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Slovene as a Minority and Foreign Language in Italian Mainstream Schools in the Province of Trieste

This paper describes the history, presence, actions and perspective of Slovene language teaching and learning in Italian primary mainstream schools in the province of Trieste as an extraordinary opportunity – after 30 years of Slovenia's independence and almost 25 years of open borders – to reflect on the role of Slovene as a minority and foreign language among the majority population of neighbouring Italy, on the interethnic relationships it fosters, and on its potential to become an element of identity awareness development within the process of identity formation for both the kin state Slovenia homeland and the Slovene community in Trieste.

Keywords: Slovene as FL/L2, neighbouring languages, border regions, language policy.

Slovenščina kot manjšinski in tuj jezik na italijanskih šolah v tržaški pokrajini

Članek predstavlja zgodovino, prisotnost, možnosti in prihodnost učenja in poučevanja slovenščine v italijanskih osnovnih šolah v tržaški pokrajini kot izredno priložnost za premislek – po 30 letih samostojnosti in skoraj 25 letih odprtih meja – o vlogi slovenščine kot manjšinskega in tujega jezika med večinskim prebivalstvom sosednje države Italije, medetničnih odnosih, ki se v zvezi s tem oblikujejo, in pomenu jezika za razvoj identitetne zavesti v okviru identitetne rasti tako za matično državo Slovenijo kot za slovensko skupnost v Trstu.

Ključne besede: slovenščina kot tuj jezik/drugi jezik, sosedski jeziki, obmejna območja, jezikovna politika.

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1. Introduction. The Slovene Language in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Not Only a Matter of Ethnic Preservation

Strengthened by a decentralised view resulting from many years of border studies, we hereby propose an investigation inspired by a fluid conceptualisation of borders and the minority status of languages in these territories (Cavaion 2016; Klatt 2013), which aims to analyse the dynamics arising from the relationships that develop between coexisting ethnic communities.

We are indeed problematising the teaching of Slovene in mainstream compulsory education in neighbouring Italy where it is currently taught either as the language of a national minority – the Slovene community of the province of Trieste – or as a foreign language without locally coherent and shared language education planning.

The Slovene national minority – a rather strong and durable community in Friuli Venezia Giulia featuring important institutions such as minority schools, theatres, newspapers, economic and cultural associations, scientific research centres, etc. – has recently been widely and profoundly challenged by studies raising new questions about the real possibility of the Slovene community to successfully meet the challenges of a society that invites and induces people and institutions to meet, mix, intermix with each other and, as a consequence, blur linguistic, cultural and psychological boundaries (Bogatec & Lokar 2016; Bogatec & Vidau 2016; Brezigar 2007; Grgič et al. 2020; Jagodic & Čok 2013; Toroš 2019; Vidau 2015). Indeed, these scientific publications also address the perspective of the diffusion of the minority Slovene language among the majority population, an aspect that is quite controversial in both majority and minority communities residing in the province of Trieste, yet that we believe is a crucial element for human and cultural growth and citizenship.

The study we propose aims at contributing to and deepening the reflection on the possible key role of the teaching of Slovene in Italian majority schools as a language of a transnational territory that could act both as an instrument of social integration – or “human coexistence” as Čok (2008) has written elsewhere (cf. Čok 2003; 2006; 2009; Čok & Pertot 2010) – and as an element of identity awareness development in the process of identity formation for the kin state Slovenia and the Slovene community in Trieste.

Starting from our point of view (Cavaion 2016; 2020a; 2020b) regarding the possible role of Slovene both as a minority and neighbouring language in the border regions, we will describe the survey and the results obtained from the analyses of the current national and regional language policies that regulates the presence of Slovene in mainstream compulsory education in the province of Trieste, as well as the ongoing teaching in mainstream primary and lower secondary education¹ through the testimonies of project coordinators.

As we will see in the discussion and conclusions, this study could represent the baseline for broader research that could examine in more detail the impact of the teaching of Slovene within the mainstream school population – and minority community – in terms of the development of social integration, language awareness, and linguistic competence.

1.1 Slovene as a Language of the Environment and a Neighbouring Language

In Italy, and specifically in the province of Trieste, Slovene is the language of a national minority with all the political, societal, and identity-related implications of such circumstances (cf. Cavaion 2016, chapter What Neighbouring Languages Are (and Could Be), 16–39). A national minority is a linguistic peninsula which maintains the link with the kin state from which it has been separated and where people are “anxious to preserve what constitutes their common identity” (Klatt 2013, 301).

However, over time, the notion of national minority changes and blurs to some extent as the distance between minority and majority groups in this area narrows (Bufon 2016, 18–19; Bogatec & Lokar 2016) and identity undergoes some sort of transition. Members of the minority community find themselves in a situation of multiple identity choices (Pertot 2016, 108) – as much as, we think, members of majority groups and people of recent immigrant background – and the linkage to the kin state remains under examination (cf. Brezigar 2016; Bajc 2016; Zupančič 2016).

On the other hand, Slovene is not spoken by the majority group in the province of Trieste. It is the language of instruction in Slovene minority schools, i.e., it is not systematically part of the curricula in mainstream Italian schools where there is compulsory teaching and learning of English from the first year of primary school and compulsory teaching of a second European Community language in lower secondary school. This points to the lack of the possibility of teaching Slovene as a language of the environment or of the neighbouring country due to the absence of local, national and (cross-border) multilingual language policies, which can partly be attributed to the broader phenomenon of the absence of infrastructural and institutional cross-border links and agreements (Bufon 2016, 15). *De jure* and *de facto*, the historically multilingual social fabric of the region is not preserved, let alone promoted, by adequate language policies, i.e., inclusive language acquisition planning, which has been highlighted in Brezigar (2007):

The Slovenes in Italy being a part of the nation that mostly lives across the border in Slovenia, where Slovenian is the majority language, the linguistic minority does not have either full responsibility or “full powers” to deal with language planning. In practice this means that several institutions in the Republic of Slovenia *de facto* take

care of language planning, while there's no designed institution that takes care of the language planning that is necessary for the survival of the Slovene linguistic minority in Italy (Brezigar 2007, 211).

In 2018, the Central Office for the Slovene Language was established to manage and coordinate activities related to the use of Slovene in public administration, provide a translation and interpreting service, and take care of the standardization of Slovene legal and administrative terminology and linguistic training.² This is an important goal which guarantees Slovene-speaking citizens the right to use their language in relations with local administrative authorities. Nevertheless, in our opinion, this is not yet a complete measure taken by official bodies to promote the use of one or more languages in a given speech community, as language planning is usually defined.

Nevertheless, Slovene, especially after the Schengen Agreement, is increasingly a language that the citizens of the region nowadays want to know, learn and use in everyday life when communicating with Slovenes and visiting Slovene institutions, events and places in their region and neighbouring Slovenia (Brezigar 2013).

In Cavaion (2016), we explain the rationale and possibilities of teaching and learning neighbouring languages, proposing to consider neighbouring languages as:

languages of modern open borders, 'multiple identity' languages which by the passing of time and of historical, geopolitical events, have developed complex interconnections in terms of linguistic contacts, cultural and identity issues among people living in those areas, who are nowadays called to answer key functions in terms of social, interethnic integration (Cavaion 2016, 22–23).

Relations between the Italian and Slovene communities in the province of Trieste are not yet as constructive and dynamic as elsewhere (see the research on the Italian-Slovene border in the province of Gorizia-Gorica, Novak-Lukanovič 2011; 2015), although there has been improvement in recent years (cf. Brezigar 2016; Bajc 2016), as evidenced by a large number of Slovene language courses for adults and children organised in the last decade (Brezigar 2013) that seemed to have been stimulated more by the desire to have contacts with neighbouring Slovenia than with the local Slovene community (Brezigar 2013). We wonder whether anything has changed in recent years and whether learning Slovene has had a positive influence on the desire to get to know the locals and their culture. That is, we wonder whether the awareness among representatives of the Slovene community in Trieste and among Slovene citizens in the Republic of Slovenia about the increased attention and interest shown by the Italian majority population towards their language could help their sense of belonging and

identity formation, which is still quite hesitant among youngsters on this front (see the research by Munda Hirnök & Lukanovič and Obid on the process of identity definition among young representatives of minority communities on the Slovene borders in Obid 2018), or, at least in some changing form, with a detachment from discourses about national and ethnic identity as felt by previous generations and a greater interest in the values of plurilingualism (Brezigar & Vidau 2021, 100).

On the other hand, the teaching and learning of neighbouring languages is quite well supported at the European level with documents that are particularly rich and meaningful, whose only downside is their non-binding nature.³

2. Research

2.1 Method and Research Questions

We conducted qualitative research, mainly through document analysis, and specifically:

- a) the selection and analysis of national and local language policies supporting the teaching of a minority language in Italian mainstream schools;
- b) the analysis of documents available on the websites of mainstream school institutions situated in the province of Trieste concerning the teaching and learning of Slovene in the last six years. The documents are now all included in a framework document titled PTOF *Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa* (Three-Year Educational Offer Plan) that can be found on each institution's website.

We identified six out of 16 comprehensive mainstream institutions as Slovene project holders (see further paragraph 2.2).

We corroborated the document analysis of the identified schools through direct verification (telephone interviews) with the coordinators regarding the existence, functions and organisation of any kind of project for the teaching of Slovene in their institutions. Four out of the six schools took part in our interviews.

The study ran at the beginning of the school year 2020/21 (October 2020–January 2021). Many difficulties related to the Covid-19 pandemic were encountered in data collection as schools practically barricaded and isolated themselves. The teachers covering the instrumental functions of coordination of the projects changed and the school offices proved difficult to reach for research purposes as they were committed to solving problems of daily urgency.

The research questions we tried to answer were:

- to what extent – from a viewpoint of curricula, didactics, and language policy – is Slovene taught and learned in Italian mainstream schools of the province of Trieste?

- how much do the projects included in Italian mainstream schools imply a direct relation with the Slovene community or the schools of the Slovene community?

2.2 Results

a) Selection and analysis of national and local language policies supporting the teaching of a minority language in Italian mainstream schools

In Italy, i.e., in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, the Slovene language is protected by international treaties and conventions as well as national and regional laws, all of which have enabled the preservation of the language and culture of the Slovene communities in the province of Trieste and, although less effectively due to later legislative intervention, in the provinces of Udine and Gorizia⁴ (cf. Bonamore 2004; Cavaion 2016, 23–28).

The current law regarding the teaching and learning of minority languages in mainstream schools is the national Law No. 482/1999 – Regulation for the Protection of Historical Linguistic Minorities (Legge 15 dicembre 1999, n. 482). Law No. 482 of 15 December 1999 describes under Art. 4 the possible measures and the type of organisation that school institutions can take to provide linguistic education that includes the teaching and learning of minority languages or the vehicular use of the minority language.

Despite Law No. 482 and its implementing decrees (DPR 345 2001) that allow for intervention in schools, as far as minority language teaching in Italy is concerned, there is nothing compulsory, only advisable actions left to the discretion of each school. It is a complicated “knotty whole” of norms that “allow” schools to set up projects involving minority languages, which still depend very much on parents’ wishes and attitudes toward the minority language, as Serena claimed almost twenty years ago (Serena 2003, 33).

In fact, Italy has not yet ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (CoE 1992) which it signed in 2000. The ratification of this document would demonstrate a concrete commitment and improvement in terms of the promotion of minority languages even among individuals who do not speak these languages but wish to learn them (see Art. 7g in Objectives and Principles of the Charter).

Consequently, there is neither a national plan for the teaching and learning of minority languages in Italian compulsory schools nor a regional inclusive multilingual language policy for the multilingualism of a region (e.g., Friuli Venezia Giulia, characterised by the presence of different languages such as German, Slovene and Friulian). These languages are currently preserved and protected under local regulations, but not promoted through a substantial and coherent regional multilingual policy, except for the Friulian community that can rely on the

General Plan of Linguistic Policy (the last one applying to 2021–2025) (ARLEF 2021), an instrument through which the Friuli Venezia Giulia Autonomous Region – in the sense of Article 25 of the LR 29/2007 – sets the future strategies for the development of the Friulian language, with particular reference to the areas of corpus, public administration, school, new technologies, mass media and social promotion.

The local education office of Friuli Venezia Giulia (Ufficio scolastico regionale FVG) does have an official responsible for the promotion of regional minority languages, but the Slovene language, unlike Friulian and German, is not promoted at all, as can be seen from the office's website (USR-FVG 2020).

There are also no references to the teaching of minority and regional languages in the Ministry of Education's national guidelines for school curricula (MIUR 2012) and its extension (MIUR 2018). There is a whole paragraph on the importance of promoting multilingual education, but only guidelines for teaching English or the second community language are provided.

The only measures to promote the teaching and learning of minority languages in mainstream Italian schools are two calls for the voluntary presentation of projects in the field of minority languages which implement Law No. 482/1999 and Law No. 38/2001 (Legge 23 febbraio 2001, n. 38).

The first is a national call – Financing plan for minority languages. Presentation of projects in the field of minority languages (Art. 5 L. 482/1999)/Piano di finanziamento Lingue di minoranza. Presentazione dei progetti nel campo delle lingue di minoranza (art. 5 L. 482/1999) – derived from Law No. 482/1999 (see the website of MIUR – Lingue di minoranza – Piani di intervento e finanziamento).

The second is a regional call – Call for funding teaching activities related to the teaching of languages and cultures of historical linguistic minorities/ Bando per il finanziamento delle attività didattiche relative all'insegnamento delle Lingue e Culture delle Minoranze Linguistiche Storiche – supported by both Law No. 482/1999 and Law No. 38, 23 February 2001 (see the website of Regione FVG – Piano regionale triennale per il potenziamento dell'offerta formativa (POF): insegnamento delle lingue e culture delle minoranze linguistiche storiche).

These two measures were first implemented after 2001 when the laws came into force, but both have been significantly cut back financially over the ensuing years. Nevertheless, many projects were already running in earlier years, as testified by the Ministry of Education's publication on the implementation of Law No. 482 in mainstream schools (MIUR 2010).

The main objective of both actions is to promote interventions related to the teaching of the languages and cultures of historical linguistic minorities and to strengthen the multilingual and multicultural identity of the community represented in the territory, in this case, Friuli Venezia Giulia.

The national call specifies that projects will be evaluated according to very precise – and in our opinion, ambitious – criteria, which follow Article 4 of Law

No. 482/1999, namely:

- teaching in the minority language as part of the curriculum, carried out by teachers from the school who have appropriate language skills;
- application of the integrated method of vehicular teaching, ensuring the achievement of the objectives of competence development for all pupils, using the CLIL methodology;
- production of transferable pedagogical and didactic multimedia materials, also with a playful approach to transferability, must be understood not only as diffusion of the product but above all as methodological innovation and process innovation;
- multilingual cooperation, to stimulate exchange between different linguistic and cultural realities present in the same territory or different territories;
- skills review and assessment of acquired skills, abilities and knowledge through the use of models such as grids, maps, class or board diaries that are easily applicable and transferable to other minority contexts;
- network collaboration and representation in the territory through a broad and conscious synergy with local authorities, confirmed by memoranda of understanding or agreements with institutions, associations, research centres, and universities;
- production of music, sounds and songs that characterise our minority languages.

(Home page of the web site MIUR – Lingue di minoranza – Piani di intervento e finanziamenti).

As a final reflection on the policy analysis, we propose a consideration in the context of Slovene language policy, which is well outlined in the last Resolution on the National Programme for Language Policy 2020–2024 (Resolucija o nacionalnem programu za jezikovno politiko 2020–2024 RS 2021)⁵ and the underlying document titled Legal Regulation and Programme Documents on Language Use and Practices of Language Users in the Republic of Slovenia and Users of Slovene Language in Neighbouring Countries and in the World/Pravna ureditev in programski dokumenti o jezikovni rabi in praksah jezikovnih uporabnikov v RS in uporabnikov slovenskega jezika v sosednjih državah in po svetu (Komac & Kovač 2018).

In the Resolution 2020–2024, the only paragraph concerning Slovene outside Slovenia deals with Slovene communities in neighbouring countries (paragraph 2.1.3.2.1 Slovenske skupnosti v sosednjih državah). Here the focus is on the knowledge and use of Slovene as a second language or heritage language.

In the document Legal Regulation and Programme Documents on Language Use and Practices of Language Users in the Republic of Slovenia and Users of Slovene Language in Neighbouring Countries and in the World (Komac & Kovač 2018), Slovene outside Slovenia is constantly mentioned as the language

of the autochthonous Slovene population living beyond Slovenia's borders (Italian, Austrian, Hungarian, and Croatian), but we also noted the emphasis on the current challenges for those minority Slovene communities, as "there is a growing interest in learning Slovene in schools with Italian as the language of instruction" (Komac & Kovač 2018, 99), and the link with school autonomy as a way to adapt the curricula to local needs and contexts, such as knowledge and understanding of the territory (also described in Bogatec & Lokar's (2016) study of Slovene teaching in a lower secondary school in Trieste). Could this document convince pedagogical actors in Slovenia of the importance of disseminating the Slovene language in compulsory education in neighbouring countries? This would imply what Grgič (2019) calls cross-border education.

b) Analysis of documents available on the websites of mainstream school institutions situated in the province of Trieste concerning the teaching and learning of Slovene in the last six years

From our analysis of the documents available on the websites of all mainstream comprehensive schools in the province of Trieste concerning the teaching and learning of Slovene, we have deduced that the teaching of Slovene within the Italian compulsory school system in the province of Trieste is offered in six out of 16 institutions.

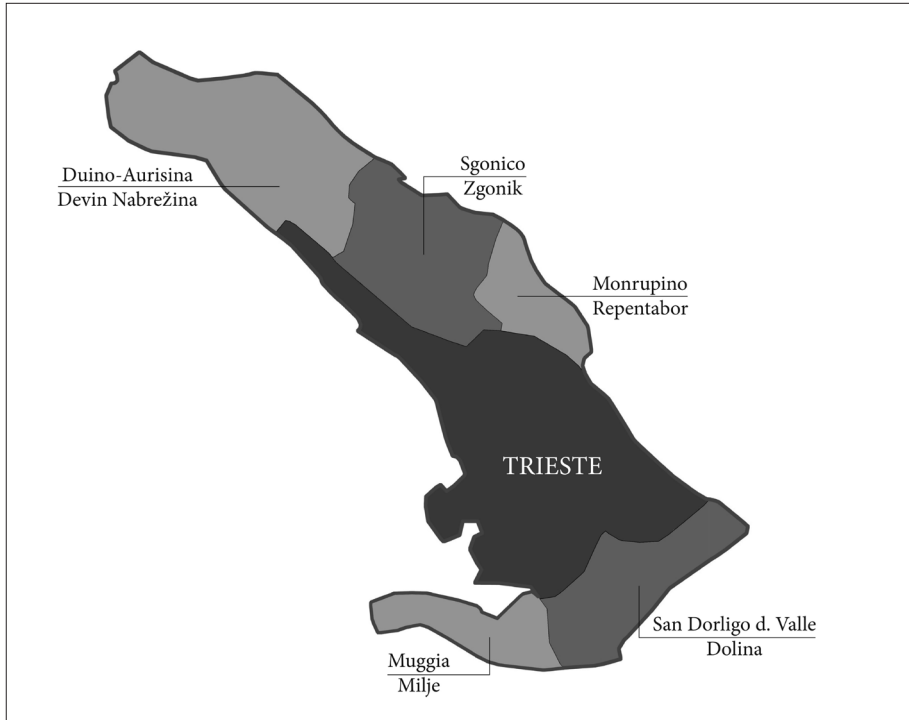
Nevertheless, this teaching is offered incoherently since Slovene is taught as a minority language (as will be described later on) in only a few mainstream primary schools (pupils between 6 and 10 years of age) – in most cases as an extracurricular activity, i.e., not in accordance with the requirements of Law No. 482, which speaks of curricular activities – and as a European Community language (namely as a foreign language, officially since 2007) in two lower secondary schools (pupils aged 11–14), which means that it is not taught as a regional, minority language or as the language of the environment.

The geographical context of the schools

The study was conducted in the school year 2020/21 in mainstream Italian schools in the province of Trieste, which includes six municipalities (see Figure 1 below):

- Duino Aurisina/Devin Nabrežina
- Monrupino/Repentabor
- Muggia/Milje
- San Dorligo della Valle/Dolina
- Sgonico/Zgonik
- Trieste

Figure 1: Map of the Province of Trieste and its municipalities



Source: own data © Paolo Monello.

There are 16 mainstream comprehensive institutions with Italian as the language of instruction and five with Slovene as the language of instruction in the province of Trieste, scattered among the six municipalities which all belong to the Slovene settlement area protected under Law No. 38/2001.

Each institution includes one or several kindergartens (ISCED 0⁶), primary schools (ISCED 1) and lower secondary schools (ISCED 2), depending on the size of the neighbourhoods they serve in the municipalities.

As evident from the educational offer plan for the last six years (PTOF, see further), which is posted on the homepage of the school, we arrived at the figure of six institutions out of 16 that include the learning of Slovene in their educational plan.

This result is in line with the results of a previous study we conducted in 2015 and presented at the conference *Lo sloveno per i ragazzi di Trieste* on 19 May 2015 in Trieste (Cavaion 2015), where the same comprehensive institutions promoting Slovene were listed:

- “R.M. Rilke” in Duino/Devin, including the villages of Sistiana/Sesljan, S. Croce/Sveti Križ, Aurisina/Nabrežina, Villaggio del pescatore/Ribiško naselje;

- “Altipiano” in Opicina/Opčine, including the villages of Banne/Bane and Prosecco/Prosek;
- “San Giovanni” in Trieste;
- “Iqbal Masih” in Trieste;
- “G. Lucio” in Muggia/Milje;
- “G. Roli” in Trieste and San Dorligo della Valle/Dolina, including the villages of Bagnoli/Boljunec and Domio/Domjo.

The schools cover almost all the municipalities of the province.

Analysing the documents (PTOF) reporting on projects of teaching and learning Slovene, we tried to find information on:

- a) when the project of teaching and learning Slovene was started;
- b) why it was started, i.e., who or what stimulated the introduction of Slovene in the institution;
- c) what kind of actions were organised, to whom they were addressed;
- d) Slovene partner institutions involved;
- e) curricula, documentation and references to national or regional legislation;
- f) type of financial support used.

Below, we report the results of the PTOF analysis and the answers we received in the interviews with the project coordinators of four of the six institutions where Slovene is taught and learned.

We must say that the extraordinarily creative nature of these projects and the enthusiastic response of the coordinators have convinced us of the importance of carrying out a more in-depth study in the near future, aimed at analysing the methodology and impact of these projects on some aspects of linguistic and intercultural education, and making the methodology used more visible and available for scientific studies of minority language teaching and for other Italian school institutions that would take up the teaching of the Slovene language.

These results were highlighted in the paragraph of PTOF about the school environment and by the teachers and coordinators we interviewed:

- a) The projects started around 2000 thanks to the financial support guaranteed by the enacted laws. The last one started in 2012 (Muggia/Milje). The actual beginning of the projects – which in some cases is difficult to determine and took place before 2000 – refers to experimental actions proposed by teachers, which slowly developed into school projects that implied the collaboration of their associates and the support of the principals.
- b) The context and the main reasons for starting the projects were:
 - the desire and request of families to ensure a multilingual education for their children and in some cases to regain contact with their Slovene origins (mentioned in all six institutions and confirmed by the coordinators of the projects);

- the bilingual environment in which the schools are located, which creates the possibility of extracurricular encounters (four out of six institutions);
 - Italian pupils attending Slovene sports clubs, i.e., extracurricular interethnic contact (three institutions);
 - pupils attending Slovene schools and then transferring to Italian institutions (mostly Italian pupils) with some knowledge of the Slovene language which they did not want to lose (one institution);
 - the proximity to the border, which represented an opportunity for Italian pupils to attend Italian institutions on the other side of the border, in Slovenia. Learning Slovene in Italian schools helped in the return of this outgoing group of pupils (one institution).
- c) The actions organised concerned both the teaching of Slovene in school time and in extracurricular time and interdisciplinary paths to learn the language of the environment and the historical context and meeting Slovene speakers and representatives of the Slovene community. Slovene is the mother tongue of all teachers but one, who master a B2 CEFR level in the Slovene language.

The above actions can be summarised as follows:

- teaching Slovene in curricular time throughout the school year in all primary school classes (Duino Aurisina/Devin Nabrežina);
- raising awareness of the Slovene language and culture in primary schools through a five-step path module in curricular time (last two years of primary school, 10–11 years old pupils) (“Iqbal Masih”, Trieste);
- virtual and face-to-face encounters during school time between Italian and Slovene schools also coming from Slovenia (Sežana), and drama-based activities (“San Giovanni”, Trieste);
- extracurricular courses (in the afternoon) organised at two levels – beginner and advanced, 20 hours each – for students in the last three years of primary school (9–11 years) and grades 1 and 2 of lower secondary school (11–13 years) (“Altipiano” of Opicina-Opčine and “G. Roli” of Trieste and San Dorligo-Dolina). It is noteworthy that this type flourished about ten years ago before cuts in funding drastically reduced its availability. One interesting experiment was made by the institute “Altipiano”, which offered an online course at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic that attracted many students this year (as reported by the coordinator of the project).
- workshops on the history, traditions, and arts of Slovene culture, including, before the pandemic, visits to Slovene institutions in Trieste and Slovenia (“G. Lucio” of Muggia-Milje).
- two out of six schools (“Iqbal Masih” of Trieste and “G. Lucio” of Muggia-Milje) included Slovene as a second foreign language in their lower secondary programmes following the rule of foreign language teaching

and learning, with a final ministerial examination. Here it is important to note that although the schools are geographically embedded in a socio-linguistic context characterised by the presence of the Slovene community, the teaching of this language is promoted as a European Community language and not as a language of the environment and of the autochthonous linguistic community. The consequences are, for example, a lack of possibility of financial support for the development of materials and problems related to the recruitment of teachers. The same schools are involved in actions based on contacts with schools in Slovenia where pupils learn the Italian language (Progetto Contatti!).

- d) Five of the six institutions that promote the Slovene language base their projects on cooperation with schools with Slovene as the language of instruction. The cooperation consists of teacher exchange, encounters of classes, joint development of interdisciplinary pathways or participation in local or cross-border literary, historical, geographical or mathematical competitions (all these activities are attributed greater importance by the Muggia/Milje school).

One school is very active in exploiting local networks such as Slovene associations, scientific research centres, universities and cross-border contacts with naturalistic associations in neighbouring Slovenia (the Muggia/Milje school).

- e) In the PTOFs of schools offering the teaching and learning of Slovene, there are no references to national, regional or European regulations, laws or other documents on the teaching of minority languages. Only one of the six institutions cited Law No. 482 as a reference for its projects, but only in relation to financial issues.

Curricula and other planning documents are not available for consultation or evident from the PTOF, except for the teaching of Slovene in lower secondary schools, where the curricula follow the national guidelines for the teaching of a second foreign language. In Italy, the curriculum is prepared by the teachers based on national guidelines. These two curricula are interesting because they attach more importance to the language of the environment than to the teaching and learning of a foreign language. They seem to us good examples of schools which are aware of their work in the classroom being positively influenced by the environment and able to overcome an inadequate language policy.

As far as the teaching of Slovene at the primary level is concerned, the schools' websites are crowded with ministerial calls and, this year, with information about the Covid-19 pandemic; no links to projects promoting the Slovene language are visible. On the other hand, as testified by the teachers, there are many materials prepared and we presume there are plans for intervention in schools. This is one reason we should conduct a more thorough investigation.

One institute in the city centre – of the six we have presented so far – runs a project to promote a multilingual and intercultural curriculum, following a specific project of the region Friuli Venezia Giulia and inspired by a European call for the development of plurilingual curricula. It is stated in their PTOF that the school promotes all languages spoken by the pupils and their families.

- f) All projects mainly used regional financial support through regional funding for minority language activities. A few used national financial support. Three were involved in Interreg EU projects (Jezik, Eduka, Eduka2). In the last two years, general European funding was used to combat early school dropout (the PON programme).

3. Teaching Slovene in Italian Mainstream Education: Discussion and Reflection on the Results

Despite the lack of national, regional and cross-border language education plans, Slovene is taught with great creativity and some sort of a bottom-up approach in a few mainstream schools in the province of Trieste. Schools take advantage of the only two possible initiatives regarding the teaching of minority languages in Italy, namely a national and a regional financial requirement (the latter is the one that is used the most). Exceptionally, Interreg programmes were used, but rather to promote culture and interethnic encounters than to teach languages. Unfortunately, the number of schools promoting Slovene has not increased over the last ten years, which we believe is related to the financial cuts experienced by the national and regional intervention plans in recent years.

The majority of schools that include projects to promote Slovene are institutions located in bilingual municipalities, where the very mixed local social fabric seems to be the true underlying impetus for all initiatives. The two institutions located in the municipality of Trieste (“Iqbal Masih” and “San Giovanni”) have contact with the minority community, very probably because these neighbourhoods are also characterised by old Slovene community settlements (the neighbourhood of San Giovanni and the neighbourhood of Melara). In one institution in the city centre, the promotion of Slovene is part of a broader context of a regional project on plurilingual education. This might be an easier and more inclusive means for the promotion of minority languages in mainstream schools, but in our opinion, school communities should be better informed, aware and sensitised regarding the great opportunity to develop language education through minority language teaching. In short, there is a lack of visibility of these experiences and of the possibility to develop projects for minority languages.

European guidelines and recommendations on minority and neighbouring language teaching could help schools in this region make the teaching and learning of Slovene a matter of European citizenship, but the official documents de-

scribing the institutions (the PTOF) we analysed do not refer to such guidelines or EU communications. Are these mainstream school institutions even aware of their existence?

The documentation on the projects promoting the teaching and learning of Slovene uploaded to the schools' websites is not detailed and does not allow for a scientific reflection on the quality of the projects and on the extent to which the projects comply with the criteria required by the national call for proposals. We can assume that the reason schools opt more frequently for regional financial aid, which is much lower than national, is because it is very difficult to meet all the requirements for national support. The question we pose is: how could schools actually meet all the requirements in a region where there is no language policy support, no teacher training, and no information campaign regarding the teaching of minority languages among mainstream school institutions and civil society?

We believe that the summarised experiences deserve a deeper analysis through a more participatory quality study that includes visiting schools, conducting interviews and analysing the materials produced, which was indeed our intention but was prevented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The type of actions proposed in the projects considered are quite varied and interdisciplinary. They largely come from the personal experience of the project coordinators (information obtained through telephone conversations) and are stimulated by a social context in which contacts between the majority and minority language communities seem to be improving. All the projects analysed offer the actual teaching of Slovene and not only the promotion of cultural or even folkloristic aspects of Slovene culture like the previous projects, an aspect denounced in the MIUR report about the presence of minority languages in Italian schools after 10 years of legal enforcement of their preservation (MIUR 2010). Teachers, families, and representatives of the Slovene community seem to make a concerted effort to make the promotion of the Slovene language a matter of intercultural encounters and an opportunity to make up for the missing regional and national integrative policies and a wounded historical past that still requires space for debate to improve knowledge and overcome lingering divisive aspects of shared history. Slovene mother tongue teachers employed in Italian institutions are valuable key actors for local social integration and, we dare say, for the construction of a mature plurilingual and pluricultural society.

To answer our research questions – i.e., at what point, from the point of view of curricula, didactics and language policy, stand the teaching and learning of Slovene in Italian mainstream schools of the province of Trieste and to what extent the projects in Italian mainstream schools imply a direct relationship with the Slovene community or with the schools of the Slovene community – we can assert that the teaching of Slovene in mainstream schools is still far from having a well-structured and well-organised curriculum. We were unable to in-

investigate didactic aspects despite the great diversity of funded measures and the interdisciplinary nature of the projects. Language policies, national and regional, are non-existent. Language education policies are non-binding. The result is the fragmented nature of Slovene language teaching, which depends on internal human resources and the schools' own ideas. Nevertheless, the projects carried out in Italian mainstream schools imply a direct relationship with the Slovene community and, in most cases, with the schools of the Slovene community and the local Slovene associations and institutions (library, theatre, newspapers, etc.), as well as with neighbouring Slovenia. These relationships could not be analysed qualitatively but the fact that the projects continue may be interpreted as a result of successful contacts and exchanges.

The results lead us to an important reflection on the potential of the school environment and the projects involving several schools and other types of institutions for the dissemination of the Slovene language and culture in the mainstream society, as well as for the contextualization of this language learning. In fact, this context seems to offer a pedagogical starting point that is not linked to an instrumental motivation, like the one that can stimulate adults who enrol in the numerous language courses promoted by local cultural associations, but to the schools' desire to offer their users a real experience of interpersonal and cultural contact that might one day become a more mature and autonomous desire to learn more about the Slovene culture and language as the language of the environment.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we provided an overview of the presence, function and actions related to the teaching and learning of Slovene in Italian mainstream primary schools in the province of Trieste as an exceptional opportunity, after 30 years of Slovenia's independence and almost 25 years of open borders, to reflect on Slovene as a minority and foreign language – a definition we have problematised and better identified in the concept of the language of the environment – in the majority population of Italy, to better identify the interethnic relations it fosters, and to ask whether it can be considered an element of awareness development in the process of identity development of the kin state Slovenia and the Slovene minority community.

The thesis hereby expressed, within the scientific framework of regional and cross-border studies, minority language teaching studies and intercultural language studies, is that the teaching of Slovene within the compulsory education of the neighbouring Italian majority population can importantly contribute to the development of a more authentic and mature reciprocal contact area where the image of Slovenia, its language and culture, can be valued and reinforced in and through the eyes of neighbouring otherness.

From a sociolinguistic viewpoint, it is quite astonishing that a divisive linguistic policy has so far characterised and persists in this area where, as this research demonstrates, there are Italian school institutions very much engaged in the teaching and disseminating of Slovene language and culture, yet not at all supported by national and local policies.

The projects analysed and their school communities – i.e., the type of actions proposed that focus on the teaching and learning of the Slovene language and on important aspects of its culture, envisaging a spontaneous intermingling of the Italian and Slovene communities and embracing the Slovene language in all its aspects of identity – are meaningful indicators of a civil society that does not want to miss the opportunity to grow through the gift of its multilingual and multicultural background. Could these projects pave the way for new and important reflections within the Slovene and Italian majority communities and the Slovene minority community in Italy on the great potential of teaching and learning each other's languages as a tool for shared social and human growth?

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Notes

- ¹ Primary education is organised differently among European countries. Italy follows a common core curriculum system with primary schools for pupils aged between six and eleven years – ISCED level 1 (International Standard Classification of Education – ISCED, developed by the UNESCO, see https://ec.europa.eu/education/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced_it) – lower secondary schools for pupils aged 11–15 – ISCED 2 – and upper secondary schools for pupils aged 15–19. Slovenia has a single structure school system including ISCED levels 1 and 2, recognised as 'primary education' for pupils aged from 6–16.
- ² Centralni urad za slovenski jezik, <https://www.regione.fvg.it/rafvfg/cms/RAFVG/cultura-sport/patrimonio-culturale/comunita-linguistiche/FOGLIA25/>.
- ³ In fact, the European Union includes the teaching of neighbouring languages in its Recommendations and Communications, all documents which have the function of guiding member states whilst not obliging them to accept the proposed actions. We list them here, but for a more detailed reading we refer the reader to Cavaion 2020a:
 - Recommendation Rec (2005)3 of the Committee of Ministers at Teaching Neighbouring Languages in Border Regions (CoE 2005);
 - Europe, Frontiers and Languages by Albert Raasch (2002);
 - Rewarding Challenge: How the Diversity of Languages Could Strengthen Europe (Maalouf et

al. 2008). It reports on the European Commission's proposal on the need to "develop bilateral relations between the peoples of the European Union," especially where conflicts have divided neighbouring countries.

- the most recent European document entirely dedicated to border areas – Boosting Growth and Cohesion in the EU Border Regions (EC – European Commission 2017);
 - finally, there is a more specific European document related to language teaching, also from the European Council – Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Comprehensive Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Language (EC – European Commission 2018) –, which focuses on the need for innovation in language teaching, promotes its potential by proposing important measures to integrate and connect between the specificities of the border context and the broader context of the social and cultural growth of Europe itself and its citizens.
- ⁴ As Brezigar (2004, 75) reports, three different models have been created for the protection of the Slovene-speaking minority in Italy: the model of Trieste (since 1954 as a result of the London Memorandum and since 1975 of the Treaty of Osimo), the model (of the province) of Udine, where the existence of the Slovene language minority was not recognised until the adoption of the national protection law L482/2001, and the model of the Goriška region, based on the partial fulfilment of Article 6 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic, especially in the field of minority education, where the situation was similar to that in the province of Trieste.
- ⁵ At the time when the research was conducted, the last resolution on the Slovene language 2020–2025 (Resolucija o nacionalnem programu za jezikovno politiko 2020–2025) was not published yet.
- ⁶ See endnote 1.

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