

# Co-Crossing Borders through Neighbouring Languages Teaching and Learning: the CoBLaLT model and school communities' perceptions of language policy in their border regions

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## Abstract

Border studies in Europe have traditionally been shaped by disciplines such as law, sociology, geography and history. However, the humanistic and educational dimensions—particularly those related to language education—remain under-recognised in both value and practical application. In border regions such as those between Italy and Slovenia, language plays a critical yet often overlooked role in fostering integration, collaboration, and social cohesion. This paper aims to reframe the discourse by placing applied and educational linguistics, language policy and pedagogy, and geopolitical awareness within school communities at the centre of border-related inquiry. It begins with an analysis of territorial policy frameworks in border regions, drawing on the example of the Gorizia–Nova Gorica 2025 European Capital of Culture initiative, the policies of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), and the Adriatic–Ionian Euroregion. This analysis is anchored in relevant European recommendations and communications on border region policies. The paper then introduces a methodological proposal for language education – the CoBLaLT method –, developed and validated through recent fieldwork on the Italian, Slovenian and Croatian border. Particular attention is given to a research segment that explores how participating school communities perceive the lack of coherent language policies in their cross-border context. The study concludes by underscoring the relevance and potential impact of integrating humanistic research—such as the work presented here—into the formulation of policies for border regions, complementing and enriching traditional sectoral approaches.

**Keywords:** CoBLaLT Humanistic approach to border studies, Gorizia–Nova Gorica border – Neighbouring language teaching - Educational language policy for border regions

## Introduction

Although interdisciplinary approaches—including those from philosophy, religious studies, the life sciences, and other specialized fields examining physical and embodied border spaces—are emerging, border studies in Europe have traditionally been dominated by disciplines such as law, political geography (geography of the border landscape), sociology, and history. This disciplinary focus is understandable, given that European border regions are the product of historically and geopolitically complex processes, most of which still carry the weight of painful memories, often regulated and stabilized through international treaties and bilateral agreements.

Especially in regions where Europe has endured and survived the devastation of the World Wars, the culmination of inflamed ethnic hatred, and, distressingly, now again the brunt of conflicts both within internal (for COVID pandemic for example) and external borders, border studies have often centred on issues of security and peace. Such research has aimed to foster discourses that promote stability among populations historically divided by ideological, geopolitical, ethnic and also economic interests (Brezigar, 2003; 2006; Klatt, 2013; Malloy, 2010).

However, the humanistic and educational dimensions of border studies—particularly those concerning language education—have often remained undervalued and underexplored unless deliberately avoided, mostly, we say, for political reasons. It is the case of the Italian-Slovenian border area (especially on the Italian side), a wounded border bringing heavy consequences of

iron curtain memory, where language plays a vital yet frequently overlooked role in promoting integration, cross-border collaboration, and social cohesion.

Based on our research and experience, this paper seeks to reframe the discourse on border regions by placing applied and educational linguistics, language policy and pedagogy at the centre of the conversation. This approach draws on research that highlights the key role especially in border regions, of educators, school heads and even pupils recognizing their potential political roles, while maintaining a critical distance from endorsing any particular political or national ideology and developing a culture of positive, fought-for intercultural, intergroup and interpersonal contact, which can only have a positive impact on civil society, the professions and the economy of border regions, which are so complex and require contextualised measures.

The cross-border city of Gorizia–Nova Gorica, designated the European Capital of Culture for 2025 and representing a typical EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation), presents an ideal setting in which to reflect on these issues, particularly in light of the still-unrealized challenge of integration through multilingual education founded on reciprocity and mutual understanding. This is the reason why we will start exactly from this point.

## **Gorizia-Nova Gorica: Geographical, Historical, Geopolitical and Language Education Policy Context**

### ***The wounded eastern Italian-Slovenian border***

The Gorizia-Nova Gorica territory lies at the easternmost edge of Italy (in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region) and the westernmost part of Slovenia (Goriška). It encompasses the Soča/Isonzo River and stretches between the Brda/Collio hills and the Karst plateau. It is a geographically cohesive region and shares a unified historical journey. Over the centuries, its people have lived together under various rulers, serving representatives of three cultural heritages: Latin, Slavic, and Germanic. In the 20th century, a border was drawn that reshaped the land and disrupted lives. Since 2007, efforts have been underway to heal this division, dismantling both physical and symbolic boundaries. In fact the Italian-Slovenian border in the Gorizia (Italy) –Nova Gorica (Slovenia) area represents a unique geopolitical landscape shaped by the tumultuous events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following World War II and the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, the historic town of Gorizia was divided, with Nova Gorica emerging on the Yugoslav side as a new urban center. As historian Pamela Ballinger notes, this border became “*a living laboratory of Cold War divisions and post-socialist transformations*” (Ballinger, 2003). The collapse of Yugoslavia and Slovenia’s

accession to the European Union in 2004 further reshaped the region, transforming a once rigid boundary into a zone of cross-border cooperation and shared cultural identity. Today, the area is emblematic of the broader European project, where “*borders no longer mark separation but interaction*” (O’Dowd, 2002; for a deeper understanding of the geopolitical and historical context see also Bufon, 2002; 2019; Cattaruzza, 2011; Klabjan, 2020; Miklavčič, 2008; Zilli, 2019).

Today, these communities are witnessing a process of reconciliation. We say “witnessing” because the current efforts to bring Italy and Slovenia closer together hold strong symbolic value. However, it is crucial to monitor how this process affects the local population, institutions, and everyday life—and to begin envisioning ways to sustain this transformation and ensure it continues, or at the very least, does not come to a halt. And for this reason, too, we would like to emphasise the importance of creating participatory situations where change can also, or above all, leverage citizens’ desire to emancipate themselves and have a society that is more responsive to their needs, including the need for local policies and strategies to promote equitable, reciprocal multilingualism, which does not currently exist.

Unlike the bilingual area of the Slovenian coast - comprising the municipalities of Koper-Capodistria, Izola-Isola and Piran-Pirano - the Gorizia area in fact is not affected by any language policy that seriously supports bilingualism or

multilingualism<sup>1</sup>. This is, however, widely supported in the Slovenian coastal area, a territory governed by protection policies deriving from the Osimo Peace Treaties and the London Memorandum, which effectively promote bilingualism only in the territory of the Republic of Slovenia but nowhere on the Italian side, excluding the schools of the Slovenian national community. Both the Italian and Slovenian national communities are present in the coastal area of the Italian-Slovenian border. In the Gorizia area, only the Slovenian national community is present in Italy, but not the Italian community in Slovenia.

### **GO! 2025 - European Capital of Culture Nova Gorica-Gorizia 2025: assets and missing points**

On 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020 Nova Gorica and Gorizia was announced to be the winners of the European Capital of Culture 2025 programme with the project Go (Borderless) 2025!<sup>2</sup>. For several months, the cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica have been actively engaged in a wide range of cultural events and initiatives, marking their designation as joint European Capital of Culture. This recognition reflects not only the richness of their cultural offerings but also the symbolic significance of their cross-border cooperation.

The comprehensive programme, along with the application dossier and supporting documentation submitted to the European Union, is available on the official project website (<https://www.go2025.eu/en>). These materials illustrate the rationale behind the European Union's decision to select Gorizia and Nova Gorica as a representative example of a European border region committed to overcoming the historical, political, and cultural boundaries that have traditionally defined it.

Nevertheless, despite the rationale supporting the nomination of Gorizia-Nova Gorica as European Capital of Culture, it becomes evident that there is a significant lack of concrete, specific recognition of multilingualism as a valuable asset. While the topic of plurilingualism is mentioned, it is treated more as an inherent, self-sustaining phenomenon—something natural and given—rather than as a dimension requiring active support, development, or strategic initiatives. It is often merely granted visibility rather than being embraced as a dynamic area for growth.

Among the projects (see footnote 2) that address directly plurilingualism (not so many), they rely primarily on the concept of passive plurilingualism or intercomprehension—that is, the ability and opportunity for individuals to speak

1 Gorizia area is not an official bilingual territory like the Slovenian coastal area. In Gorizia (Italy) there is any curricular or extracurricular opportunity to learn Slovene at school. In Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and in the small surrounding municipalities there is the possibility of learning the Italian language as a non-compulsory subject within primary school education, however the organizational and curricular conditions of this teaching are truly critical - with lessons starting at 7.20 in the morning, in fact an hour before the start of the main lessons or at 14.30, at the end of the same -, creating a situation of great disparity in the pupils who choose this subject unlike those who alternatively choose an optional subject like for example sports or activities related to environmental education.

2 <https://euro-go.eu/en/programmi-e-progetti/capitale-europea-della-cultura-2025/>

their own language while understanding others in theirs. This approach may seem interesting and democratic, yet it may be questionable between two languages such as Italian and Slovenian, which in fact belong to two distant language families, the Romance and South Slavic respectively.

No project proposal meaningfully prioritizes the need to learn and master the language of the neighbouring country—a language that is also spoken by local minority communities, who are notably excluded from the official Go2025 program.

This omission mirrors a broader absence of a coherent local language policy—or even the unwillingness to develop one—that would consistently support plurilingual education. There is no serious reference to the urgent need for a language policy that promotes functional multilingualism. Such a policy is essential not only for fostering natural linguistic and cultural contact, as is characteristic of the Gorizia region, but above all for enabling social integration and mutual recognition. It would allow communities to reconnect through the reciprocal learning of each other's languages. This need is further underscored by the very strategic objectives of the body promoting the candidacy of Gorizia and Nova Gorica as European Capitals of Culture—the local EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation), that is the EGTC GO.

The EGTC GO (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation GO) is an Italian public authority with legal status, founded in 2011 through a partnership between the municipalities of Gorizia in Italy and Nova Gorica and Šempeter-Vrtojba in Slovenia.

It was created to tackle common cross-border issues and to boost the region's economical competitiveness and cultural attractiveness. What sets EGTC GO apart is its ability to function beyond national borders, allowing for coordinated planning and the joint execution of projects within a shared transnational urban area that goes beyond conventional municipal and national divisions<sup>3</sup>.

The territorial strategy of EGTC GO has established three main pillars, which we summarise as following:

- Build on the results of two Italy-Slovenia cross-border cooperation programs to enhance public investment efficiency.
- Transform the former “border economy” by turning national borders into opportunities for joint local economic development, leveraging regional strengths.
- Improve local services in three municipalities by integrating the area's best resources and expertise.

The actions of EGTC GO aim to boost economic growth and enhance quality of life for residents along the Slovenia-Italy border, addressing the economic and social challenges caused by the border, such as limited investment and employment opportunities.

3 <https://euro-go.eu/en/chi-siamo/cosa-%C3%A8-gect-go-e-come-funziona/>

Here the Core themes and the key area activities we extrapolated from the Convention (EGTC GO, 2011):

- *Core Themes:* Territorial cooperation, Regional development, Economic and social cohesion, Cross-border cooperation, Strategic coordination, Urban policy.
- *Key Areas of Activity:* Infrastructure, Transport and mobility, Logistics, Intermodal terminals, Energy resources, Joint energy planning, Urban transport policy, Environmental protection, Spatial planning, Tourism development, Cultural dissemination.

Thus, as can be deduced from the lists above, the historical multilingualism of the territory or the multilingualism of its current inhabitants including newcomers is not a specific objective, nor a key area of activity. Specifically, proficiency in the language of the neighbouring country is not a goal or a tool indicated with importance or priority for achieving economic and social cohesion objectives.

Looking from another viewpoint – that is, at another border structure, the Euroregion<sup>4</sup>-, Italy and Slovenia belong to the Adriatic Ionic Euroregion which has been established in 2006 and which, despite the general and lofty aims of forming an area of peace, stability, co-operation and protection of the cultural heritage, has not yet set up a specific policy for improving the

learning of the Euroregion languages (see the Statute Adriatic–Ionian Euroregion, 2021), an aspect claimed to be highly detrimental by the European Association of Border Regions – AEBR which since ever claims that language is an obstacle to cross border cooperation in 72% of border regions (AEBR, 2012).

This aspect is also reported by scholars who identified “command of neighbour’s language” and a “*general positive attitude towards the neighbouring population and cross-border cooperation*” among structural factors which enable a higher degree of cross-border communication (Klemenčič, 1987 in Bufon, 2002, p. 459).

Thus, language barriers are what we need to define and what we tackle in the next paragraph.

## **The Context and the Challenge (all to be shaped) of Language Barriers in Border Regions**

Despite political agreements and regional cooperation frameworks such as EGCT GO and the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion, linguistic integration in Gorizia border remains a major challenge.

Around 42% of Slovenian population live in border regions, engaging in daily cross-border interactions where language knowledge—or the lack thereof—has a significant impact (Bufon, 2002). On the Italian side, the approach to the other side

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4 The Euroregions can be defined as European cross-border structures that play an influential role at the borders between European countries. Euroregions are informal networks of cooperation between cross-border regions, while EGTCs (European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation) are formal legal entities with specific structures and powers established under EU law. We might say that Euroregions are generally more flexible and less structured, while EGTCs are designed to provide a clear legal framework for cross-border cooperation.

of the border is similar, despite greater sociolinguistic complexity. Cross-border movement occurs for similar reasons and with comparable frequency.

The wider context of the Gorizia territory situation is that well described in the important Communication ‘Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions’ (EUR-Lex, 2017) which informs us that European internal border regions:

- cover 40% of the EU territory,
- account for 30% of the population – 150 million people,
- produce 30% of the EU’s GDP, host almost 2 million cross-border commuters, 1,3 million of which are cross border workers representing 0.6% of all persons employed across the EU (e.g. 450,000 in France, 270,000 in Germany, 140,000 in Poland and 135,000 in Slovakia).

The same Communication claims that border regions, despite being ideal places to benefit from European integration through cross-border activities like studying, working, and doing business, often face economic underperformance compared to other areas. These regions typically have reduced access to public services and face difficulties due to complex and costly administrative and legal differences. Feedback to the Commission highlights ongoing challenges in cross-border interactions for individuals, businesses, and organizations. The Commission’s analysis reveals that border complexities and duplicated services hinder economic potential in internal land border regions.

A study estimates these regions could be 8% wealthier and gain over 1 million jobs if all barriers were removed and a common language adopted—though such a scenario is unrealistic due to Europe’s diversity. Even removing just 20% of obstacles could boost GDP by 2%. Current barriers restrict the use of resources, prevent economies of scale, and impose costs on individuals and businesses, with more pronounced effects in countries where border regions significantly contribute to national GDP.

Among difficulties reported by population language differences have been identified as a major challenge by many respondents to the public consultation. Border stakeholders report that rigid use of different languages on either side of a border increases administrative burdens and hinders effective communication between public authorities and individuals. The Communication of the Council of Europe claims:

*The Commission is pursuing a strategy endorsed by the Council and based on the objective defined by the EU Heads of State and Government that all citizens should have the opportunity to learn two foreign languages from an early age. In border regions one of these languages can ideally be the language of the neighbours. Language learning is also an over-arching priority of the European funding programme for education, training, youth and sport: Erasmus+. The programme can support language learning in border regions in many ways.*

(EUR-Lex, 2017, p. 12)

This the consequent proposed action:

*Action: Member States, regions and municipalities are urged to use life-long learning opportunities to step up efforts to **promote bilingualism** in border regions. Existing good practices should be a source of*

*inspiration and will be further promoted by the Commission. Existing funding instruments such as Erasmus+ or the Interreg cross-border cooperation programmes will be used to support this where appropriate.*

(EUR-Lex, 2017, p. 12)

The European Commission, in its 2021 report ‘EU Border Regions: Living Labs of European Integration’ (EUR-Lex, 2021), based on a public consultation carried out in 2020, echoed these concerns: language differences, alongside challenges in diploma recognition, remain major impediments to cross-border labour, education, and training. Yet, while the document states that “*cross-border regions should be considered as one*” in the field of education and training—with citizens of these areas ideally able to attend schools and universities on both sides of the border (EUR-Lex, 2021, p. 9) — it does not specify how multilingualism should be supported or achieved. This implies, again, an inherent, assumed, or naturally acquired multilingualism among citizens.

In the final table of the Report, summarising the 2017 Action plan—Outline of progress made in implementing the 10 actions, referring to the measures introduced by the earlier 2017 Communication –, Action 6, ‘Promoting border multilingualism’, is presented as an enhanced initiative. It is mainly associated with a series of good practices and cross-border projects, most of which have been implemented through the Erasmus+ programme (EUR-Lex, 2021, p. 17).

To conclude this analysis of documents and initiatives concerning the promotion of plurilingualism in European border areas, a reference to the commendable *b-solutions* initiative is in order.

The *b-solutions* project (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>), promoted by the European Commission’s DG REGIO and managed by the AEBC, addresses legal and administrative barriers to cross-border cooperation in Europe. Launched in 2018 and running through various phases until 2026, it supports public bodies and cross-border structures by providing technical assistance, expert analysis, and practical solutions. Focused on areas such as institutional cooperation, public services, labour markets, education, and the Green Deal, *b-solutions* helps identify obstacles through open calls and shares best practices via reports and compendiums.

The 2023–2024 *b-solutions* compendium (EC, 2024) reveals a limited focus on plurilingual society and education as strategic assets. The selected *b-solutions* projects tackling multilingual issues primarily address structural limitations in cross-border education, including the financing of pupils’ education—as seen in the case of the Communauté de communes Pyrénées Haut-Garonnaises in

France. As clearly shown in the thematic distribution image of the *b-solutions* cases reported between 2018 and 2024 presented by Mullan and Scott (2024), the topic of multilingualism concerns only 2 out of more than 170 cases.

Similarly, among the *Best Practices* promoted by the Border Focal Point<sup>5</sup>, multilingualism appears in only nine best practice projects.

From our perspective, informed by the scientific experience outlined in the following paragraphs, individual plurilingualism in border regions is still far from being fully developed and effectively promoted. On the contrary, it must be actively fostered, guided, and, where appropriate, regulated, that is, supported by coherent local and cross-border language education policies and border initiatives. On the other hand, language education policies must be inspired by humanistic studies, real experiences run by local stakeholders of plurilingual education.

As we have previously argued language education in border areas does not automatically incorporate plurilingual teaching and learning. School curricula often fail to reflect the multilingual character of these regions by excluding the teaching of autochthonous or neighbouring-country languages (Cavaion, 2016; 2020; 2022).

In the context of what has been described and argued so far, we will now present the CoBLaLT model, an approach to language education in European border areas that has been developed and applied

in numerous primary schools on the Italian-Slovenian border over the last 10 years, based both on specific principles of applied linguistics and on the insights presented so far regarding the lack of national and cross-border support for educational language policies. We will also report on a research section in which participants have been asked about their opinions and perceptions of the language policy of their border region after three years of participation in a cross-border co-operation project.

Let's start with the theoretical context.

## **CoBLaLT: A Contact-Based Model for Language Learning in EU Border Regions**

The CoBLaLT model, Contact-Based Neighbouring Language Learning and Teaching, (Cavaion, 2016) emerged from a doctoral study based on the scientific observation (Cavaion, 2012; Furlan, 2002) of two key issues along the Italian-Slovenian border: the lack of direct contact with the neighbouring country's language and culture among pupils learning it—representing a missed opportunity to leverage the proximity of schools located along the border—and the lack of motivation to learn Italian among pupils in Slovene-majority schools, where Italian has been a compulsory subject since the post Second World War. This research immediately revealed the absence, in the investigated area, of language education policies capable of supporting effective cross-border cooperation in a region

5 The Border Focal Point Network is an EU-wide professional network bringing together experts on cross-border issues. The network aims to promote easier cross-border interaction, address existing legal and administrative barriers, and encourage the pooling of cross-border services (from <https://futurium.ec.europa.eu/en/border-focal-point-network>)

marked by significant mobility but an uneven mastery of the neighbouring country's language among its citizens.

To address these gaps, the CoBLaLT model was developed (Cavaion, 2016). This pedagogical approach promotes reciprocal cross-border language learning among primary school pupils (aged 10–15) as a means of fostering social integration, based on the methodological use of contact. It combines virtual and face-to-face interaction and is grounded in interdisciplinary, socioconstructivist theory. The model is built on the premise that it is possible to develop an approach that fosters both awareness and a willingness to challenge the *status quo*, engaging school communities as active participants in change through the co-construction of the method itself.

The model, to be included in the field of educational linguistics studies, is supported by a strong theoretical framework encompassing sociolinguistics, second language acquisition, intercultural studies, psychology of groups and relationships, and language policy. Inspired by scholars such as Allport, Byram, Kramsch, Gardner, and Kumaravadivelu, CoBLaLT envisions language learning not only as academic acquisition but as an ethical, affective, and social process.

Among its theoretical framework two sources are particularly important.

One is the first official European paper addressing directly neighbouring languages for good neighbourly relations, in the context of transfrontier cooperation conventions and agreements, in order to promote plurilingualism in a pan-European context, the Recommendation Rec (2005) 3

of the Committee of Ministers on teaching neighbouring languages in border regions, adopted by the Committee in 2005 (CoE, 2005). The document assumes as reasons for “*developing language-education policies capable of safeguarding or, if needed, introduce the teaching of NL and their cultures*” an exhaustive interdisciplinary background. The Recommendation underlines two important desirable aspects about border areas: the respect of diversity of languages existing along borders – diversity impossible to generalise due to the different typologies of linguistic situations characterising European border areas we discussed before – and, within diversity, the principle of reciprocity, where we imagine each country putting in force any possible strategies to avoid any possibility of power exertions linked to the status of languages involved.

The other reference document is an amazing inspiring report that of the linguist Albert Raasch, author of the Reference Study ‘Europe, frontiers and Languages’ of the Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe. From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education (Raasch, 2002), which provides an inspiring vision regarding the role neighbouring languages teaching and learning can potentially play in European borders which, if, on the one hand, must be understood and “read” through the analysis of their “*origins, movements, changes and transfers that determine the way people interpret them*” (Raasch, 2002, p. 10) and, on the other hand, demonstrate a common will to overcome old barriers, that is “*the transfrontier situation is rich in commitment and activities by the inhabitants aiming at promoting multilingualism/plurilingualism*” (Raasch, 2002, p. 9).

This key study highlights several principles essential to language learning and teaching in border regions. It emphasizes the heightened awareness of language roles in frontier areas, the need for language education to align with societal and political contexts, and the importance of educators and pupils who understand their regional and political responsibilities. Effective language education in these regions requires institutional support and tailored frameworks suited to frontier conditions.

The study recommends practical strategies such as school exchanges, regionally focused teaching materials, thematic learning about neighbouring regions, joint development of cross-border resources, and ongoing teacher training with a cross-border perspective. These principles—tested notably in the CICERO project under the European Centre for Modern Languages (see publication Halink et al. 2003)<sup>6</sup>—are well-aligned with the goal of promoting neighbouring languages (NL) through sustained cross-border interaction. However, their successful implementation depends on a stable territorial framework, such as those provided by Euroregions and Eurodistricts under the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) initiative.

Raasch's study represents an important reference, not yet surpassed by other scholars, on only one aspect of the method, but in the context of this contribution it is certainly the most significant. Since there is no space here for further details on the

method (for which we recommend reading Cavaion 2016; 2020; 2022), we will now introduce the specific research that inspired the writing of this contribution.

## **From Theory to Practice: The CONTATTI! Project and Research**

The CoBLaLT method was developed thanks to the support of the National Research Agency of the Republic of Slovenia, which has financed various phases between 2013 and today. A research grant entitled *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* is currently being concluded<sup>7</sup>, where the main objective was to disseminate a socioconstructivist culture of language learning in border areas, highly interdisciplinary, based on the development of both linguistic and cross-linguistic awareness (Čok, 2023), inclusiveness (Čok, 2024) and of the role (including political) and significance of language learning and teaching in border regions.

The CoBLaLT approach is known in schools as the CONTATTI! Project and in its last edition (2021–2024) it translated the CoBLaLT model into practice across seven schools in Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia. It involved over 250 students aged 10–15, teachers, and school leaders across seven municipalities (Koper-Capodistria, Piran-Pirano, Nova Gorica in Slovenia; Gorizia, Trieste and Muggia-

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6 The project CICERO was carried out in cooperation with the ECML, Graz, the Telenacademie Nederland, Maastricht, the Goethe Institut – inter Nationes, München, the KulturKontakt, Wien, Ministère de l'Éducation, Luxembourg, the Haridusministeerium, Tartu, and the European Commission.

7 ARIS Slovenia - National agency for research -, project no. J6-3132, 2021-2024/25

Milje in Italy; Buzet in Croatia) and five languages (Italian, Slovenian, Croatian, Istrovenetian, and English).

Activities, as usual, ranged from digital and thematic classroom modules to real-world encounters like joint historical and literary walks, peace marches, and cultural exchanges. These experiences helped

children use languages of the neighbours in meaningful, real-life contexts. A key feature was the ‘e-autobiography’ (Cavaion, 2019), a multimedial digital diary where pupils reflected on their cross-border linguistic journeys, reinforcing the connection between language, identity, and agency (for more details see Cavaion, 2022).

### ***The sub-study about school communities’ perceptions of (local) language policy in their border regions***

From the extensive long-term CONTATTI! Project and research, we report here a segment in which we wanted to investigate school communities’ perceptions of (local) language policy in their border regions. It involved two twinned primary school communities located in Gorizia (Italy) and Nova Gorica (Slovenia).

The study included three classes (two from the Italian Gorizia and one from the Slovenian Nova-Gorica) comprising 70 pupils, eight teachers (specialising in neighbouring languages—Italian and Slovenian—as well as history, literacy, science, citizenship, and art), and two school heads. The primary aim was to co-construct the meaning of reciprocal neighbouring language learning through an interdisciplinary and socioconstructivist framework. Notably, in both contexts, the teaching of the neighbouring language was neither compulsory nor integrated into the core curriculum, but rather extracurricular or experimental in nature, often limited to just a few hours per year. The pedagogical intervention was structured around three CoBLaLT/CONTATTI! modules

developed and implemented across two school years<sup>8</sup>. In 2022–2023, activities included *Cross-border Walks*, where children guided one another through historical and cultural itineraries on both sides of the border, and participation in the *Assisi Peace March (Peace Walks)*. The 2023–2024 cycle introduced *Walks of Peace in Places of War*, which entailed jointly designed visits to World War I and II sites and integrated visual and literary workshops (see Toroš, 2022; Zajc, 2023). The project culminated in a final roundtable, reflecting on three years of CONTATTI!, showcasing the outcomes and insights gained through this contact-based, cross-border educational experience.

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8 The first year of the project (2021–22) was still suffering of COVID pandemic repercussions. Pupils met exclusively via videocalls. Teachers attended training courses on the CoBLaLT method.

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## The research within research: school communities perceptions of (local) language policy in border regions

### ACTIVITIES:

#### In class, in contact

- Discussions
- Videocalls
- Chat
- Digital language learning
- Thematic lesson/NL module
- Preparing activities, materials for the *others*
- Reflection: *My multimedial autobiography of crossborder encounters*

#### Out of class/school, in contact

- Thematic meeting in the *others'* school
- Visiting *the others'* place (town, village, surroundings..)
- Visiting *our* places together
- Working together
- Round table CONTATTI!

## Methodology and Research Questions

This study employed a qualitative, ethnographic approach combined with principles of action research to investigate neighbouring language learning in a cross-border school context. Data collection methods included direct observation with triangulation to ensure reliability and depth of interpretation. A variety of materials produced by pupils—such as written texts, dialogues, drawings, poems, posters, and autobiographies—were systematically collected and analysed to capture their perspectives and evolving understanding. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with both pupils and teachers to explore attitudes and experiences in greater depth. Additionally, questionnaires were administered and analysed descriptively to gather broader perceptions across the school communities. The researcher maintained a reflective diary throughout the project to document the process and support interpretative analysis, ensuring a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of the educational dynamics observed.

### Research questions:

1. How do children, teachers, heads in border areas perceive linguistic needs for young people living near borders?
2. What do children think about reciprocal learning of neighbouring languages, based on their three-year-CONTATTI! experience?
3. How did the socioconstructivist approach encourage them to see language learning as a matter of contact, collaboration, cooperation, and cultural exchange?
4. How did it foster self-engagement and individual agency in language learning?

## Results

The following results are in truth partial data based mainly on the class discussions, interviews and on the e-autobiography. The analysis of the materials produced (creative writings, visual poetry, illustrations, themes, posters) are not included in this phase of data analysis. These are in fact included in the more comprehensive research that investigates the consequences of the socio-constructivist approach on the awareness of border language learning, a paper that is still in the drafting stage. We therefore choose, also for lack of space, to report the results according to the research questions and based on the data analysed so far.

### ***Linguistic needs for young living near the borders***

1. How do children, teachers, heads in border areas perceive linguistic needs for young people living near borders?
2. What do children think about reciprocal learning of neighbouring languages, based on their three-year-CONTATTI! experience?

The research explored how children, teachers, and school heads in border areas perceive the linguistic needs of young people living near national boundaries, with a particular focus on pupils' experiences within the three-year CONTATTI! project. From first class discussions, among pupils, initial perceptions were notably distant from the broader aims of the research. Their understanding of communicative needs in cross-border regions was limited, fragmented, and primarily shaped by a school-centric view

of language. Most pupils displayed a form of linguistic unawareness, conceiving language mainly as a subject to be studied rather than as a tool for social interaction or a marker of multilingual identity. The value of languages—both individually and societally—was largely unrecognized outside the classroom context. Moreover, the concept of 'language policy' was unfamiliar to them; when grasped at all, it was interpreted as something imposed by authorities rather than as a participatory or socially driven concern. Notably, elicited from midterm and final interviews, their reflections throughout the project gradually revealed a growing awareness of the communicative potential of neighbouring languages, especially through activities involving direct interaction and shared experiences with peers across the border.

Teachers, by contrast, demonstrated (final interviews) a clearer awareness of what cross-border communication may require for youth. However, they often expressed uncertainty about what concrete actions to propose. This hesitation was strongly shaped by the structural absence of neighbouring languages in school curricula and the broader lack of supportive language policies. The perceived institutional neglect appeared to significantly dampen their motivation and sense of agency.

School heads (from final interviews), while generally supportive and appreciative of the project's goals and outcomes, revealed limited awareness of existing local language policies. Most had no established contact with local political or administrative actors involved in language planning. Although they welcomed initiatives like CONTATTI!, they were hesitant to

proactively engage beyond the school context—often citing a lack of trust in local or national authorities and a sense of disconnection from institutional processes.

### **Socioconstructivistic approach, self engagement and agency**

3. How did the socioconstructivist approach encourage them to see language learning as a matter of contact, collaboration, cooperation, and cultural exchange?
4. How did it foster self-engagement and individual agency in language learning?

The socioconstructivist approach adopted in the CONTATII project played a crucial role in reshaping pupils' perceptions of language learning, shifting it from a purely academic exercise to a dynamic process grounded in contact, collaboration, cooperation, and cultural exchange. From class discussions, by engaging in real-life cross-border interactions and co-constructed learning experiences, pupils began to view language not just as a subject, but as a means of meaningful communication and relationship-building. This pedagogical model fostered self-engagement and individual agency, as learners took ownership of their learning paths and recognized the relevance of language in their everyday lives. Their spontaneous reactions (from e-autobiography and class collective writing reflections) reflect this transformation: *"This is not a project, it is a revolution!"*; *"We can decide what we learn"*; *"We learn the things we need."* Students also expressed a growing confidence and willingness to take risks: *"I am not afraid to make mistakes"* and a desire

to share and expand their learning: *"I want to invent an app for my friend to learn my language"*, *"We want to tell other schools about this experience."* They reported developing resilience—*"We have learnt to endure difficulty and go beyond misunderstandings"* — and a sense of autonomy — *"I can decide how much I want to learn."*

Teachers observing the process reported noticeable changes in pupil attitudes and engagement. In interviews they described pupils as 'more included', displaying 'more reflection' and a renewed interest in local history and culture. In several cases, teachers noted instances of striking self-engagement, with pupils independently initiating activities or demonstrating sustained curiosity far beyond what had been expected. These observations further underscore the transformative impact of the socioconstructivist framework in cultivating learner motivation, linguistic awareness, and cross-cultural sensitivity in border regions.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

We began this reflection on the importance of teaching and learning the languages of neighbouring countries by grounding it in topical situations—such as the European Capital of Culture, local EGTCs, and Euroregions—and by contextualising these within key European policy documents that directly address border regions, including considerations on border multilingualism.

To this analysis, we added the introduction of a pedagogical approach rooted in educational linguistics, one that

is also informed by an awareness of the linguistic policies specific to the border context under study.

The paper then presented a small-scale research component within the broader CONTATTI! project. This segment aimed to explore participants' initial perceptions and the potential for transformation prompted by the project's many activities, as well as the reflective practices encouraged by the researcher (including class discussions, project diaries, and final interviews). The focus was on pupils, teachers, and school heads, with particular attention to their evolving awareness of the significance of teaching and learning the languages of neighbouring countries in border regions.

From the partial results—drawn mainly from class discussions, autobiographical writing, and final interviews with pupils, teachers, and school heads—we derived some initial findings. Pupils, in particular, initially showed limited awareness of language policy and often viewed language learning through a narrow, academic lens. They did not readily perceive language as a tool for social participation. However, participation in CoBLaLT/CONTATTI! activities gradually fostered values such as reciprocity, collaboration, and mutual understanding.

Teachers observed increased student engagement, deeper reflection, and a growing interest in local history. Nonetheless, systemic challenges remain: language teaching in these contexts is still non-compulsory, often relegated to extracurricular activities, and limited to just a few hours per year. While school heads expressed support for the initiative,

they frequently lacked knowledge of local language policies or access to the resources necessary for sustained implementation.

The limitations of this research primarily concern the data that remain to be analysed. Nevertheless, we anticipate that this additional material will serve to enrich and further substantiate the insights already drawn from the data examined thus far. Another limitation lies in the fact that the segment discussed here addresses an aspect that was not the central focus of the original research project, which was funded by the National Research Agency of the Republic of Slovenia.

That said, the findings presented here offer a valuable foundation for future, more targeted investigations into the level of awareness among various stakeholders—whether speakers, learners, policymakers, or ordinary citizens—regarding the languages of neighbouring countries. We believe this research can play a meaningful role in the co-construction of policies that are increasingly responsive to the specific needs of border regions, building on the directions already set in recent years.

### **Structural and Political Implications**

Taken together, these findings underscore the urgent need for more coherent, inclusive language policy frameworks that empower school communities to engage meaningfully in multilingual and cross-border educational experiences.

One of the greatest barriers remains the lack of institutional support. Although school-led efforts show promise, they often remain invisible to border political and administrative authorities. A broader shift

is needed—one that includes and amplifies the voices of teachers, researchers, pupils, and policymakers alike.

Albert Raasch's statement (Raasch, 2002, p. 14) that language education must be “*geared to the needs of society and justified by a political interpretation*” remains strikingly relevant. In this spirit, we identify several key needs:

- Politically-conscious educators
- Pupils who are aware of their regional and cultural roles
- Networks that support context-sensitive language education in frontier areas
- Cross-sector dialogue that brings together school communities, labour markets, and policymakers

Language should not be a barrier in Europe's border regions—it should serve as a bridge. Through innovative pedagogical approaches such as CoBLaLT and cooperative initiatives like CONTATTI!, border communities can become laboratories of integration. Genuine cross-border cooperation requires more than policy declarations; it requires people, relationships, and reciprocal communication. Only by embedding these values into educational practice can we move closer to the ideal of a truly borderless Europe.

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