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## **The Role of the Minority Language in Slovene Education Policy: the Case of Slovene Istria**

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### **Abstract**

This case study attempts to specify, delineate and describe the language policies of bilingual settings in Slovenia using the example of Slovene Istria and the border area in Italy. Data were collected first hand and taken from existing data sources. Some preconceived hypotheses on education of minorities were that: learning languages and living cultures of the environment from early childhood improves cognitive and formative phenomena (competencies, attitudes, awareness, specific living strategies); tolerance-oriented, education avoids discrimination, develops a climate of coexistence, and guarantees peace and openness among the people.

**Keywords:** political geography, education, ethnicity, minority, language, Slovenia

## **Minorities in Slovenia and their function in the border environment**

With regard to the ethnic composition of its population, Slovenia is quite homogenous as a European country. The data of the 1991 census show that of 1,962,606 inhabitants, 87.5 per cent were of Slovene nationality. Next to the Slovene nationals there are 3,000 Italians in the municipalities of Izola, Koper and Piran near the border with Italy, and about 8,500 Hungarians living along the border with Hungary. A substantial part of the Slovene community was separated from its nation of origin by borders: about 100,000 Slovenes remain in Italy, some 50,000 in Austria and about 4,500 in Hungary. The members of nations who have always lived in an area and were separated from their nation of origin by a state border are referred to as autochthonous national minorities; they are differentiated from immigrants who settled on the territory of another state by choice. In Slovenia, there are also many immigrants from other republics of the former Yugoslavia; they came to Slovenia in search of better living and working conditions. A special group of non-Slovene inhabitants is composed of approximately 6,000 Roma. Due to their social backwardness, a different way of life and tradition, they need special assistance to be included into modern living and working conditions.

The Slovenes are a tiny nation, who have for a long time lived under the rule of foreigners and fought for the recognition of its rights as a nation. Many Slovene people still live across the borders of the Slovene Republic. Slovenia is therefore especially active in regulating the status of the minorities and very sensitive when it comes to their protection.

### **The Italian minority in Slovenia**

According to the last census carried out in 1991, the Italian community in Slovenia numbers 3,063 people (2,187 in 1981). The ethnically mixed territory within the territories of the communities of Koper, Izola and Piran consists of the town centre and seven settlements in the municipality of Koper/ Capodistria, the centre of Izola/Isola, the centre and six settlements in the community of Piran/Pirano. The share of Italians in the total number of population within the ethnically mixed territory defined above is more evident only in Strunjan (about 20 per cent), while in other places it seldom exceeds 10 per cent; as a

whole it is less than 5 per cent. However, the number of Italian speaking people was considerably higher before World War II, as more than 20,000 persons of predominantly Italian nationality, traditionally representing the majority in the coastal parts of Slovene Istra, emigrated from this area after the annexation of Istra to Yugoslavia. Istra is particularly characteristic for having been ethnically mixed for a long time, which influences greatly the oscillations in people opting for a certain nationality, depending upon the criteria and general political, social and economic circumstances at the time of the census. The same as for the Slovene community in Italy; it is characteristic that the great majority of the Italians in Slovenia (in this case about 75 per cent) live in urban centres, where they only represent a small part of the population.

In compliance with the Constitution of Slovenia and other laws the Italian community is guaranteed the right to elect at least one member to the Slovene Parliament and to the local councils in ethnically mixed territories as well as to all bodies which make decisions that in any way could have an impact on the life of the minority and its problems. All decisions in this respect have to be made in agreement with the representatives of the minority. Within the framework of the mixed territory defined above, the Italian language is equal to the Slovene, as such it is used in place names and in public inscriptions as well as in relation to all authorities and bodies of the society. The law on ethnic communities provides further, that members of the minority have the right to found their own self-governing communities at the level of communes. Within individual communes Italian communities are active, organized as associations in the fields of culture, sports and others. There are four such communities (Koper, Hrvatini, Izola and Piran), funded by the self-governed communities of the Italian minority, which also are responsible for proposing programmes of activities to the competent authorities. Contacts and exchanges with various institutions on the Italian side are frequent, especially with *Università Popolare* in Trieste, which is an official intermediary with the Italian communities in Slovenia and in Croatia, but also with other cultural associations and organisations, such as various organizations of exiled Istrians of Italian culture. More sporadic are contacts with the Slovene community in Italy and with other minority organisations throughout Europe.

The self-governed communities of Italians have (together with the communes) the status of co-founders of kindergartens and primary schools with Italian as language of instruction. It is also important that Italian is taught in all schools with Slovene as the language of instruction in the ethnically mixed territory. Most of the students who graduate from one of the Italian secondary

schools continue their studies at the universities in Italy, but some opt for the Slovene ones. In the last few years an increased number of secondary school students, both from Italian and Slovene schools, tended to enroll in either Italian or Slovene schools in Italy, because this enabled them to choose programmes that were not suitably accessible in Slovenia or did not exist there at all. For the Italian minority in Slovenia as well as for the Slovene one in Italy it is expected that they maintain close contacts with the parent country in the use of text-books, in-service teacher training in different courses and organizing visits and excursions for school-leavers at primary and secondary levels.

The role of the Italian minority in media, especially in radio and television, is also very important. The regional seat of the national broadcasting company has two autonomous radio stations, which broadcast one in Italian and the other in Slovene and the regional television channel TV Koper-Capodistria, which broadcasts the largest portion of its whole-day programmes in Italian, a certain part of the programme also being dedicated to the Slovene minority in Italy. As a result of a close co-operation within this TV company and with the news agency connected with it, the Alpe-Adria, which had its seat in Trieste, both minorities (the Italian one in Slovenia and the Slovene one in Italy) have prepared a plan to found a joint cross-border television channel that would be focused on the Slovene-Italian border region, but would in a broader sense cover the entire territory of the cross-border Alpe-Adria working group.

The Italian community in Slovenia does not have its own newspaper. Widely read, however, is the daily *La voce del popolo*, printed in Rijeka. In connection with the Italian minority, local editorial offices of both *La voce del popolo* and *Il Piccolo* of Trieste are functioning in Koper. Several years ago the Italian minority in Koper proposed the foundation of their own cultural centre, in which a central library for this minority and other cultural activities could be located.

The Italian minority in Slovenia does not have its own economic basis, although under Slovene law on privatization, measures were provided to exempt part of the resources that would emerge from this operation and dedicate them for the economic development of minority communities. Of the various social initiatives by the Italian community in Slovenia, let us mention the project for the founding of a news agency and of a cultural centre. The only result of these initiatives is the centre for small enterprises in Piran, in which the Italian community takes part to a limited degree. The Italian minorities in Slovenia and Croatia and their institutions and organizations are the beneficiaries of the financial support from the Italian government on the implementation of the



so-called law on border regions, while Slovenia takes care of the project founding of various initiatives from the self-governing interest communities of the minority.

## Education in bilingual contexts of Slovenia

The Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia contains basic stipulations on international documents regarding the protection of human rights and freedoms. Our Constitution and legislation guarantee to every citizen of Slovenia fundamental human rights including the right to use his/her mother tongue, to maintain and develop his/her culture and national particularities, while special protection is provided for the members of the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national minorities. The Constitution guarantees them special common rights, such as: free use of their mother tongue in private and public life, use of their national symbols, establishment of their own organisations, development of their own cultural activities and information and education in their language, participation in matters of general public concern through their representatives in the Parliament and local government as well as free communication with their parent nation.

The school system, which, on the basis of the legislation, enables the members of ethnic communities to maintain and develop their own language and culture, implements one of the basic human rights and is a practical realization of the state's attitude towards its minorities. In addition to the basic goals and tasks valid for all public schools in Slovenia, members of the two national minorities implement their right to education in their mother tongue and learn about and develop the culture of their nation of origin in their own educational institutions besides learning about and developing the culture of the environment which they live in. A special feature of education in bilingual environments of Slovenia is the concern of the majority nation for the preservation and development of the minority language and culture. In nationally mixed areas, Slovene children of all generations, from kindergarten to the end of secondary school, learn the appropriate second language (Italian or Slovene) in addition to their mother tongue. This obligation, which stems from the Constitution and is defined by school legislation, determines the conditions for understanding among people and for active coexistence of the inhabitants.

The school system of the minorities forms part of the national school system. It is based on the principles and theoretical premises of education in the

Republic of Slovenia. As a consequence of different social and historical circumstances, two different school models are developed in the nationally mixed areas of Slovenia.

In Slovene Istra, there are schools offering education in the Italian language, where Italian is the language of instruction and a subject taught in addition to schools offering instruction in Slovene. The national minority is guaranteed an educational option starting in kindergartens and going all the way to the *matura* (the secondary school leaving) examination. In 1994-95, there were eight Italian kindergartens in the communes of Koper, Izola and Piran with the total of 313 children, four 8-year primary schools with five 4-year branches, attended by 571 children. Finally the community has at its disposal grammar schools in Koper and in Piran and a secondary professional school for economics and mechanics in Izola: altogether about 300 students are enrolled in these schools. In comparison to the statistics of the 1970s and the 1980s, the enrolment in the above mentioned schools and kindergartens has increased considerably, which indicates a good integration of these schools into the social environment and that these schools are also attractive to the children and students from families of Slovene origin. In schools where Italian is the language of instruction the syllabus includes Slovene as a compulsory subject at all levels taught for at least three periods per week. The didactic concept of *Slovene as the second language* has been intensively developed during the past few years.

Schools with instruction in Slovene teach the *Italian language* as a compulsory subject. More than 12.000 pupils in the coastal region learn Italian as second language from pre-school to the secondary level of education. The so-called 'coastal model' of second language acquisition in primary school was established in 1959, and the one for pre-school and secondary education in 1980. The inter-cultural education strategies and the didactic premises of early second foreign language acquisition around the world lead to a renewal of this model. Efforts for a didactic renewal have yielded empirical and practical results.

The bilingual school model of Prekmurje follows the two-way model, where the mother tongue, as well as the second language, are languages of instruction and taught subjects. *Bilingual classes* are attended by students of both nationalities and both mother tongues: *Slovene and Hungarian*. Both languages have an equal status in all subjects, which is implemented by switching from one language to another in certain time intervals. Both languages have an equal position as means of communication in and out of

school as well as for other formal communication in the nationally mixed area. By studying and monitoring the model in Prekmurje, it was found that it was necessary to introduce the 'didactics of languages' approach to language teaching, which takes into account the fact that the Slovene and the Hungarian languages were mother tongues for some pupils and second languages for others attending the same class. The research results have already found their way into teaching practice. 1217 pupils enrolled in bilingual schools during 1994-95.

Learning the *neighbouring* languages has always been a fact in Slovene schools. German, Italian, Hungarian, Croatian and Serbian have been taught in individual regions according to the traditional cultural and economic contacts. Mainly English, but also German and Italian, are taught as *foreign languages* in primary schools in Slovenia. The teaching of English has lately been much influenced by innovations in the field of didactics, which have changed the methods of teaching this particular language. The reformed (nine-year) primary school anticipates, among other things, an earlier enrolment into school, introduction of a first foreign language (mainly English or German) in the fourth grade, and a second foreign language in the sixth grade. National projects (e.g. Foreign Language in Lower Primary Schools, 1992 - 1996) monitor the effects of early foreign language acquisition on 40 per cent of the pupils. Schools in nationally mixed areas are also included in this reform. In addition to the national projects (e. g. Motivation for Learning the Mother Tongue and the Second Language in a Bilingual School in Prekmurje, 1986 - 1994), international projects (e.g. 3767 TEMPUS project: Teaching Foreign/Second Languages in Pre-primary and Primary Sector, 1992 - 1995) also develop didactic strategies for early second language acquisition in bilingual environments.

### **Minority languages in education Language of the minority in the schools of ethnically mixed Slovene Istra**

Slovenia regulates its ethnic and language policies through the Constitution and legal provisions, which implement the language and cultural equality of its citizens according to the territorial (autochthonous) principles. In this way it tries to implement the rights of Italian and Hungarian ethnic communities and promote their language and cultural assimilation within the majority nation. The contents and organization of its education system speak of



an open and tolerant way of experiencing ethnic and cultural diversities among its citizens. School legislation, which enables the members of ethnic communities to preserve and develop their own language and culture, puts into force one of the basic human rights. In Slovenia there are two models of school systems, which protect the rights of minorities, through both content and organization: the Prekmurje bi-directional model of bilingual education and the combined model in the Littoral region. The Littoral school system model is carried out in pre-school, primary and secondary education of the Koper municipality and in the communes of Izola and Piran.

The combined model used in the Littoral region, which includes the regulation of the school system for the Italian minority and teaching the second language in the mainstream schools, also includes adaptations of the national curriculum at all levels. Its origins were contained in the legislation of 1959. In the following forty years it was defined by a number of laws and by other statutory provisions and, following the declaration of independence of Slovenia in 1991, the provisions of the Constitution only made its position stronger; later it was also confirmed by school legislation. Slovenia reinforced the concept of its ethnic and language policy by signing the Vienna convention in 1994.

Italian has been a compulsory subject in all the mainstream primary schools in the ethnically mixed territories of Slovene Istra since 1959. In the last forty years the Italian language (as a subject) has been constantly, and more or less intensively, included at the centre of political and professional interest in the development of the school system. At the time of the reform movements (1965; the introduction of audio-visual methods: 1978; renovation of curricula: 1980-1985 INSET for teachers) there have been periods of stagnation as well. At the time of the tendencies towards an earlier introduction of foreign language teaching, Italian was, besides Hungarian, the only systematically organized early language teaching. During the development of the Littoral model, similarities in approach have been noted with the models of Bolzano and Val d'Aosta. However, the didactic aspects of teaching are synchronised with the latest guidelines for projects, and the documents of the Council of Europe.

In the communes of Koper, Izola and Piran about a 1000 children are learning Italian in nursery schools, 6173 primary school children in compulsory programmes and further 750 optionally. About 4200 secondary school students learn it at the beginners, intermediate, or even advanced level. Italian is also one of the subjects that can be chosen as one of the school leaving exams, either as part of national testing (*matura*) in grammar schools or as part of the final exams in the professional schools of ethnically mixed Slovene Istra.



In a multilingual environment shared by people of various cultures, a child is getting acquainted with the second language and its culture at a very early stage. Such children are successful in learning it alongside their mother tongue only if the environment encourages bilinguality and accepts equally the use of both languages. The family and the school play the most important role in this aspect, because they are the ones who guide, direct and consolidate the second language learning. Theoretic standpoints in favour of early second language acquisition emphasise the importance of a didactic realisation of such learning.

## The second language teaching

In the Slovene Littoral the teaching of Italian as a second language in primary schools has a long-standing tradition of 35 years. It is based, however, on a tradition with syllabi and textbooks which are mostly out of date. The applications of glotodidactics in bilingual models around the world and the teachers' needs to modernise their teaching motivated the author of this article to search for an appropriate early teaching model of the Italian language in Slovene schools.

In the research on second language utterance formation (Čok, L. 1994) a more suitable didactic model was prepared, which was based at the primary level and which followed the concepts of compulsory education in Slovenia. Beside intercultural education, the Italian language teaching should take into account the special needs of children from nationally mixed areas as well as include early second language learning principles.

A group of practising teachers and three researchers from the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana were included in the model testing stage. In the school years 1991/92, 1992/93, 1993/94, the innovatory model was tested at pre-school and primary levels, in two groups with fifty-two children. Second language teaching was integrated into class-teaching, the syllabus was adapted and new materials were written for the experiment. Teachers and headmasters were included in the research.

In this sector of the school field research a case-study proved to be the most suitable research method. The case report describes a longitudinal monitoring of the second language teaching in one innovatory model and two variants, which differed in the duration of the second language contact. When qualitative research methods were complemented by communication and co-

operation between researchers and innovators the case-study approached action research. Research findings were reached by using qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Qualitative research was complemented by quantitative data analysis especially when a cause and effect relationship between the second language and the mother tongue acquisition had to be established.

The research findings present characteristics of the second language utterance formation in the Italian language, the structure of children's guided communication in this language, and the role of the pupil and the teacher in a communication exchange. The observation of cross-linguistic influences and phenomena of mother tongue transfer into the Italian language motivated the researchers to assess the interdependencies of both languages. The case findings proved that in the learning process the frequency of second language contact is important, that an awareness of a mother tongue is essential for successful second language acquisition and that the influence of a co-ordinated language education is more important for positive results in both languages than an accelerated second language learning.

## **Conclusion: Language policy and school education in ethnically mixed areas**

In nationally mixed areas, the school education is supposed to have, from the aspect of sociological-linguistic issues, a double function:

- to enable the pupils to get acquainted with the autochthonous cultures and their languages in such areas (first language, mother tongue, as well as all original languages and cultures);
- to co-create a suitable attitude towards their own culture and language and other autochthonous (and non-autochthonous) cultures and languages.

In the western part of the Slovene cultural entity, the two cultures and the two languages that intermingle along the Slovene-Italian frontier can be preserved and affirmed with suitable language and school policies (through selection of appropriate curricula, organisation and programmes). Language and language practice, however, are not the only indicators when assessing an individual's cultural identity.

Although language is, by itself, a part of culture and a means for getting aware of it, its cultural dimension is often left out during language teaching at schools. Pupils in the mainstream schools should be aware why they are learning the language of the ethnic minority (second language), they should

become acquainted with the culture and the social-historical development of the nation, which exists along with their own. Only in this way will they be able to develop a suitable attitude towards it and accept the principle of multicultural norms. Apart from this, it is important that multicultural norms, as a social value, are accepted by all European and other nations, and not only by ethnic minorities or small nations.

In their mission, however, schools should, by all means, consider education within the family and other factors in the near and wider environment (TV and other mass media, cultural and other public manifestations, the influence of the so-called celebrities, information science, literature, etc.), which co-shape the pupils' attitude towards languages and cultures in their natural surrounding. Due to a greater inflow of information from the Italian media, notably television, there are many school children both in Slovenia and Italy that appreciate Italian culture more than their own. The issue regarding the function of language and culture becomes even greater, if school education in ethnically mixed areas is observed from the aspect of the future European integrations. On the presumption that the English language will play an ever increasing part in the European integration processes, the following two questions arise:

- the status of autochthonous languages in relation to English as the language of communication;
- the role of the present minority schools, which will, after the abolition of borders in the united Europe, carry out their mission in a narrowed and more specific educational dimension.

One of the great challenges of the present European reality is in the very attempt to carry out the economic and political integration within the constraints of cultural diversity and thus to offer to the global public, after some three centuries, a new view of civilisation that would not equate social-economic globalisation with the social-cultural variant of the American melting pot. This new European view of civilisation will be confronted with its first test in the numerous European "contact" settings. Here - apart from the issues of international contact and settling the functional social, economic and administrative issues – the conditions for coexistence and the mechanisms to protect cultural specificities of different peoples, as well as ethnic and language groups, are created. Abolition of different kinds of "frontiers" will demand a major revision of traditional and ethnocentric conceptions and social behaviours that were so well exemplified by classical nationalism. It will be necessary to disclose and to get to know that, alongside a certain national identity, other ethnic, regional

and language identities also exist and that the border between them is not linear and clearly recognised, but that it forms an complex social-cultural entity, within which constant exchanges and conversions are taking place. But in spite of this never-ending "boiling" on the edge or in the area of intercultural contacts, the cultural entities are remaining surprisingly stable and offering a kind of "longue-durée" background, to which simultaneous social entities are adapted more or less consciously and more or less successfully.

In such circumstances people yet again discover, even after some long-standing alienating procedures and state assimilation practices, their ethnic, regional and language identity. But due to these very practices this identity does not always agree with the actual language use. An objective definition is particularly different, if not impossible, in traditionally ethnically mixed urban environments, for here we meet, as a rule, a multigenerational interaction of mixed marriages, within the framework of which the ethnic and language orientation or cultural identification depend on the fate of individuals. In circumstances where nation-state exclusivism, and with it a connected single language, no longer represent a dominant model, this is not such a problematic choice as it was in the near past. In areas of cultural contacts people can easier associate knowledge and the practice of local languages with the knowledge and practice of various standardised national languages, along which the international code of communication based on English is being gradually affirmed (Knudsen, 1996 ; Williams, 1996).

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## **Vloga jezika manjšine v slovenskem izobraževanju: primer Slovenske Istre**

### **Povzetek**

Pričujoči prispevek želi izpostaviti izobraževalno vlogo oziroma učenja jezika soseda v slovenskih šolah, prednostno na obmejnem, narodnostno mešanem ozemlju. Pri tem se avtorica opira na primere iz Slovenske Istre oziroma izsledke študije opravljene na območju ob slovensko-italijanski meji. Izpostavljena je politika izobraževanja na dvojezičnem ozemlju in učenje drugega jezika v šolah tega območja. Izkušnje kažeje, da učenje jezika soseda od otroštva dalje izboljšuje izhodiščni položaj osebe rojene na dvojezičnem območju. Taka oseba ni le bolj prilagodljiva, temveč tudi tolerantna in sposobna ubrati pota koeksistence oziroma konsenza, saj jo izobraževalni sistem ne utesnjuje v razmišljanju, ampak ji na široko odpira vrata kulture soseda. S tem, ko jo spoznava, postaja taka oseba oziroma otrok v razmišljanju širok in utrjen za preizkušnje življenja.