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FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY AND CULTURAL CONNECTION THROUGH STUDENTS AS TRAINERS IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY: AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY

Introduction¹

This chapter presents an introductory study for a larger research project aimed at exploring potential pathways to foster mutual understanding and the impact of proactive interactions between secondary school students from the Slovene national minority in Italy and their peers in an Italian majority-language school community. In this context, minority students assume the roles of informants, narrators, and mediators, conveying linguistic, cultural, and identity aspects of their community to mainstream lower secondary school pupils and teachers. Additionally, the project seeks to collaboratively develop content and methodologies that would bring the minority language closer to majority-language children, viewed through the perspective of young people.

The research is situated within the broader framework of a research programme that outlines the current scientific focus of the Institute for Linguistic Studies at the Centre for Scientific Research in Koper. Titled Slovenhood Dimensions between Local and Global at the Beginning of the

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¹ This work was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency / Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije – ARIS. Grant P5-0409 Slovenhood Dimensions between Local and Global at the Beginning of the Third Millennium numbers and Grant J6-3132, Strengthening a (socio)constructivist approach in Slovenian border regions Primary FL teaching and learning through a co-constructed extension and evaluation of the CoBlaLT model.

Third Millennium, the programme primarily aims to deepen the understanding of Slovenian identity. This study contributes to the investigation of the role and the potential of teaching and learning the Slovene language outside the borders of the Republic of Slovenia as a tool for intercultural and social integration.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in research on intergroup contact, minority (youth) studies, the teaching and learning of neighbouring languages – particularly the role of mediation in language education (Council of Europe, 2020) – and socioconstructivist theories. However, during the initial phase of experimentation, the research has evolved, expanding and likely undergoing a significant theoretical shift from an external perspective on groups and intergroup contact to one that incorporates theories positioning the studied group as co-participants, thus fostering a more personal and nuanced engagement with interethnic contact theories. The emerging theoretical framework integrates research on agency among minority students theoretical paradigms regarding minority languages new speakers, peer-to-peer education, critical youth research, ethnography, and language policy – all of which have informed the study's participatory approach.

This chapter presents partial findings that lay the groundwork for the completion of the research², and which, according to the researcher, compellingly demonstrate the importance and necessity of conducting studies of this nature in order to provide scientifically validated tools for fostering societal growth in terms of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding.

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 2 The research will continue and be completed by June 2025 within the same school institutions.

Slovene language between minority and mainstream community and the call from the territory

Slovene in Italy and Friuli Venezia Giulia. Reflections and observations

In the Italian region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, which borders Slovenia, Slovene is spoken by the Slovene national community³ in various contexts, including at home, in public spaces, during social interactions, and in schools with Slovene as the language of instruction. The last is the context and setting for this research.

Members of the Slovene national minority in Italy are bilingual as they speak Slovene and Italian (Pertot, 2024). More, they speak both standard Slovene, the official language of the Republic of Slovenia, and its various regional dialects or variants (Jagodic, Kaučič Baša & Dapit, 2017 in Vidau, 2024, 3). The relationship Slovenian speakers have with standard Slovene language and their code choices especially between the latter and various regional *lects* is very interestingly analysed in Grgič (2024) who gives us a complex and somewhat problematic view of it, allowing us to understand above all its evolutionary state. About identity issues we assume with importance Vidau's claim (2024) that the perception of what is the Slovene community varies depending on the settlement areas, and that the identity is deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural and political environment in which a community and its members live (Vidau, 2024, 2). We consider this statement to be particularly significant for our research, which does not directly investigate questions of identity, but looks for tools to be able to interpret statements by participants belonging to the community as correctly as possible. Furthermore, the studies cited above are particularly valuable to us because they describe a community in a way that highlights problematic issues, moves away from monolithic definitions,

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3 As Vidau well describes, "the Slovene national community in Italy is a border-area national minority that gained minority status during the nation-state formation in the Upper Adriatic in the late 19th century of which the officially designated Slovene-speaking area includes 15% of municipalities in FVG, covering 32 municipalities: eight in Gorica/Gorizia, six in Trst/Trieste, and 18 in Videm/Udine, including Benečija/Benecia, Rezija/Resia, and Kanalska dolina/Val Canale. This designation is based on the 2001 Slovene Minority Law and a decree from 2007. However, the traditional Slovene settlement area in FVG is larger, encompassing a total of 39 municipalities" (Vidau, 2024,1).

and emphasises challenges that, if addressed constructively, we believe can lead to its growth and strengthening.

From “the other side”, the Italian-Friulian-German-or-other-language-speaking majority community in Friuli Venezia Giulia region typically does not speak or have knowledge of the Slovene language, that is “members of the majority population are not, in principle, speakers of the Slovene language, although in the new millennium this language is a source of growing interest for them” (Pertot, 2024, 148) interpreted by the large number of Slovene language courses promoted by associations and private language schools. The structure of the Slovene community, along with its organisations and institutions, is generally unfamiliar to the majority. Slovene traditions are primarily recognised through festivals, performances, village events, historical commemorations, and similar cultural expressions. Currently, no specific studies have examined the extent of awareness within mainstream Italian society regarding the Slovenian national community. The insights presented here are based on years of field observations within and between these communities, with a particular focus on language education.

Finally, there is as yet no systematic, curricular presence of Slovene language teaching in schools with Italian instruction at any level, neither primary nor secondary⁴ (see Cavaion, 2022a).

This is a major missed opportunity for the majority community, which cannot enjoy the possibility of getting to closely know the culture of a community which has always been an important part of the cultural and economic life of the cities of Trieste and Gorizia, certainly the indigenous culture of all Karst villages, the fascinating settlement of Resian and Val Canale culture in the province of Udine and all the other Slovenian-speaking realities in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region that are difficult to exhaustively list in this

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4 Slovene was taught as a foreign language in two lower secondary schools in Trieste and Muggia for 15 years with great commitment and an experimental spirit (see Bogatec & Lokar, 2016). This teaching is now in decline for very different reasons. First of all the problem that there is no regional language policy that supports the teaching of the languages of the region, the national minority community and the neighbouring country. Secondly, there is the major problem of the availability of Slovenian language teachers.

At secondary level, Slovene was and is taught sporadically as a non-compulsory school subject for similar reasons, which have not been fully investigated yet.

space, as well as an important opportunity to better understand the culture of neighbouring Slovenia, the kin nation of Slovenian community in Italy⁵.

On the other hand the absence of the teaching and learning of Slovenian language in the mainstream Italian curricula of the Friuli Venezia Giulia is also a missed opportunity for the closed-in minority community who continue to experience a complex relationship with the majority community being caught between two opposing national ideologies (see Pertot, 2024, 150, paragraph 2.2), that is between the instinct to close oneself off to keep communication in one's own language intact and open oneself up to the demands that modern societies increasingly impose.

Opening, telling and explaining oneself have an important function in the development of self-awareness. Listening to the other and, to cite a very significant publication in the context of our research, getting to know “the close otherness” (Čok, 2006), is the basis of a mutual understanding. This relationship of mutual enrichment and openness towards each other is the principle and the final aim that certainly guided the researcher in this study.

To summarise the critical points resulting from the researcher's field observations⁶ corroborated at the moment by little literature on the subject are, in order of importance to this research:

- *Slovene language and culture is (almost completely) absent in the curricula of Italian mainstream schools in the FVG region (Cavaion, 2016; 2022a), with the exception of the experience of two lower secondary schools in the province of Trieste and Muggia, where Slovene is on the curriculum as a language of the European Community (see footnote 3);*
- *There is little knowledge within the majority population about the Slovenian minority community and other autochthon national and linguistic communities in general (no research in Italy yet; see Čok, 2021 for Slovenia)*

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5 For a reflection about Slovene language as a neighbouring language see Cavaion, 2016; 2020b.

6 The researcher is engaged since years in investigating whether it is possible to turn the language of the territory into an effective instrument of social integration and which methods are suitable for this. Specifically, she examines the teaching and learning of the Italian and Slovene language in the Italian-Slovenian border region using an ethnographic approach that enabled her to become more aware of the problems that characterise this interethnic relationship (see Cavaion, 2016; 2017; 2020a; 2022a; 2022b; Čok & Cavaion, 2023).

- *There are no established, continuative contact between Italian (mainstream) and Slovenian (minority) school communities* (Cavaion, 2022a);
- *The “voice” of young representatives of the Slovene national community seems to be underrepresented in research and, hypothetically, in community society.* Numerous important studies have been conducted “on” minority youth (see Brezigar & Vidau, 2021; Jagodic, 2018; Jagodic & Vidau, 2009; Jurić Pahor, 2023; Kržišnik-Bukić, 2017; Obid, 2018; Riman & Lukanovič, 2021; Udovič, Komac & Brglez, 2022). However, the methodologies used in these studies, while reporting their perspectives, do not deeply engage Slovenian youth in the research process itself. From community viewpoint it needs further investigations, not conducted yet within this introductory study. In any case this is the element that inspired the aim of assigning young people from the minority community the role of agents of social change, to check whether they actually share this observation and whether the research helps them to develop a new awareness in this area.

The call from the territory

The research idea emerged from a request by a mainstream Italian school in Gorizia to the researcher to introduce lessons on the Slovene language, culture, and community to its lower secondary school students. The aim was to foster language and cultural awareness while promoting positive (intergroup) contact. However, a significant challenge was the widespread shortage of qualified teachers, an issue affecting not only Italian schools but also Slovene minority schools and attributable to a worldwide crisis in the vocation for teaching.⁸

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7 Some very significant projects have been realised, but they are already in the past. We mention the main ones: Interreg projects, all proposed and coordinated from the Slovenian national community; Mi.Ma 2000-2006; Jezik-Lingua 2007-2013; Eduka 2014; Eduka 2, 2014-2020; Sporadic projects including Slovene language teaching in primary mainstream schools which in some cases implies some contact with schools with Slovene as a medium of instruction (Cavaion, 2022a) and a few isolated initiatives in the secondary schools of the Slovenian minority schools. See footnote 8.

8 In the specific case of teaching Slovene in Italian-speaking schools, the necessary qualification would be a university degree in Slovene as a foreign language, a degree that is not very common among young people in the Community and which is hardly known as a study option among the young people who took part in this research. Almost all of the students involved replied that they had never thought of teaching their language to non-Slovenian speakers and that they had not received any information or special encouragement from the school or the community in general.

To address this, critical point the researcher proposed a collaboration between the Italian-instruction school and a neighbouring high school where Slovene was the language of instruction. This partnership would enable senior high school students to deliver the lessons. A similar initiative had already been implemented with some success in the province of Trieste, albeit in a less structured manner, by teachers involved in Slovene language education in Italian schools⁹.

The initiative was formally developed within the framework of Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO), a program established by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM). Designed for students in the last three years of secondary school PCTO integrates theoretical learning with practical experiences in real-world contexts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of work dynamics.¹⁰

As a result, upper secondary school students with Slovene as the language of instruction were engaged in a training program to teach their own language and culture. However, the concept of “own language” itself was critically examined, prompting students to reflect on their personal and collective relationship with the Slovene language.

In this first part of research, which started on March 2024 and ended on June 2024, students participated in a four-week training period – two hours per week, the trainers were the researcher for the methodological reflection and a Slovene-as-a-mother-tongue expert in teaching Slovene as foreign/community language for the linguistic aspects –, followed by five weeks of active teaching in mainstream Italian classrooms supported and monitored by the

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9 The experiment we are referring to is related to a foreign language teacher working at a secondary school in Trieste where Slovene is the language of instruction. She was part of a working group that dealt with the development of materials for the teaching and learning of Slovene in Italian mainstream schools working between 2008 and 2020.

10 The PCTO represent an essential educational strategy defined by the MIM guidelines, through a law (Article 1, paragraph 785, of Law No 145 of 30 December 2018) which redefined the school-work alternation provided for by Law 107/2015, integrating it in a more structured way into the curriculum of educational institutions. The new legislation envisages a minimum duration of 210 hours in the three-year periods of vocational institutes, 150 hours in technical institutes and 90 hours in high schools, maintaining the compulsory nature of PCTOs as a requirement for access to state examinations, as indicated by Legislative Decree No 62 of 13 April 2017. <https://www.mim.gov.it/-/linee-guida-dei-percorsi-per-le-competenze-trasversali-e-per-l-orientamento>

local school teachers, coordinators of the PCTO program and the researcher. Their involvement was formally recognised as part of their PCTO pathway.

Moreover, students were made aware that this initiative was a scientific didactic experiment. They actively agreed to take part not just as participants but as co-creators of the learning experience¹¹.

As a result of this experimental research we all agreed (researcher, students, teachers, school heads) that the research and experiment will be continued on the next school year (2024–2025).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is very articulate and in the period from the beginning of the research to the realisation of this first part of it has already seen changes that we consider to be an achievement from a theoretical-methodological point of view.

Our theoretical starting point was in fact based on theories on *Contact theory* (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) and *Minority (youth) studies* through a strong local deep view (Brezigar & Vidau, 2021; Jagodic, 2018; Jagodic & Vidau, 2009; Jurić Pahor, 2023; Kržišnik-Bukić, 2017; Obid, 2018; Riman & Lukanovič, 2021; Udovič, Komac & Brglez, 2022). Then following the observed need of giving youngsters “a voice” and an active role, we looked for a world-wide based view on minority youth within peace education studies, mainly North American studies (Hornberger, 2008; McCharty, 2011), theory about *Agency* in language learning and teaching within minority youth (Teng, 2019; Campano et al., 2020; Cook-Sather, 2020; Jayakumar, 2011), the importance of affection in language learning and teaching through the theoretical work *The Neurobiology of Affect in Language* (John H. Schumann, 1997), the specificity of being effective mediators in language education and behaviour thanks to the framework regarding *Mediation* in language teaching and learning (Council of Europe, 2020), the importance of Peer-to-peer education, the framework of *Socioconstructivism*

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11 The research followed ethical regulations devised for the wider framework of the research *Slovenhood Dimensions between Local and Global at the Beginning of the Third Millennium*. Students and teachers signed agreements for their participation to the research.

in language teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1986; Lantof & Thorne, 2006; Neguerela-Azarola & Garcia, 2016) and then the methodological framework of Critical youth research (Ali & McCarthy, 2020) and Ethnography and language policy (McCarthy, 2011). More, for the specificity of our investigation, both theoretical and contextual analysis studies concerning *new speakers* of minority languages are certainly important, of which a very interesting chapter is offered by Pertot (2024, 147–166).

The research

Aim and objectives

As we described at the beginning of this chapter, this study represents an introductory study¹² of a broader research investigating on the implementation of possible paths to collaboratively develop content and methods that would bring the minority language closer to majority-language children from the perspective of young people and on the impact in terms of agency of such a proactive interactions between secondary school students from the Slovene national minority in Italy and their peers in an Italian majority-language school community.

Specifically, the broader research aims at:

- **Aim1. Developing/co-creating a teaching module with secondary school students** to ‘authentically/meaningfully’ speak and explain “their” language, culture and community, that is report on their relationship to Slovene language, as a tool to develop cultural awareness in both mainstream schools and schools with Slovene as a medium of instruction;
- **Aim2. Empowering students from linguistic communities to become “agents of social change”** through language teaching and reflection, inspired by the observation about the lack of “youth voice” within research and, maybe, hypothetically within community society;

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¹² An introductory study, slightly differently from pilot research, is broader in scope. It is used to explore a topic or research question in its early stages, and it might not only test the methodology but also aim to generate initial findings, provide background information, or explore the feasibility of a research problem or question before diving into more detailed research.

- **Aim3. Identifying the methodological approach to train students** to speak and teach effectively about the minority language and culture they belong to with different levels of identity.

Overall, the research wants to contribute to creating tools for coexistence in the multilingual society, creating links (exchange, mutual understanding) between (mainstream and national minority) communities through (peer-to-peer) language teaching and learning.

Questions research

See ANNEX 1

Methodology

The overall study is an investigation which aims to contribute to triggering a change in the relationship between majority and minority communities point out possible ways for society to open up in order to make the most of the richness of the area's linguistic and cultural diversity, taking into account all the complexities and points of view, especially that of the young people involved in this experiment. Consequently, the research is qualitative and ethnographic, participatory in its method, inspired by theories such as those of critical youth research in education (Ali & McCarthy, 2020) of which the founding principles have guided the researcher are:

- With-ness (that is, the epistemological solidarity with the communities and individuals with whom we pursue enquiry),
- multi-modality (that is, inclusive of visual oral and other modalities in addition to writing),
- pedagogical nimbleness (that is, the ability to shift without warning or concern the topic and workshop plan on a given afternoon),
- trust (including "recognising and embracing vulnerability") and
- play.¹³

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13 From the chapter "Participatory, multimodal, ethnography with youth" (Ali & McCarthy,

It is a study with Slovenian community youth not a study about them.

Our positionality in fact is typical of ethnographic research in which the researcher becomes an integral part of the setting she is investigating. To this end, the researcher has always asked herself the question of how her own presence is perceived by noting observations in her journal during the research process. This positionality is also evident from the type of research questions that for some aspects are formulated as a collective question, a 'we' that includes the point of view of the researcher and students according to the principle of 'with-ness' indicated above.

Participants to the introductory study phase

The participants in this phase have been:

- 2 classes of a *secours* mainstream lower secondary school of Gorizia (80 pupils, 11–12 years old)
- Teachers at mainstream lower secondary school (observers, 4 teachers)
- Trainers for students (3 trainers, the researcher, the coordinator of secondary school students, an expert teacher of Slovene as a «language of the territory / foreign language»)

Data collection and analysis

Data collection followed the typical data collection of a qualitative research done through document analysis, observation and interviews with a questionnaire delivered at the beginning and at the end of the research with a triangulation of viewpoints: the researcher's, the students' and the pupils' one, the teachers (for details see ANNEX 2).

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a typical Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) approach, which involves examining, interpreting, and making sense of non-numeric data – such as text, audio, video, or images – to uncover patterns, themes, meanings, and insights. The technique primarily used was narrative analysis, focusing on understanding the stories and accounts within the data. This approach examines how individuals construct and make sense of their personal experiences, emphasizing the structure and content of the narratives to gain insight into both individual and collective meaning-making. Questionnaires have been analysed descriptively.

Results with some elements for discussion

We would like to point out that in the context of an introductory study, the following results are partial with respect to the research questions posed. They represent certainly a tool for improving the same research questions with a view to conducting a second experiment.

Aim 1: To co-create a teaching module with secondary students (...).

In response to the research question regarding which topics and aspects of their belonging to the Slovene community students are most willing to express and share, the findings highlight several key areas of focus.

First and foremost, **festive traditions and festivals** emerged as the most prominent topics students are eager to share, indicating a strong connection to cultural celebrations as expressions of community identity. This was followed by a keen interest in **cultural and sports associations**, particularly those related to sports associations and **famous Slovene sports figures**, suggesting a significant pride in national achievements in the sporting world.

Next, the discussion turned to **symbols of Slovene identity**, which were also identified as important but not as central as the previous two topics. This

suggests that while symbols hold value, they may not evoke the same level of engagement as shared traditions and national figures.

Lastly, a more **creative proposal** emerged, reflecting a desire to explore **everyday life** of younger generations. This idea was likely inspired by themes from my poster on “Big and small Cc [culture]: culture as everyday life” by Tomalin and Stemplenski (1996), in which students combined discussions of cultural identity and school attendance, and how dialects connect to their cultural backgrounds.

When considering the role of **institutions**, particularly schools, the responses were more nuanced. While the students expressed positive feelings about their school environment, describing it as having a **good atmosphere**, there seemed to be a sense that institutions, in general, were perceived as somewhat distant or removed from their everyday lives. This impression aligns with the idea that students are more inclined to engage with aspects of the Slovene community that are personally meaningful, rather than institutional structures.

In terms of the overall findings, it appears that these choices represent just the beginning of a reflective process. There was insufficient time for deeper exploration or further development of these themes. However, the aim of involving students in reflection has been achieved, providing initial insights into what aspects of their identity within the Slovene community they are most eager to explore and express.

Aim 2: To empower students of minority communities to become agents of social change through language teaching and reflection.

Regarding this objective, the following observations must be made. During initial discussion within the ‘training’ phase – specifically, the co-construction of the proposed pathway for students of the Italian-language school – an evident sense of impatience, if not outright unease, has spontaneously emerged among students attending the Slovene-language high school. This sentiment stemmed from their perception of a lack of recognition of their specific identity, both by the majority community in Italy and by the majority

community of their kin state, Slovenia. The discussion of this sensitive aspect of identity naturally evolved into a collective reflection on possible responses, both at an individual and group level. Specifically, students considered how to react to instances of ignorance or non-recognition of their status as members of the Slovenian minority in Italy and Slovenia. This reflection further developed into the broader question of “how to effect change,” which appears to support the researcher’s perspective on the importance of engaging young people in actively improving their social environment and contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and informed society.

Students from minority communities to become agents of social change

That said, in exploring the aim of empowering students from minority communities to become agents of social change through language teaching and reflection, the responses from the students highlighted both optimism and challenges. When asked whether they believed they could be effective agents of social change, the resounding answer was **“Yes, definitely!”** This indicates a strong sense of agency among the students, suggesting that they believe in their potential to create positive change. However, there was also a recognition of limitations. Students noted that there is **little space for youth decisions and actions within institutions**, reflecting a disconnect between their enthusiasm for social change and the opportunities available to express that agency within institutional structures.

Another key observation was that **associations** – which students find important and enjoyable¹⁴ – tend to be **hierarchical**, where older members are viewed as more significant or influential. These dynamic limits the ability of younger students to fully participate in decision-making processes, reinforcing traditional power structures that can stifle the voices of youth, even in spaces where they feel engaged. Of the 21 students, only one girl was active as a leader of a youth organisation, which gave us interesting insights that we will analyse in detail as soon as the study is completed with the second part in the next school year.

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 14 Almost all the young people involved in the research are members of one or more Slovenian cultural or sports associations in the Gorica area.

From a researcher's perspective, there seems to be **little space for debating** these ideas in more formal or structured settings. One example of this limitation was the **BLOG** (digital sharing and debating platform) that was introduced. While the platform was designed to provide an open space for reflection and discussion, it was quickly apparent that it was **not the right medium** for deep, meaningful dialogue on such complex issues. The format and nature of the platform didn't facilitate the kind of engaged substantive conversation needed for exploring social change.

Given these observations, it may be worthwhile to investigate minority youth within different theoretical frameworks, especially those that address the dynamics of empowerment, youth participation, and social change. This could offer deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities these students face in becoming true agents of change, both within and outside institutional settings. Exploring alternative frameworks could also help identify new methods of engaging students in reflective practices that better support their growth as leaders and change-makers.

Students' desire to open up

Through observations, questionnaires, discussions and interviews we start investigating students' desire to open up and engage with others which we noted that grew over the course of the action research. Initially, students were somewhat reserved, but by the end of the study, their willingness to share and participate had noticeably improved. Students identified several key reasons for this positive change. First, they noted that they had **worked extensively with their peers** in the Italian school, which fostered a sense of collaboration and teamwork. This collaboration helped to build a sense of community and trust, making it easier for students to open up. Additionally, students appreciated that their **peers in the school showed genuine interest in their culture**, which encouraged them to share more freely. The opportunity to **speak about their culture** was another significant factor, as it allowed them to assert their identity and feel validated in their experiences.

One important observation that emerged from the students' reflections was the feeling of being **welcome**. This sense of belonging and acceptance was instrumental in empowering them to engage more openly in discussions about

social change. The shared awareness of feeling included and respected helped students feel more confident in their ability to contribute to conversations about cultural identity and societal transformation.

These experiences suggest that creating environments where students feel **welcome** and their **cultural contributions are valued** can significantly enhance their readiness and motivation to become active agents of social change. When students feel that their voices matter, they are more likely to take initiative and engage in meaningful actions that promote inclusivity and positive transformation within their communities.

Is teaching our own language a tool for fostering good connections?

In exploring whether teaching “their own” language plays a significant role in fostering good intergroup connection, the students provided **tentative answers**, reflecting their ongoing understanding of the issue. While they generally agreed that teaching language is important for connection, there was **little awareness** about the challenges involved in teaching a language they master or even their own language. This suggests that, although students recognised the role of language, they had not yet fully grasped the complexities of teaching it effectively, particularly when it comes to imparting the nuances of language and culture to others and its full potential is not clear yet to students, even not really skilled yet.

When asked about the appeal of language teaching, many students responded positively, stating that **language teaching is fun**, which points to the engaging and enjoyable aspects of learning and sharing a language. This enthusiasm suggests that the act of teaching a language can indeed facilitate positive connections between groups, especially when the process is framed as a fun and interactive experience.

In terms of what pupils of the Italian mainstream school remembered most from the experience, the majority of them – **31 pupils** – remembered the **language** itself as the most prominent element. This highlights the central role that language played in their learning experience. **21 pupils** recalled both **language and cultural elements**, indicating that the integration of culture

with language instruction is also a key factor in fostering deeper connections. **22 pupils** remembered more about **traditions**.

The pupils who received lessons in Slovene language from secondary school students primarily remembered elements tied to their own language and culture – “Some words are similar to the Italian ones!”, “Some words are very similar to my mother tongue Serbian!” – or discovered the words their everyday life – “I didn’t know was Slovene, so I already knew how to pronounce them well!”, “The *piazza transalpina* in Slovene is called *trg Europe!*”. They recalled specific words, like *ena* (one), greetings, and expressed curious, amused observations about Slovenian school institutions - such as how the last day of high school students turn the institute upside down. They also remembered the strong sense of community in Slovenian villages and small towns, and that in some places in Gorizia, Slovene is the only language spoken. Pupils were impressed by Slovenian traditions, with particular mention of the carnival and the unique local customs. They also noted linguistic differences, like how time is read differently in Slovenian compared to Italian, and the distinction between various Slovene dialects.

Are we students effective teachers of Slovene language and culture?

Regarding the **effectiveness of the lessons**, the pupils from Italian school gave positive feedback: 57 out of 76 students held a very positive opinion, describing their teachers as excellent or very good ambassadors. The lessons were appreciated for being nice, funny, and engaging with simple explanations, though some pupils noted that the student-teachers were occasionally shy or lacked confidence. Many students expressed a desire to open up (47/76), sharing personal aspects of their lives in class.

Teachers in class observed that the students from Slovenian school often used anecdotes from their everyday lives, offering simple but effective descriptions. When asked about the quality of student-teacher relationships, 74 out of 76 students said that they preferred having students as teachers over adult teachers, citing that adult teachers were often perceived as boring and distant, whereas student-teachers were closer to their age, funny, and explained things simply.

These results suggest that Slovene students from the minority community express openness, which is well perceived by mainstream school pupils, contributing to a sense of connection. The concept of agency, as both an active and silent phenomenon, emerges in this context, highlighting the complexity of individual and collective agency, which warrants further investigation.

Research Questions A3: Identifying the methodological approach to train students.

During the training period aimed at empowering students to become “good agents and mediators for our own language and culture,” students showed a range of perceptions and experiences, as observed by the researcher. The **autobiographical approach** was particularly appreciated by the students, as it allowed them to connect their own life stories to the language and culture they were about to teach. This approach provided a personal and engaging way to explore their identities and the role of language in their lives. Additionally, the **plurilingual approach**, which included languages like Hungarian and German, was positively received, encouraging students to draw connections between multiple languages and their cultural significance.

As the researcher, the observation during this training period revealed that students were somewhat **unaware of their own level of Slovene language proficiency** and their knowledge of Slovene community institutional frameworks, which proved to be a delicate issue within the context of this ethnographic study. This lack of awareness highlighted the need for more time and focus on developing their understanding of both language and cultural context.

In terms of engagement, the **approach chosen** to make students feel comfortable and “free” to play or not play the role was built around creating an environment of openness and autonomy. The idea was to allow students to choose their level of involvement without feeling pressured, fostering a sense of empowerment and control over their learning process.

Regarding the duration of the training, it became clear that **more time** was needed to fully sensitise students to language and cultural awareness. The training period, though valuable, was likely not long enough to achieve full

language sensitisation or deep reflection on their role as cultural agents. the training time in this experiment, which was carried out in the afternoon, was described as inappropriate. The students were already confronted with dedicated considerations after seven school hours. The next experiment would be better conducted in the morning and possibly linked to the curriculum.

Reflective activities such as reflection sheets, and group discussions provided valuable insights into students' thoughts and growth, but these also pointed to the need for extended engagement and time to explore language and culture in greater depth.

In general, a critical point of the experiment was the lack of trained researchers for scientific and well-founded participant observation, which is to be organised in the next experiment instead.

Conclusions

This introductory study has provided multiple confirmations regarding both the theoretical framework and the research approach. From a theoretical point of view, the results support the *contact hypothesis*. They show that a deeper sense of connectedness is created when students work together towards a common goal – e.g. as instructors and learners in a peer-to-peer relationship – and are supported by “authorities” such as their teachers and school leaders. Additionally, insights from the neurobiology of affect in language learning reaffirm that emotional well-being, a welcoming environment, and a sense of belonging are crucial elements for successful language acquisition and engagement. The study also aligns with minority youth research, particularly in highlighting young people's desire to open up and the central role that language – especially dialects – plays in their identity. Slovenian students have a deep and nuanced relationship with both standard Slovene and their cherished dialects. Raising awareness of this connection could further enhance their ability to introduce and present themselves effectively.

From a methodological standpoint, the study validates the effectiveness of a socioconstructivist and autobiographical approach, which allows for a more personal and intimate exploration of language and identity than traditional group-oriented methods. The ethnographic and critical youth research

perspectives proved particularly valuable, as they emphasised key aspects such as trust, play, with-ness, multimodal engagement, and pedagogical nimbleness. These elements fostered a more dynamic and responsive learning environment, reinforcing the idea that meaningful language learning and cultural connection are deeply intertwined with personal experience and active participation.

At the same time, it has highlighted the need to integrate new theoretical perspectives, particularly on new speakers' issues, and to reinforce language awareness as a means of fostering positive connections and mediation.

While this research has helped recalibrate our questions and refine organisational aspects – such as scheduling training in the morning to align with students' school commitments – it has also revealed limitations, including the need for more participative observers and further investigation into youth roles within the Slovene community both inside and outside school. Additionally, the sensitive issue of personal identity within community settings calls for deeper theoretical exploration. Future research will focus more on identity dynamics in mixed-group classrooms, not only as a pathway to fostering inclusivity and diversity acceptance but also as a means of enhancing language awareness and engagement.

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Annex 1

Research questions for the Aim1: To co-create a teaching module with secondary students

- Which are the topics, the aspects of our belonging/attendance of Slovene community that we students are willing to express and share most?
- „How/what“ do we choose to explain/show?
- Can we students be effective language and culture mediators?
- What are the elements/topics that pupils appreciate/remember most?

Research Questions for the Aim2: To empower students of minority communities to become agents of social change through language teaching and reflection:

Students' viewpoint and self reflection:

- Do we students feel the desire to open up, to speak about ourselves to others?
- How /did the experience influence our desire to open up?
- How did we experience language teaching? Did we prefer to teach language or speaking about culture?
- How did we students perceive the training-action experience?
- What do we, students, think about the peer-to-peer teaching and learning about our language?
- How do we perceive our role as cultural mediators an agent of social change?

Pupils' feedback:

- Do mainstream pupils perceive students' level of desire to open up?
- How mainstream pupils evaluate students as cultural mediators?
- How much minority students feel they are valued, supported, inspired to act, by their community?

Researcher's viewpoint:

- How/do students express their desire to open up, to speak about ourselves to others?
- How /did the experience influence their desire to open up?
- How do students perceive the training-action experience?
- What do students, think about the peer-to-peer teaching and learning about their own language?
- How do they perceive their role as cultural mediators an agent of social change?
- Do students connect Slovene language teaching to Italian mainstream classes as a tool/strategy to foster positive intergroup contact?
- How often are minority youth valued in local Slovene newspaper and in publications describing the Slovene community)?

Research questions for the Aim3: Identifying the methodological approach to train students:

- How do we students perceive and experience the training to become “good agents and mediators for our own language and culture?”
- What do I, researcher, observe during the training period in students engagement?
- Which approach do I choose to make students feel engaged and «free» to play or not to play the role?
- How long can I, researcher, «train» students and how many lessons could be «enough» for a language sensitisation?

Annex 2

Document analysis:

- students' materials prepared for the lessons
- researcher/trainer materials used for training
- reflection sheets for students (4, after every two meetings and every two lessons, substituting the e- BLOG in Google classroom)
- Slovene newspaper of Slovene community (April – May 2024)
- Researcher's journal (March –May 2024)

Observations:

Researcher's observations of:

- 4 training lessons
- 5 students' lessons in class and feedback sessions
- 1 final discussion

Lower secondary school teachers' observation grids of the lessons

Interviews:

- 10 final interviews to students (in couple, about 20 students included)

Questionnaires:

- 2 for students: 1 before starting the training and 1 at the end (42)
- 1 for for pupils, at the end of the lessons (76)