upper-secondary level minority schools in Austrian Carinthia. We conducted interviews with school management and focus groups with students, who also completed a short questionnaire. Based on qualitative and quantitative data, we drew conclusions about the motives of students from Slovenia for enrolment in Slovene minority schools in Austria and about the consequences of their decision – their well-being, their knowledge and use of languages, their plans for the future – as well as in relation to their sense of Europeanness and their varying identities. Cross-border schooling turns out to be a success story. The outcome seems to be particularly favourable for the Slovene minority in Austrian Carinthia as it maintains the scope and quality of minority education, while also having the positive consequence of giving the members of the Slovene minority much greater exposure to the Slovene language, especially spoken language, with which they otherwise have less direct contact.

Keywords: cross-border education, minority education, students from Slovenia in Austria, recording the consequences, linguistic consequences.

Čezmejno izobraževanje: dijaki iz Slovenije na avstrijskih manjšinskih šolah

Članek obravnava primer vse pogostejšega čezmejnega izobraževanja, in sicer dijake iz Slovenije, ki se šolajo na višjem sekundarnem nivoju manjšinskih šol na avstrijskem Koroškem. Z vodstvi šol so bili izvedeni intervjuji, z dijaki pa fokusne skupine ter vprašalnik. Na podlagi kvalitativnih in kvantitativnih podatkov odgovorimo na vprašanja o motivih dijakov iz Slovenije za vpis na slovenske manjšinske šole v Avstriji ter o vseh posledicah njihove odločitve: njihovem počutju, znanju in rabi jezikov, njihovih načrtih za prihodnost. Konkretni kontekst čezmejnega šolstva se izkaže za zgodbo o uspehu. Se posebej se zdi razplet ugoden za slovensko manjšino na avstrijskem Koroškem, saj se na ta način ohranja obseg in kvaliteta manjšinskega šolstva, obenem pa je za pripadnike slovenske manjšine pozitivna posledica tudi veliko večja izpostavljenost slovenskemu jeziku, še posebej slovenski pogovorni različici, s katero imajo sicer manj neposrednega stika.

Ključne besede: čezmejno izobraževanje, manjšinsko šolstvo, dijaki iz Slovenije v Avstriji, evidentiranje posledic, jezikovne posledice.

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1. Introduction

Recently, the various forms of minority education (and other educational opportunities available to immigrants and new minorities) have been used by the wider community, not only by minorities and immigrants (and their descendants). Although this trend is not new, it has gained momentum following the enlargement of the EU and the accession of new countries into the Schengen area. The current situation is therefore a natural consequence of long-standing inclusive and non-discriminatory European policies and globalisation; the free movement of people, goods, and services. Although we can find some successful examples of cross-border educational projects (e.g., see European School Education Platform 2019), at primary and secondary levels of education, these are usually well thought-out endeavours of individuals. Students' and parents' motives for including speakers of majority languages in minority education programmes vary, ranging from the search for one's own roots to seizing the opportunity to increase one's cultural capital – with a view to possibly increasing economic capital through additional (linguistic) competences. Certainly, their presence in minority schools introduces a new dynamic that has both positive and negative consequences. The most obvious and far-reaching are those affecting linguistic competence and multicultural awareness.

In this article, we look at data from the only three Slovene minority schools in Austria at the upper secondary level (age 15–19) where the language of instruction is (also) Slovene. Students from Slovenia have become an important part of minority classes. The proportion varies depending on the school: the smallest number attends the Slovene Grammar School, a much higher number attends the Bilingual Commercial College, and the largest number is enrolled at the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter (cf. Zorčič 2020a;b). The impact of students from Slovenia in these schools is visible in two direct ways: (1) places are filled in Slovene minority schools that would otherwise have remained unfilled or filled by students with a poorer knowledge of Slovene; (2) with their presence, the Slovene language is also much more present in the schools, in all its variations. In particular, it makes (colloquial) Slovene, which is not a dialect of Carinthian, much more present (see also Lengar Verovnik 2023), as the majority (86 %) of students choose one of the non-Carinthian dialects of Slovene for communication with students from Slovenia, most often the standard colloquial language (Zorčič 2020a, 145). As the choice of Slovene as a means of communication becomes more frequent, the students from Austria experience an increase in their communicative competence in Slovene, as the cause-effect relationship between language use and (active) language competence (i.e., speaking and writing) is well established and is also reflected in the self-assessment of their language competence in this language (Zorčič 2020a).

The article will present the results of a study in which we answered questions about the motives of students from Slovenia for enrolment in Slovene minority

schools in Austria and about all the implications of their decision: their experiences, their knowledge and use of languages, their schooling during the pandemic, their feelings about their European and other identities, and their plans for the future (more on that in Zorčič 2023). The paper concludes with a final analysis of the cross-border educational context under discussion.

2. Methodology

The research data were collected through interviews with the management of all three schools and focus groups with students from each school. A focus group is a group of individuals with certain characteristics who generate narrative data in the context of a focused discussion (Morgan 1996). In addition to the narrative that interviews usually provide, in a focus group the interaction between individuals can lead to new, even crucial information as the breadth of responses increases, certain forgotten details can be activated, and the positive dynamics release speakers who might otherwise remain reticent. Focus groups are a particularly good way to gather information on potentially sensitive topics. The method proved to be very effective with the students, who at the end of the focus group talk compared it to a kind of psychotherapy. This is in line with Morgan's principle of focus groups being suitable for "sharing and comparing" (Morgan 1996), as the students were able to compare their perspectives and experiences in relation to their schooling in Austria. In most cases, we were able to design the size and number of the groups according to Morgan's recommendations (Morgan 1996) i.e., between 5 and 10 participants, which allows for the best conversation dynamics, and the number of groups per survey, i.e., 3 to 5. All students also completed a short questionnaire on their self-assessed language proficiency in Slovene, German and English, on their grades and performance at school, and on their family socio-economic status, which also provided us with some quantitative data.

The focus groups and the interviews with school management (I1, I2, I3) were conducted in April and May 2022. Two focus groups were conducted at the Bilingual Commercial College: the first group (FS1) consisted of four students (two boys and two girls) and the second group (FS2) consisted of nine students (eight boys and one girl). At the Slovene Grammar School, we conducted a focus group with eight students (FS3: four boys, four girls). At the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter, two focus groups were conducted: the first group (FS4) had nine girls, and the second group (FS5) had six girls and two boys. In total, 38 students (22 girls and 16 boys) took part in the study, all of whom were 18 or older, participated voluntarily, and had been selected for the study by school management on the basis of the broad categorisation of "Slovenes attending this school" (discussion below). The Office for Minority Education in Klagenfurt (Ger. *Bildungsdirektion für Kärnten, Pädagogischer Dienst, Abteilung III – Minderheitenschulwesen*) provided the replies by e-mail (I4).

This was followed by data processing and analysis, starting with data transcription and anonymisation and the indexation of the data according to subject headings, which will be discussed in the following chapters. For the statistical analysis and visualisation of the questionnaire data, we used the Orange Data Mining 3.34 data mining software (Demšar et al. 2013).

3. Minority Schools in Austria: The Legal Base for Transborder Education and Number of Enrolments from Slovenia

The survey was conducted in the only three Slovene minority secondary schools in Austria where the language of instruction is (also) Slovene. The Slovene Grammar School is historically the most important school for the Slovene minority in Austria. It was founded in 1957 on the basis of Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 to provide secondary education for young Slovenes. It is the only school where the language of instruction is exclusively Slovene. The Bilingual Commercial College in Klagenfurt was founded in 1990 as an additional secondary education option for the Slovene minority. There, Slovene and German are equal languages of instruction and are exchanged on a monthly basis. The same language regime is also applied at the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter, a private Catholic school for gastronomic and commercial professions, which is almost 125 years old.

Although originally founded to meet the needs of the Slovene ethnic community in Austria, today these schools could not survive with students from the minority base alone and therefore operate under the motto: “a school with a (supra-)regional focus” (see, for example, their online presentation (SLOGAT)). This is especially true for the public minority schools – the Bilingual Commercial College and the Slovene Grammar School – while the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter is a private institution, located closer to the Slovene border, which has always had a significant enrolment of students from Slovenia.

The historical shifts that allowed cross-border education to flourish were gradual, but the main turning point was 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the events that followed. In 1995, Austria became a member of the EU. Slovenia became a member nine years later, opening the way for closer links between border regions, towns and people, and Slovene became an official language of the EU. European legislation began to apply, allowing Slovene citizens to study in Austria.¹ In terms of cross-border education, the period in between, when Austria was already a member of the EU and Slovenia was joining it, is interesting; at that time, the Bilingual Commercial College in Klagenfurt had a quota regime limiting the number of foreign nationals enrolling (mainly from Slovenia, but also from Italy), while the Grammar School had a complete ban on

students from Slovenia.² Here, the restriction was eased with the introduction of Kugy classes (1999/2000), a special grammar school programme with a broad regional linguistic education (in Slovene, German, Italian and English). The programme was cross-border-oriented and specifically intended for students from the neighbouring regions of Carinthia, Friuli (Italy) and Slovenia, or for those exploring the neighbourhoods of these regions.³

The possibility of students from Slovenia enrolling at these schools also depends on the vacancies in the schools and dormitories. In schools with Slovene or Slovene and German as the language of instruction, students can be admitted as full-time students because they have mastered (one) language of instruction. In other schools, they would be admitted as part-time students with a special curriculum to obtain proficiency in German (I4).

The attitude towards minority schools has always been socially and politically linked to the attitude towards the Slovene minority in Austria, which has certainly been more open and positive in recent times than it was in the last century. At the same time, the regional policy is also much more economically oriented and promotes economic development (which always presupposes an increase in immigration) as well as social development, which is closely linked to economic development (e.g., the well-being and proper education of the children of immigrants). The minority schools (especially the two in Klagenfurt) have made good use of the niche that has emerged and have taken educational initiatives: they have become regional (language) schools that cover the social and economic needs of the Alps-Adria region. Enrolment of foreign nationals (especially from Slovenia) is on the rise at all the schools in question, and the number of students who enrolled because of their families moving to Austria is also rising (more on this distinction below). Table 1 shows the number of students from Slovenia enrolled in the last five school years, from which it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has not had a major impact (at least in relative terms) on enrolment at the two schools in Klagenfurt (although there have been some isolated cases; e.g., at the grammar school 5 students dropped out). However, the fact that both countries quickly took care of the status of commuters legally and formally and ensured that schools would not be closed in the future probably had an impact on the enrolment from Slovenia in the 22/23 school year not being lower compared to the previous school years (Table 1). The situation is different for enrolment at the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter, where the decline in enrolment was both nominal and relative (Table 1). The management of the school attributed this to the fact that the gastronomic industry (partly influenced by the pandemic) was experiencing a downward trend, which they believed was also reflected in the enrolment at other gastronomic schools in the region and beyond (I3).

Table 1: The number and share of students with permanent residence in Slovenia enrolled at Slovene minority schools at the upper secondary level in the last five school years

	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2018/19 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2019/20 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2020/21 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2021/22 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2022/23 school year
Slovene Grammar School (upper level)	26 (11.98 %)	31 (14.42 %)	31 (13.90 %)	30 (14.15 %)	26 (13.07 %)
Bilingual Commercial College*	121 (49 %)	117 (50 %)	110 (50 %)	108 (51 %)	107 (50 %)
College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter	110 (79.71 %)	107 (74.31 %)	106 (76.26 %)	94 (67.63 %)	76 (64.96 %)
Total	257	255	247	232	209

Source: Own data.

*The number of students with Slovene citizenship (including those whose parents work and/or live in Austria).

Data for the larger group of students who had already immigrated to Austria were not available for all schools because of the difficulty in capturing data. In Table 1, they are only included in the statistics of the Bilingual Commercial College, where the management estimated that about 20 % of those with Slovene citizenship had “some life interest (Ger. *Lebensmittelpunkt*) in working and living in Austria” (I1). The rest had a business at home and were trying to expand their activities and interests to the child, and consequently to expand in the region. “An interlacement of economic education and multilingualism, that is our quality” (I1), states the management of the Bilingual Commercial College. According to the management of the Slovene Grammar School, the group that had moved to Austria was larger at their school, around 25 %. We should keep in mind that the proportion is constantly rising, owing to the lower birth rate and the migration of Carinthian Slovenes to larger cities that lead to a decline in the number of minority members, while immigration from Slovenia is increasing.⁴ The fact is that the group of students who immigrate to Austria together with their parents is quite different from the group who live in Slovenia. For the latter, attending a school in Austria is a personal (or family) decision, and therefore – also according to school management – there is a sense of “a certain relaxedness” (I2), whereas those who have immigrated to Austria tend to be a group with less economic capital and fewer choices (similarly, Zorčič 2020a). Nevertheless, according to the Grammar School management:

Slovene students from Slovenia strengthen Slovene education in Austria. Absolutely. And we all benefit: our children, but also the teachers, benefit from the influx of these people, Slovenes, and that's why we say that a certain language education in favour of Slovene is already happening in the classroom, which is very beneficial. (I2)

The provincial government Office for Minority Education also considers cross-border education and students from Slovenia in minority schools in Austria to be “a unique opportunity in the area in which we live, because Slovene is a common language in this area” (I4).

4. Students' Motives for Enrolment

Students from Slovenia have various motives for enrolling in minority schools in Carinthia, but what unites them all is that they have reached out for an offer that is different and foreign. Roughly speaking, they can be divided into students who have a rather elaborate idea of what their goals and interests are in the (long- or short-term) future, i.e., students who have a rather elaborate identity capital (e.g., Côté & Levine 2016). The latter is the result of their personal characteristics, which are manifested in their individual search for different life alternatives or the result of strong family involvement in this identity composition (i.e., the active involvement of parents). These students choose Slovene minority schools in Austria because, among other reasons, there is good infrastructure in Klagenfurt for extracurricular intensive football coaching or studying music (the Klagenfurt Conservatory of Music), or because going to Austria is a kind of preparatory act for possible further studies abroad. Although these schools also promote themselves in Slovenia, many students decide to enrol on the basis of prior recommendations from friends, and in some cases, all the children from one family attend school abroad.

The second group of students are those whose decision to go to school in Austria was more influenced by circumstances. These are the children of parents working in Austria, who are sometimes even still in the process of moving to Austria. Thus, in the focus groups, we constantly ran into students who had already been living in Austria; they may have been living there for a very long time (e.g., 10 years), but they are still treated as Slovenes from Slovenia (and separate from the Slovene minority there), as they have come from Slovenia and do not have Austrian citizenship. For these students, the decision to go to a school where lessons are (also) taught in Slovene is even more natural, because of the desire to reduce the language barrier and help to integrate into the environment where they have followed their parents. For example:

So, I went to school in Slovenia, in Jesenice, until fifth grade, and then my family had the opportunity to come here and we said why not. This school was one of the first we heard about and it sounded ideal: a school in Austria where they teach in Slovene. (FS3_7)

Parents are also crucial when considering transport; for students who go to boarding school weekly or for those who commute across the border daily (those who live close to the border are driven across the border, e.g., to Ferlach, from where they continue by bus). In most cases, the influence of parents is very strong: they provide strong support or help their children in the decision for schooling across the border, while at the same time making it financially possible to do so. However, the students themselves are convinced that studying abroad is not for everyone: “For some people, it’s obvious that they came here because they had to and that’s it ... But if you come here when you want to, you can manage” (FS2_9). They also highlight the experience as extremely positive in further shaping their independence, which embellishes their already curious personalities. The following student summarised his motives in a way that nicely combines many of the aspects presented so far:

For me, however, three factors were crucial in deciding to go to this school: (1) I knew a couple of people who had gone to Austria to study, and somewhere in the middle of the ninth grade of primary school in Ljubljana, I decided that I would go to Austria, too, (2) but I also played football and that was one of the factors that made me come here, (3) and also the language skills attracted me a lot: to learn German and later the possible options for further education, study, sports, etc. I think more options open to you if you learn German: you can study in Germany, Switzerland, or Austria. But honestly, I thought that maybe at this school there would be a little more use of German as a language of instruction, a little more German, maybe that surprised me in the end. But I was also very attracted by the city itself, the new challenges, maybe to become a bit more independent, to learn some basic values in life, to be able to deal with myself and just go about life in a way that I am aware of. (FS3_4)

While the motives for enrolment are very similar for all the students from Slovenia, there are significant differences between schools in terms of students’ expectations of their education at the school they are enrolled in, their perceptions of their skills and their plans for the future, and as a result some students transfer between schools (particularly between the Grammar School and the Commercial College in both directions).

The students who return to Slovenia weekly and still have strong contacts and ties with friends and family in Slovenia are also exposed to constant comparisons between the Austrian and Slovene school systems, to which they also react critically. Owing to the different approaches and ways of working in the three schools in question, the students’ reactions are also different, although most of them are convinced that education in Austria is easier for them than it would be in Slovenia. The schools are more student-friendly (“I find it a bit more relaxed here ... As for the breadth of the material and the pressure itself, it is less here” (FS1_1)). Therefore, students have more time to devote to themselves – to their various hobbies and self-reflection, e.g.:

In Slovenia, grammar school is very difficult. In primary (school in Slovenia) we get a lot of background knowledge, with it I have covered my knowledge for the whole schooling here, I can say that. When you get to grammar school (in Slovenia) there is more ... not so much of content as it is of grading. I have friends (in Slovenia) who have five assessments a week, which is just too much [...]. I have to say, I noticed that here I have the possibility to grow as a student, to think by myself what I want to do, what my goals are, what I want to be, because school – not that it's too easy – but it's just normally scheduled with assessments throughout the year and somehow you have the possibility to think about yourself; it's not all at once, right away, acutely, I don't know, it seems to me that you have the possibility to find your ambitions as well. I think it's a good thing that you have the possibility to think about yourself. To see what you want to be. (FS3_5)

At the same time, they feel they have more choices for their future than they would have had if they had studied in Slovenia. In particular, there are many responses that mention the lesser amount of evaluation and more room for manoeuvre that teachers in Austria have because of the additional (in their opinion very subjective) grading for cooperation.⁵ They also conclude that education in Austria is much more practical and narrowly focused on certain areas of education. As a result, there is less general knowledge, which they consider to be more abundant in Slovenia. This last opinion, i.e., the lack of general knowledge, is one of the reasons why most students believe that it is better not to return to Slovenia to study, but to continue their studies in Austria or elsewhere. We should also mention here the lower enrolment of Slovene minority students from Austria at Slovene universities; although it should be noted that this is not the case for some faculties in specialised fields, such as medicine and pharmacy, which cannot be studied in Carinthia. The still on average lower enrolment of members of the Slovene minority from Austria in faculties in Slovenia (compared to the Slovene minority from Italy) has so far been explained mainly by the greater prestige of Austrian faculties and the students' (lack of) knowledge of the Slovene language, but perhaps we should also add to this a more pragmatic consideration of specific knowledge,⁶ which individuals apparently believe they receive in Austrian secondary schools.

As enrolment is also partly related to family financial means, we also analyse the students' self-assessment of the socio-economic class they consider their household to be in, in relation to enrolment at a particular school. It is evident from the data that enrolment in the Grammar School is more or less independent of the family's financial capacity; the choice of a grammar school is linked to a greater extent to the individual student's ability and motivation. Meanwhile, for students of vocational schools, we observe that there are slight deviations: the bilingual Commercial College enrolls students who mostly consider themselves to belong to the middle class, while the school in St. Peter enrolls more students who consider themselves to belong to the upper-middle class. According to the data obtained, one can conclude that enrolment at the commercial college is

often a pragmatic decision – primarily in search of a profession and better job opportunities in neighbouring Austria, while enrolment at the private school in St. Peter is to a great extent an exploitation of family capital for education abroad. In both cases, the aim is of course to increase cultural capital in the form of the bilingual baccalaureate, but the starting points are different, giving some more choices than others.

5. Personal Experience

Students are convinced that studying abroad is not for everyone. One has to be an independent person, open to new things and ready to deal with new situations in life, which in turn makes them more independent and ready to face life. The students acknowledge that the bilingual environment and the possibility of living in a dormitory are of great help. They point out that it is easier because the (school) environment is very Slovene and they feel less immediate stress from not knowing the national language very well. However, they point out that sometimes the experience can be very tiring and the constant adjustment to new circumstances can also be stressful. This feeling is especially strong at the beginning of school, but then – as they say – you get used to it. High levels of neuroticism from previous research reported in monolingual students of the same age and in the same circumstances (Zorčič 2019; 2020a) can therefore be interpreted as a habituated feeling, an internalised state of constant stress. Even in the highest classes, some students report that the feeling of being a stranger persists. The perception of the feeling of homeliness is very subjective and students perceive it very differently, depending on their life circumstances, personal characteristics, and on the experience of studying abroad. Some individuals feel very comfortable and (after four years) already feel at home in Austria, while others state that they never will. The feeling of acceptance is also linked to the possibility of using Slovene in public. When asked about the use of Slovene in public spaces, those who already live here answered that they strictly use German because speaking Slovene can be unpleasant (“if you speak Slovene you will be looked at badly” (FS2_2)). Students also have certain negative experiences because they are Slovenes or are labelled by the German-speaking majority because of speaking Slovene (“Inadvertently or intentionally you are definitely labelled as ... well ... they say ‘Yugoslavian’, it could be a joke or it could not (FS1_1)”. “We are Yugoslavians, aren’t we ...” (FS2_1)). Positive examples are also highlighted, and students reflect on their own experiences and behaviour and on why the Slovene language is so unexposed in public following the historical situation, and what has changed in this respect recently (“We are no longer the main threat” (FS3_7)).⁷

It should be said that these are the generations of students who have been most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the whole experience of schooling has been curtailed, both in terms of living abroad and socialising with class-

mates. There has been considerable research on the impact of the pandemic on school children and young people, revealing many of the adverse consequences of school closures. In the schools in question, a survey was carried out among teachers during the pandemic and they confirmed that the negative effects of the pandemic would be felt most acutely in bilingual schools by monolingual students, especially by students from Slovenia whose German language input was lacking (Zorčič 2020b).

In this study, we asked the students for their views on the impact of the pandemic. They highlighted the difference in perception of the stressfulness of the situation at the beginning and at the end, as well as their concerns about the (in)appropriateness of the implementation of remote education in the initial phase. Regarding the psychological effects, apart from the restriction of movement, they mainly pointed to the problem of motivation to work and learn, especially after returning to school and to in-person classes. The consequence of a longer period of remote learning, the subsequent reduction in motivation to learn, as well as the less stringent knowledge requirements at the time of return to school, will have, or in their view already has, a significant impact on knowledge. With this in mind, the students were especially afraid of the final school-leaving exam. They summarised that, just like schooling abroad, home schooling is not for everyone, as it requires a great deal of self-discipline and organisation.

A particular characteristic of the cross-border students is that some felt compelled to be vaccinated against COVID-19 because of easier border crossing or fewer expenses because of less COVID testing; individuals did not feel the situation was “fair” (FS2_9) to them. It is also necessary to highlight the fact that students were restricted from socialising at the very time in their lives when socialising with peers is most important to them (“[...] when you are growing up the most, developing the most, getting to know yourself, (at that time) society, friends are important, as much as family” (FS3_6)), and classroom bonding suffered as a result. Class cohesion is particularly important in multilingual classes in minority (or any multilingual) schools, as only good cohesion allows for genuine communication in the languages used in the school environment.

6. Language Skills

6.1 German

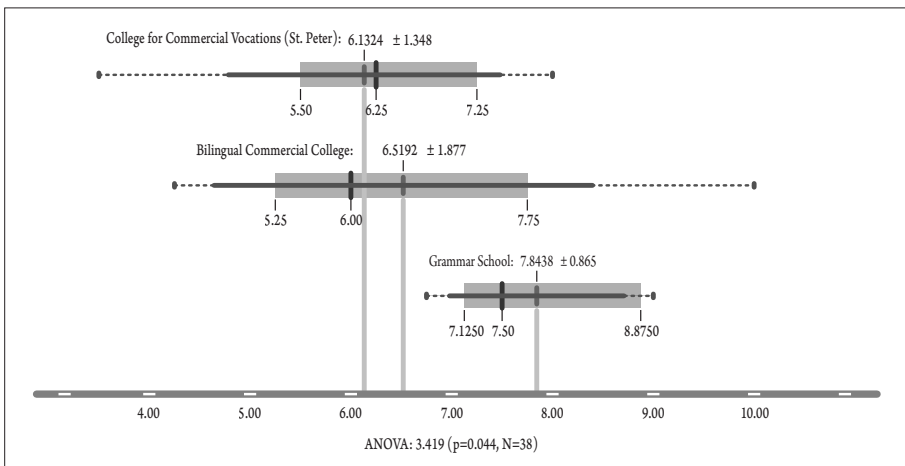
Learning foreign languages – and in particular the opportunity to learn German (more easily and quickly) in the context of schooling in Austria – was one of the important motivations for enrolment stated by students. One of the main findings among Slovene students seemed to be that most of them would have liked to have had a better knowledge of German at the end of their schooling, or (now) realise that even though they are studying in Austria, a significant additional commitment is needed to master the language. This is especially true

for the Grammar School, as Slovene is the only language of instruction and the students really have to activate themselves and find new sources of communication; preferably outside the school and the dormitory, as the possibility and temptation to use Slovene is too great in the context of minority institutions.

Yes, you have to force yourself, you have to force yourself to work and to be in touch with the language somehow. Well, if you have some sports where you have teammates from Austria, and you talk a lot, you are somehow in contact with German. But if you have nothing, you have to read a lot, listen a lot, or find someone who is Austrian and ... (FS3_2)

In the final two years, both vocational schools provide lessons in both languages; Slovene and German are exchanged on a monthly basis. However, as stated in previous research (cf. Zorčič 2019; 2020a), the focus group discussion this time also showed that these rules are not strictly followed.⁸ According to the answers, it even seems that one could go through schooling (at least until the baccalaureate) with very poor or even no knowledge of German. Especially for first-year students, it is assumed that German proficiency is not strictly necessary, but it turns out that this lack of language skills becomes a major concern in the latter years, with some students not even seeing the problem in their own poor engagement, but blaming the unpretentiousness of the teachers instead. At the College in St. Peter, the compulsory work placement (praxis) in the gastronomic industry is strongly emphasised as a turning point in the knowledge and use of German, although in conversation, individuals still do not feel confident in their competence to function in a German-speaking environment (e.g., the problem of taking a car to a workshop for repair).

Figure 1: Self-assessment of German Proficiency (10 = excellent)



Source: Own data.

The students also self-assessed their knowledge of German in a short questionnaire, which was completed by all the students in the focus groups. The results presented in Figure 1 confirm the statements made by the students in the focus groups. On average, students who attended the grammar school and who devoted a significant amount of time and commitment to learning German rated their knowledge of German the highest. Students at both vocational schools rated their German language skills as being much lower. The difference is statistically significant.

6.2 Slovene

They also talked about their first language, Slovene. The students were aware that Slovene as a language of instruction is different in Austria than it is in Slovenia. According to the students, there was “a lot of literal translation and incorrect terminology” (FS3_6), and the level of the language was “lower than if I went to school in Slovenia” (FS2). Some students were quite lenient on this issue:

Now most of the teachers are trying hard and speaking correctly, but there are also a few who only speak in the dialect they know from home. There are also some who have learnt Slovene as a foreign language, and it just shows. (FS1_4)

Others were quite critical, as they felt that no one was progressing because of the language situation: “I think, for me personally, it seems that Slovene is adapted to the Austrians in our school, and then German to us, and there is no progress for either of us ...” (FS5_4). For some of them the question of Slovene was not important at all, because they had come to school in Austria for another purpose:

It seems to me that what is more important is that if we are already in Austria, that German is their mother tongue, and then if Slovene is such that I just understand things, that's enough for me, it doesn't have to be someone who knows 100 % of both. If I am here to learn German and listen to it, I have no expectations for Slovene. (FS1_1)

The conversation became particularly heated when they talked about teachers of Slovene language (e.g., “[...] but now we are learning Slovene from someone whose Slovene is probably worse than mine, so sometimes I wondered a little bit how much sense it makes ...” (FS5_5)), and there is a noticeable difference between the two vocational schools and the grammar school. At the latter, they think a lot more about this topic, as Slovene is the only language of instruction at this school, but at the same time, the students there need a language assistant for Slovene (students from Slovenia use this person to upgrade their knowledge):

Slovene is like that: the whole class is in Slovene, but the required knowledge is very low. [...]. Once we were doing a worksheet, and since we have an assistant from Slovenia here, she brought a final exam for Slovene from a grammar school in Slovenia,

so we tried to solve it a little bit, and then the professor, who is a Slovene from Austria, said that his final exam in Slovene at the faculty in Austria had never been so difficult. That's how you see the differences. I would say this about the professors, it all depends on the individual, because they have very different backgrounds, some of them are Carinthian Slovenes, some of them are from Slovenia, where there is no 'r' at all,⁹ some of them are from abroad and they have just started with Slovene, so sometimes we correct some words ... (FS3_6)

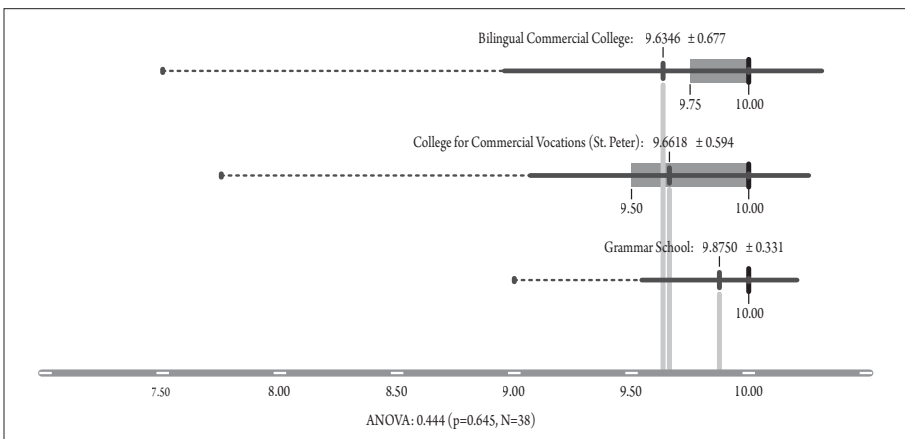
How do they react to that? Moderator (M)

Very well. They thank you. Some even ask for help. They ask if something is correct and things like that. (FS3_6)

However, the students also noticed deficiencies in their language lessons (especially a lack of spoken communication).¹⁰ It should be mentioned here that the increasing number of students with little or no knowledge of Slovene enrolled at the Slovene Grammar School (especially at the lower level), according to school management, was not the case to such an extent even ten years ago (I2). Teaching materials in Slovene also present a problem, as there are not many textbooks published in Slovene. The students mentioned a textbook for Slovene language, and Mohorjeva publishing house also publishes some textbooks for economics. Students take their own Slovene notes, translate them, or ask their Austrian classmates for help.

The students' self-assessment of their knowledge of Slovene showed a (statistically insignificant) difference between the schools, where the self-assessment of Slovene was highest among students from the grammar school, while students from both vocational schools were slightly more modest in their self-assessment of their knowledge of Slovene, but of course the scores reflect the dominance of their first language (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Self-assessment of Slovene proficiency (10 = excellent)



Source: Own data.

6.3 English and the Concept of Native Speaker

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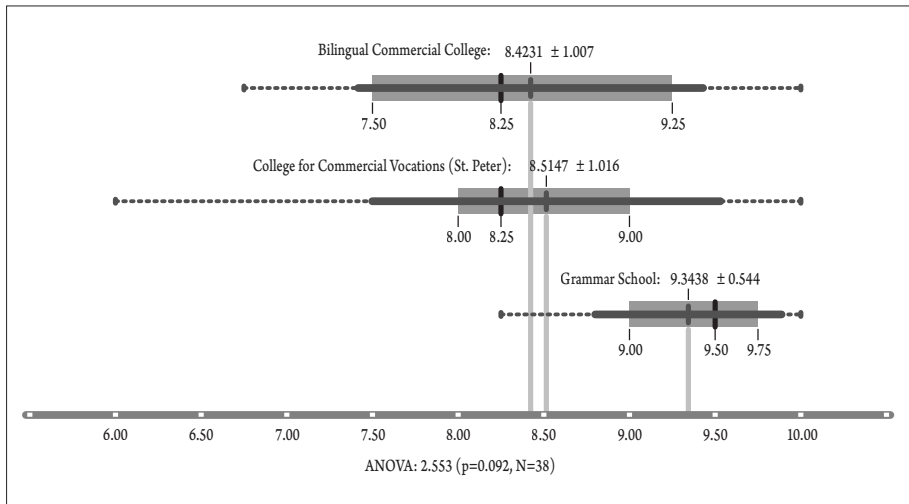
The conversation also turned to the almost mythological figure of the native speaker, which is a difficult term to define. In the focus group discussions, we used different terms that were close to the students' hearts (native, natural, speaker of the mother tongue, etc.). The topic was certainly interesting for the students and they were happy to discuss it in depth. Most of the students who participated in the focus groups did not feel themselves to be native speakers of German after four years of schooling – and this is taking into account the pandemic and the period of remote schooling. In fact, individuals admitted to speaking the language “to some extent” (FS1_2), even as native speakers: in most cases, these were individuals who were very integrated into their environment and were forced to use the language to its fullest extent (e.g., “I live with a German-speaking lady who doesn't speak Slovene, so I use the dialect with her, and then I use *Hochdeutsch* (Eng. High German) at school” (FS1_2)). In this context, the students also reflected on the extent to which knowledge of the local dialect qualifies a speaker as a native speaker:

FS1: 1: That's more or less all I know, just the dialect (laughs). 4: Yes, more of a dialect than *Hochdeutsch*. It's all like practice, you learn through conversation ... everywhere you go, only the dialect is used. M: But is knowledge of the dialect itself one of the conditions to be classified as a native ... 1: What? Native Carinthian (laughs).

There is an obvious discrepancy between how the students imagined learning German in Austria when they enrolled at school and how it turned out to be (“Yes, when I say I'm in school in Austria, people in Slovenia say, ‘Then you speak German very well’, and I think to myself, ‘Not the way you think I speak it’ (FS4_3)). Instead, a lot of commitment is required for quality language input.

The students from Slovenia were much more confident about their English than their German, although most of them were not sure that their English proficiency was equal to the proficiency they attribute to native speakers (“Working proficiency I would say. Let's say between C1 and C2” (FS1_1)). Their self-assessed English proficiency is shown in Figure 3 (the difference is indicated as statistically significant). The students were fully aware of their immersion in the English language (“We grew up with English. If I don't remember a word in Slovene, I think of it in English, a double process ...” (FS1_1)), and they also analysed the difference in their knowledge of English compared to their Austrian classmates.¹¹ In the context of language proficiency at the native speaker level, in one group, there was a debate about the linguistic competence of bilingual teachers in Slovene; in their opinion, teachers from Slovenia had a much better starting point in this case, and the statements in some cases bordered on linguistic chauvinism: “Yeah, I mean, they can never speak as nicely as a Slovene, that's logical. And even a Slovene will not be able to speak German (beautifully), even if he studies it all his life” (FS5_4).

Figure 3: Self-assessed English proficiency (10 = excellent)



Source: Own data.

7. Future Plans

Although the students have so far (more or less in practice) experienced studying abroad and have a certain advantage over peers when it comes to seeing their future path, not all of them are fully decided on their next steps. Most of them will continue their studies at university, but not all of them are sure where. Individuals who have not had a positive experience of schooling in their current environment ensure that they will not continue their education in Austria, some of them not even in another German-speaking country, as after all their time in Austria, they still do not have confidence in their German and some have even developed a dislike for the German language. Most of the students would certainly go abroad to study, but there are also a few who want to return to Slovenia. However, most would like to benefit from the (linguistic) knowledge and experience they have gained during their studies in Austria. Only the students from the bilingual commercial college are also considering immediate employment; most of them would like to work in Austria and consider this area to be important in their future life:

I think the aim of most of those who have moved here is to learn German to a level where they can get a job here. When I was looking for jobs, almost all of them say 'gute Deutschkenntnisse' (Eng. good German knowledge). That is to say, for most of us here the plan is to learn and get a job, maybe some to go on to study. Yeah, for me personally, I would like to get a job right after I finish school. (FS2_7)

8. European and Other Identities

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Given that their schooling in the neighbouring country is also largely possible because of Slovenia's inclusion in the European Union, we also talked about Europeanisation and the students' sense of belonging or their otherwise expressed European identity. The usual open-ended question of "Do you feel European?", was in most cases followed by a lively discussion on what this even means. The discussion involved generations who grew up when Slovenia was already part of the EU and therefore take most of the privileges of Slovene membership for granted:

Yes, I feel 100 % Slovene, but I don't know about European, I never think about it like that, it's all self-evident ... the only thing that means anything to me is that Slovenia is in Europe ... (FS2_9)

As expected, the students who were already discovering the benefits of being cross-border expressed high values of belonging to Europe, but many other identities also came to the fore. The heterogeneity of the group treated as Slovene students in these schools was evident. In addition to students who came from Slovenia (they still had registered residence there), there were children of Slovene immigrant parents from Slovenia (who had lived in Austria for a long time) or Slovene immigrants from elsewhere:

FS2: 2: A Slovene 70 %, a German 80–90 %, a European only 50 % M: What about an Austrian? 2: Not so much. 6: A Slovene would say 100 %, a Ukrainian would say 60–70 %, a European would say 50–40 %, somewhere in there.

We were also able to identify students who had Slovene citizenship, but their life and family paths had diverse national and identity traits:

FS3: 7: Slovene 50 %, because I was born there, but I also have Bosnian roots, Austrian not at all, European 80 %. 8: For me, Slovene about 20 %, because I like Slovenia and the language, but otherwise I am not Slovene, but I am 100 % Bosnian, and another 50 % Croatian, European 80 %.

However, the group was united on two issues: on the one hand, their knowledge of the Slovene language, and on the other, their lack of knowing the Slovene Carinthian dialect (and consequently not being part of the Slovene minority community in Austria). The permeability of this geographical area is sometimes quite incredible, and possible Austrian citizenship is (if at all) only a pragmatic assumption.¹² In the course of the conversation, trans-political issues were also raised: "I would go with the term Earthian, I have no particular attachment to anything, I don't have any particular favouritisms ..." (FS3_5) as well as various

global definitions: “it seems to me that we belong to a big community, when you go to other countries there is not so much difference, [...] because we young people are all going in roughly the same direction” (FS5_3), however, in such a lively conversation, the topic at hand also brought to light many hidden and suppressed emotions.¹³ A pervasive sense of distinction between North and South was highlighted (“Slovenia is still almost universally considered Balkan, so ... you’re not exactly considered European” (FS4_3)), and the boundary between the two was drawn each time depending on the stakeholders/speakers. In this sense, the differentiation of students by origin was also strongly emphasised at school, where, according to the students, it reflected a fear of the unknown,¹⁴ especially among teachers of the older generation. I hope and believe that many students looked at themselves in a mirror, in addition to holding one up to others, e.g.:

(I feel) 90–100 % European, for a Slovene, yes, well, it’s a bit of an identity thing for me, too, because I have Bosnian roots, but I’m third generation, born in Slovenia, and I can say without shame that I consider myself more Slovene than Bosnian. ... Although I have the feeling that for Slovenes I will always be ‘the bottom one’, ‘čefurka’ (a slur),¹⁵ but roughly speaking, yes, I would say that I consider myself 80 % Slovene, 40 % Croatian, 40–50 % Bosnian. (FS3_7)

9. Discussion

Students from Slovenia (although they are not a homogeneous group in terms of their first language or first ethnic self-definition) come to Austria not only with a better proficiency in Slovene, but also from a slightly different socio-economic background and, as far as their academic career is concerned, from a slightly different school culture, and above all, from schools where the only language of instruction had the status of the national language. Many of the students’ responses were in line with this difference and confirmed the existence of a new dynamic that these students bring with them to the Slovene minority schools in Austria. This is not only observed by researchers (Kolb 2018; Vavti 2012; Zorčič 2020a; b), school management has been dealing with this issue since the very beginning of the admission and enrolment of Slovene students at schools in Austria.

A social group is defined as two or more people who **interact with each other**, share similar characteristics, and have a collective sense of community (Reicher 1982; author’s emphasis). Small groups in school classrooms are a common phenomenon, but in minority schools, they are often defined by their means of communication. The Slovene or German language, in all their geographical and social variations, can be a unifying or constraining element in the formation of class groups and class cohesion. We tend to observe that

students from Slovenia are less likely to bond with groups of students from Austria, which is due to at least two reasons: (1) many students from Slovenia come to Austria at later stages of their schooling and enter a (sometimes already quite) group-formed school environment (especially at the Grammar School, where certain friendships have existed since lower grammar school, and groups are also formed on the basis of a common living environment, which presupposes the use of a common Carinthian dialect); (2) the knowledge of German, especially the locally spoken dialect, is very low among students from Slovenia, which makes genuine and spontaneous communication between adolescents difficult. The focus group discussion therefore confirmed what has already been found in previous research (cf. Zorčič 2019; 2020a): that groups are usually formed on the basis of the language of communication and previous acquaintances.

School management, or the people in charge of forming classes, plays a particularly important role in shaping classroom dynamics, as class cohesion is largely determined by the size of the class and the number of students from Slovenia it contains. Larger classes are always linguistically differentiated into Slovene and German groups, while smaller classes tend to have more coherence (and consequently more communication in both languages). Another special case is the almost "all-Slovene sections" in which, owing to the large number of Students from Slovenia, German is practically unheard; once this situation is established, it will persist for the rest of schooling without reforming the classes. Class formation must therefore be given great attention if schools are to give all students the best possible chance of communicating in as linguistically-diverse a manner as possible. It is important to note that the generations that participated in the focus groups were deprived of a part of their common school life when part of their education was on-line because of the pandemic. Especially at the beginning, in the first years, when the German skills of the students from Slovenia were very poor. Although the other two groups of students from Austria, the Slovene minority and the German speakers, speak German to each other, it is obvious that there is very little communication in German at school with the students from Slovenia: students from the Slovene minority use Slovene, students from German-speaking families (who some students don't even know exist in their class) adapt to their use of Slovene, and even teachers adapt (and apparently do not follow all of the monthly language rules as a result). Therefore students from Slovenia admit that it is difficult to converse in German, especially on topics they are not familiar with, i.e., things that are not school-related.

However, if we look at the consequences of the enrolment of students from Slovenia at minority schools in Austria from a different perspective, i.e., not from the point of view of students from Slovenia, but from the point of view of the Slovene minority, it is necessary to stress the good aspects of this practice, which has become widespread since Slovenia's accession to the European Union. The

presence of students from Slovenia in these schools has led to a much greater presence of the Slovene language. In this way, students from the Slovene minority, as well as monolingual students from German families, are exposed to a version of the Slovene language that they rarely hear otherwise, since in Carinthia, they are mostly exposed to the dialect of their home environment, and in more formal speaking positions to the supra-regional Carinthian version of Slovene. The Slovene colloquial language that their classmates from Slovenia bring with them, and which they undoubtedly use in their communication with their Austrian classmates, thus brings new speaking experiences to the speakers of Slovene in Austrian Carinthia and, as a consequence, better speaking competence in the social version of Slovene, which is very important for the expansion of their linguistic repertoire. The latter enables better linguistic proficiency and greater confidence in feeling better able to communicate in Slovene.

The shortcoming of the study is that it does not cover younger students from Slovenia whose parents work in Austria and are in the (transition) phase or have already moved to Austria. The possibilities for younger students are very small; the quality of bilingual education varies greatly and is only possible in the bilingual area. High quality bilingual language development for immigrant children (also outside the official bilingual area) is even more important. An active targeted research project and further development on this topic would be a necessity in the future.

10. Conclusion

The topic of cross-border education is relatively new, as this phenomenon has only become widespread in the last (in the Slovene context, two) decades (see also Grgič 2019). Of course, each geographical and temporal context has to be considered separately, but we can conclude that the context of students from Slovenia in minority schools in Austrian Carinthia is a success story. The outcome seems to be particularly favourable for the Slovene minority in Austrian Carinthia, which in this way not only maintains (the quality of and) minority education at upper secondary level, which would otherwise have had difficulties in securing an influx of students due to the decline of the ethnic community over the last century (assimilation) and decades (poorer – typically Westernised – demographics and urbanisation). However, thanks to the cross-border economy, these schools have been able to exploit their niche and not only survive, but also become a language-education centre for the wider region. The context also has beneficial consequences for the members of the Slovene minority who are educated at these schools: their classmates from Slovenia expose them to the Slovene language to a much greater extent, especially the spoken version, with which they have less direct contact in this area. Students from Slovenia also largely ensure their expectations of the experience of schooling abroad, especially individuals who have a very

elaborate self-image or clear plans for the future, so that they are able to neutralise any shortcomings in this mode of schooling in advance by themselves. We can also conclude that, owing to the successful handling of the situation during the pandemic by both countries, there has been no negative impact on cross-border education in the form of lower enrolment, and it seems that the story of success will continue for now.

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Notes

- ¹ The foundations are already laid in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000, Art. 14 and 45), which deals with the rights to education and freedom of movement and residence. These rights are further addressed in part in the Act on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government of the Republic of Austria on Cooperation in Culture, Education and Science (BATKIZ 2002) and the individual directives relating to associated family members (in the case of relocation).
- ² According to Article V, Paragraph 24 of the Minority School Law for Carinthia (Minderheiten-Schulgesetz für Kärnten 1958), only Austrian citizens with sufficient knowledge of Slovene may attend the school. However, an amendment to the law passed in 1990, which made it possible to establish the Bilingual Commercial College in Klagenfurt, relaxed the strict enrolment limitation by stipulating that the school was intended "primarily for Austrian citizens" (Änderung des Minderheiten-Schulgesetzes für Kärnten 1990, Art. II).
- ³ Kugy classes were set up as an initiative in the joint bid of Austria, Italy and Slovenia for the 2006 Winter Olympics themed *Senza confini* (Eng. Without borders). The Regional School Board of Carinthia allowed this plan to go ahead and opened up the possibility of enrolling a limited number of students from Slovenia and Italy. Despite the unsuccessful application for the Olympics, the classes remained an attractive educational offer at the Slovene Grammar School.
- ⁴ Similar conclusions were drawn in a study of the Federal Chancellery in Vienna: Položaj, raba jezika in perspektive slovenske narodne skupnosti na Koroškem (OGM 2022).
- ⁵ "[...] the professor has more freedom, doesn't he ... in the assessment of the cooperation ..." (FS2_9). "Yes, in fact, cooperation can save you a lot of the time, so it's not such a bad thing" (FS4_3). "Usually 40 % (of the grade) is one big test and 60 % is cooperation, which includes small tests, participation during the class, assignments, and that's up to the teacher to decide" (FS2_9). "And that's subjective" (FS2_1).
- ⁶ "For me, it feels like if you have a wish, it's better to stay here and continue studies here, unless you have a specific wish for Slovenia" (FS3_1). "I would say that there are two main differences, let's say, when we take a test: in Slovenia you write grammar and literature, history, things like that;

here, it's only writings, let's say, an article, a commentary, an opinion speech. There's no grammar in the school assignments" (FS3_6).

- 7 "But we also have some good experiences. For example, last week when I was buying something, the lady at the checkout was explaining to me that they had a new system and then when I was filling something in, she said that it sounds like I have an accent, where am I from? I said I was from Slovenia. And then she started speaking in Slovene. And it was so interesting for me because there are supposed to be so few Slovenes still here, but you meet them anyway. When I caught the bus with one of my friends in the evening and we were speaking in Slovene and when we got off the bus the driver said 'Lahko noč' (Eng. good night) and smiled. Some kind of bilingualism indeed exists here" (FS3_6). "... it's just that maybe some people are ashamed, that's one of the things of the Slovene minority now, to show in public that they understand, and maybe they just smile" (FS3_7). "But the situation has improved tremendously, especially in the last twenty years, maybe ... We watched a film in class where a boy was asking people in the towns in the Slovene Carinthian dialect and they all pretended not to understand him, but nowadays I have the feeling, especially with young people, that a lot of them say, 'Well, Slovenes are pretty cool,' and it's not such a problem anymore, that there's not so much of an attitude against the minority anymore, against foreigners anymore ..." (FS3_2). "But in fact there are so many more foreigners here from Third World countries that Slovenes are almost an insignificant minority among these foreigners; there are many more Syrians and such ..." (FS3_3). "You're not so ostracized anymore ..." (FS3_6). "You already look different, by the colour of your skin" (FS3_3).
- 8 "What about the one month German, one month Slovene rule?" (FS5_M). "Eh, that's worthless ..." (FS5_6). "Yeah, yeah, otherwise the professors all stick to it ..." (FS5_3). "Now a bit more, but if you don't understand, then ..." (FS5_6). "They try, only if you don't get stuck, then they have to explain in Slovene ..." (FS5_4). "Yeah, it depends on which subject" (FS5_3). "And the fact that we have a choice whether to write in Slovene or German is a big plus, even if it's German month, you have a choice whether to write the test in Slovene or in German ..." (FS5_2). "Yeah, but some professors have half the test in Slovene, half the test in German ..." (FS5_3).
- 9 Typical Carinthian laryngeal plosive, a dorsal consonant (see Karničar 2008).
- 10 "I would say that there is more emphasis on writing texts, which I think is very smart, that we learn about the ways of using language, but there is not enough conversation, for example, in English, in German, in Slovene, I think, unless we are doing some things with an assistant, I think there is not enough conversation, in general, too. Even the English exam, as it is structured, is writing, listening, grammar, and what else, reading, but there is not enough emphasis on speaking. Especially in English. That seems to me to be the weakest point for Austrians as well, speaking, in English in general because of their 'r's, which don't translate into English very well" (FS3_3).
- 11 (In Slovenia, English content is subtitled) "while Austrians mostly synchronise ... they're much worse at it (English)" (FS2_9). "It is well known that we have a much better system in Slovenia as far as English is concerned ... Our English professor is Irish and even he said that he noticed a big difference between Slovenes and Austrians ..." (FS4_2). "Slovenes have a higher level, definitely" (FS5_6). "After four years of doing the same things, I would say it's a bit more even, but at the beginning it was really obvious who was in the Austrian school and who was in the Slovene school before, because in Slovenia, there is a much higher level of English in primary school" (FS5_5). "And even when we moved here, they have a much lower level of English in the primary school, practically the whole primary school I had nothing to do in English" (FS5_4).
- 12 "As Slovene (I do feel) not very much, I basically lived there very little, we were more in Croatia, so for a while I didn't even speak Slovene, so I would say maybe 40–50 %, for a Croatian I would say 60 % ..." (FS3_9). "For an Austrian?" (FS3_M). "Well, I've been living in Austria for a while now, so, let's say 30 %, although I don't like Austrians, because they really do act quite differently than we do ... but, yeah ..." (FS3_9). "Do you already have citizenship?" (FS3_M). "No, but I want to have it" (FS3_9). "Does anyone have citizenship?" (FS3_M). "Ah, and then you have conscription and civilian military service and everything ..." (FS3_6).

- ¹³ “It seems to me that Austria is very nationally oriented and doesn’t accept those ‘from the Balkans’, and my personal experience is that you have to prove yourself by something that you are not ... that you are like them and you are not incompetent, and if you show progress in knowledge and in the ability to be independent and like them, only then will you be accepted. From the beginning, maybe they are watching you before they put you outside the Balkan basket” (FS3_4).
- ¹⁴ “And those remarks (from teachers) about not being able to work with a certain class because ‘there are a lot of Bosnians in it’ ... Really, they have problems because they have so many prejudices, because they still think that bombs are falling in Sarajevo and Belgrade, at least that’s what it looks like if we want to go on an excursion down there (laughs). They just think ... [...] that they’re just walking around with knives, and they’re cutting people, I don’t know, there are so many prejudices ... We can only go up. And to Italy ...” (FS3_4). “Yeah, the Austrians are more centred on themselves, and it’s not like they’d go to another country and see for themselves that maybe it’s not like it was 100 years ago, and that not everything south of them is the third world” (FS3_2).
- ¹⁵ A slur for identifying a member of any nation of former Yugoslavia except Slovenes.

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