



Teaching and learning the language of the neighbour country: Tools for mainstream primary education in the Slovenian-Italian border area

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Abstract: The article presents two central tools for teaching neighbour languages in border areas within the didactic framework of the Contact-Based-(Neighbour-)Language-Learning-and-Teaching method (CoBLaLT, Cavaion 2015; 2016; 2019), namely a teacher's guide to contact-based neighbour language teaching and the digital portfolio 'My multimedia autobiography of cross-border contacts' for pupils aged 11 to 15. They were developed as part of a postdoctoral project between 2017-2019 in the Italian-Slovenian border region. The article highlights the importance of making language teaching research a collaborative process between a strong scientific and professional community that thus fosters innovation and effectiveness of methods and contents in neighbour language learning.

In diesem Artikel werden zwei zentrale Instrumente für den Nachbarsprachenunterricht in Grenzregionen vorgestellt, die im Rahmen des didaktischen Konzeptes für „kontaktbasiertes Nachbarsprachen Lehren und Lernen“ entwickelt wurden: ein Leitfaden für Lehrende für kontaktbasierten Nachbarsprachenunterricht sowie das digitale Portfolio ‚Meine Multimedia-Autobiografie für grenzüberschreitende Kontakte‘ für Schüler und Schülerinnen im Alter von 11 bis 15 Jahren. Die Instrumente wurden als Teils eine Post-Doc-Projekts zwischen 2017 und 2019 in der italienisch-slowenischen Grenzregion entwickelt. Der Artikel hebt die Relevanz kollaborativer Sprachlehrforschung hervor, die durch enge Zusammenarbeit von Wissenschaft und Unterrichtspraxis Innovation und Effektivität von Methoden und Inhalten im Nachbarsprachenunterricht sicherstellt.

Keywords: Neighbour language teaching and learning; multilingual border regions; linguistic autobiography; EU language policy.

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1 Introduction

Despite the lack of a scientific definition in the field of applied linguistics (Cavaion 2016; 2020a; 2020d), teaching neighbour languages in border regions is supported by EU policy, such as in the *Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers* (Council of Europe 2005) and the report *Europe, Frontiers and Languages. Guide for the Development of Language education Policies in Europe from Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education* (Raasch 2002). Also, more recent communications strongly highlight the value, importance and urgent need to promote multilingualism in European border regions, such as documented in *Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions* (Council of Europe 2017) and in the *Proposal for a communication on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages* (European Commission 2018).

School communities located along European borders are not always aware of the specificities of teaching and learning neighbour languages (Cavaion 2020a; 2020b), and even less of EU policies on border issues (Cavaion in press). There is a lack of pedagogical tools for teaching neighbour languages as already highlighted in Raasch (2002) and evincible by a lack of literature (Cavaion 2016) or of a specific dedicated institution. At the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), for example,¹ the issue of neighbour language teaching is treated only within the wider and general context of plurilingual and intercultural education, specifically the issue of teaching languages for mobility.²

Inspired by the principles outlined in the above-mentioned EU documents that call for more focus on neighbour language teaching, the project *Contatti!* was implemented along the Italian-Slovenian coastal border in 2013. Within this project, which involved hundreds of pupils and dozens of teachers from mainstream primary schools located along the border, striving to learn each other's language, the method *Contact Based Neighbour Language Learning and Teaching* (CoBLaLT, cf. Cavaion 2016; 2019) was developed to support neighbour language learning.

On the basis of a teacher action research project (see Section 2) that involved observations of teaching and learning activities, analysis of materials, and the direct

¹ ECML is an institution created in 1994 as an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe. Its mission is “to encourage excellence and innovation in language teaching and to help Europeans to learn languages more efficiently” (cf. <https://www.ecml.at/>) and it functions as a centre of reference for language teachers, researchers, and language policy makers.

² See for example the projects PLURIMOBIL <https://plurimobil.ecml.at> or GULLIVER <https://www.ecml.at/Resources/ECMLresources/tabid/277/ID/54/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>.

collaboration between the researcher and the involved school communities, two important tools for teachers and students emerged: *The Teacher's Guide to Contact-Based Neighbour Language Teaching* (Cavaion 2019) and a digital portfolio for pupils aged 11 to 15 entitled *My multimedia autobiography of cross-Border contacts* (<http://contatti.si/home.page>). The guide is a tool that was requested by teachers participating in dissemination workshops on the method which were organised by the Science and Research centre of Koper. The autobiography was inspired by the need to get children and young people to reflect on their experiences of cross-border encounters, their language learning and the development of friendships with students in the partner class on the other side of the border.

These tools, the theoretical principles and methods they are based on, and their application are presented and discussed in this paper. It highlights the importance of developing teaching tools that make sense in the border context, in order to contribute to making language teaching a collaborative, more, a participative, co-constructed, truly innovative and effective process in a strengthened scientific and professional community.

2 CoBLaLT: context, theory and methodology

The two tools presented here must be contextualised within the *Contact-Based-Neighbour-Language-Teaching-and-Learning* (CoBLaLT) method (Cavaion 2015b; 2016), which addresses teaching and learning Neighbour Languages (NL) in mainstream primary and/or lower secondary schools³ found along national borders. The method is based on the establishment of systematic cross-border contacts and the development of meaningful cross-cultural relationships among teenagers, each learning the language of the other, based on principles of cooperative and affective communicative language learning (see the theoretical framework as described below), combining face-to-face encounters and virtual communication to maintain and foster contact.

The first idea for the CoBLaLT method was developed in the doctoral dissertation *Teaching and Learning Primary Neighbour Languages through Cross-border Contacts* (Cavaion 2015b), and it was then implemented with guidelines (Cavaion

³ Primary education is differently organised among European countries. Our research runs along the Italian-Slovenian border where Slovenia has a single structure school system including ISCED levels 1, 2 and 3 (International Standard Classification of Education, developed by the UNESCO) recognised as 'primary education' for pupils aged from six to sixteen years old; Italy follows a common core curriculum system with primary schools for pupils aged between six and eleven years old (ISCED level 1) lower secondary schools for pupils aged 11–15 years old (ISCED level 2) and upper secondary schools for pupils aged 15–19 years old.

2016) and tools for its application (Cavaion 2019), the latter developed via post-doctoral research between 2017 and 2019.

At the heart of the CoBLaLT method is the idea that language teaching is a privileged tool for successful intercultural encounters and relationship development in a linguistic and cultural contact area characterised by great historical and sociological complexity, as almost all European border regions prove to be.⁴ The distinguishing element of this pedagogy is the inclusion of authentic interaction and authentic intercultural relationships resulting from virtual and face-to-face encounters in the NL classroom, with all the complexities that ‘real life’ implies for educational settings.

The stimulus for the original research were local scientific studies in the field of plurilingual education developed by the Institute of Scientific Research in Koper and the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Primorska (Čok 2006; 2008; 2009; Mikolič 2016) and the Slovenian Research Institute in Trieste (Italy), with specific research referring to a very low proficiency level regarding the neighbour language reached by pupils by the end of their secondary school education (16 years old) in Slovene mainstream schools (Čok 2009) located along the Italian-Slovenian border, where this subject has been compulsory since 1959.⁵ On the contrary, in Italy, the neighbour language, Slovenian, represents an optional school subject and in the past was considered to be of low prestige in the eyes of teenagers from the Italian-Slovenian border area (Furlan 2002). Currently, the demand for Slovene language learning targeted at younger learners on the Italian side of the border in the form of out-of-school afternoon courses has exponentially increased in Trieste and Gorizia, the two main Italian-Slovenian frontier cities (Brezigar 2013). Yet, there is an urgent need for trained teachers (Cavaion 2019; Mikolič 2016), for materials which are still being developed⁶ and by the awkward situation of the lack of widespread curricular presence of the Slovene language in mainstream Italian schools in the area (Cavaion in press).

⁴ For a deeper understanding of border regions complexity, see Bufon (2002), Faro (2005), Klatt (2013), Malloy (2010), Nadalutti (2011), Raasch (2002).

⁵ For a detailed description of the presence and organisation of Italian language teaching and learning in Slovenia, see Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning (2012).

⁶ The teaching of the Slovene language in Italy in compulsory education at the moment takes place only in two mainstream comprehensive schools, where a textbook has been devised by teachers and researchers (Biber, Cavaion, Colja et al. 2015) who were missing a textbook specifically addressing teenagers living on the border. This textbook is oriented towards Slovene as a *neighbouring-language* rather than a foreign language. For materials addressing young learners of the Slovene language as a foreign or second language more generally, visit the website of the Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language <https://centerslo.si/en/for-children>.

Another element which inspired the original CoBLaLT study were the rare contacts and lack of meaningful relationships existing between primary school pupils and communities settled along the border. These were revealed by a preliminary research project we ran among all the final grade classes of Slovenian mainstream primary schools (Cavaion 2012).

This situation, as we have described in detail elsewhere (Cavaion 2016; 2020d), has arisen due to the fact that the official position of NL teaching in the respective Italian and Slovenian border regions is hybrid in nature, blurring into the meaning of minority language protection, a meaning which alone does not fulfil the varied needs of a modern border area, such as the need for a more extended, integrated linguistic policy capable of valuing all the functions and meanings border languages can have (Cavaion 2016: 38). This is related to the fact that Italian and Slovene are languages belonging to national minority communities in the respective neighbour country (i.e., the Italian community in Slovenia⁷ and the Slovene community in Italy⁸). Technically they are linguistic peninsulas in one country, maintaining links with the home nation from which they were forcibly separated during the last hundred years of European history due to wars and/or international treaties. As a result, Italian and Slovene are ‘protected’ minority languages in their respective neighbour countries – subject to the London Memorandum and the Osimo Treaty – but have suffered a stigmatisation, taking on a silent, implicit role as ‘unfaithful’ languages, since the Slovenian-Italian border was one of the most troubled borders in Europe; the border that separated the West from the East and where, for example, a systematic denationalisation policy towards national minorities was enacted by a fascist regime on the Italian side of the border (Cavaion 2020d). For this reason, we believe that no adequate language policy has been developed so far to valorise and promote these languages, taking into account all their possible functions and meanings in this border area. In general, a cross-border language policy is missing, which hampers the opportunity to make mastering the neighbour language a matter of common growth, both from social and economic viewpoints.

⁷ <https://www.ita-slo.eu/en/all-news/news/primis-presentation-minority-communities-italian-national-community-slovenia>.

⁸ <https://www.ita-slo.eu/en/all-news/news/primis-presentation-minority-communities-slovenian-national-community-italy>, see also Williams/Bogatec/Vidau (2020).

An extensively interdisciplinary theoretical framework underpins the CoBLaLT method.⁹ It is originally inspired and based on theories in the field of social psychology - basically the *Contact Hypothesis*¹⁰ (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998; 2008) – and integrates concepts from intercultural studies (Bennett 1993; Čok 2008; 2009), social psychology and language studies (Gardner 1985), psychology of groups and of relations (among those Berndt 1982; 1996; Bukowski/Hoza 1989), multilingualism, second language teaching and learning (Brumfit 1984; Canale 1983; Dörnyei 2013) as well as theories of second language acquisition (Gass-Selinker 2001; Krashen 1981; Long 1996; Schumann 1997; Young 2011), socio-cultural language pedagogy and network based language teaching (Belz 2003; Lantolf/Thorne 2006; Kern 1996; Warschauer 1996). The underlying learning theories of the framework are those derived from social constructivism inspired by authors such as Kelly (1963) and Vygotsky (1978; 1986), who put experience and social interaction at the centre of the learning process. Also, cooperative learning theories (Slavin 1995; Johnson/Johnson/Holubec 1994) and multiple intelligence (Gardner 2008) have contributed to the didactics.

The CoBLaLT is based on the application of the CoBLaLT model (see Figure 1), a six-stage path, which corresponds to six to eight weeks of work in the NL classroom where a large variety of activities are provided, based on:

- the use of network-based communication tools (mails, chats, Skype sessions);
- the use of reflective learning tools and strategies: autobiography of cross-border encounters, an educational digital platform; class discussions; preliminary and post-meeting activities;
- the realisation of thematic face-to-face cross-border meetings; and
- the development of common cross-cultural-contact oriented lessons for the NL curriculum.

⁹ For a better reading and understanding of this excursus of theoretical references, see the chapter *Contacts* in Cavaion (2016: 41–131).

¹⁰ The *Contact hypothesis* is a theory in psychology that suggests that prejudice and conflict between groups can be reduced if members of the groups interact with each other. Developed in USA in the 50s, it has been developed further and spread worldwide. It is still applied nowadays in studies where interethnic relationships matter.

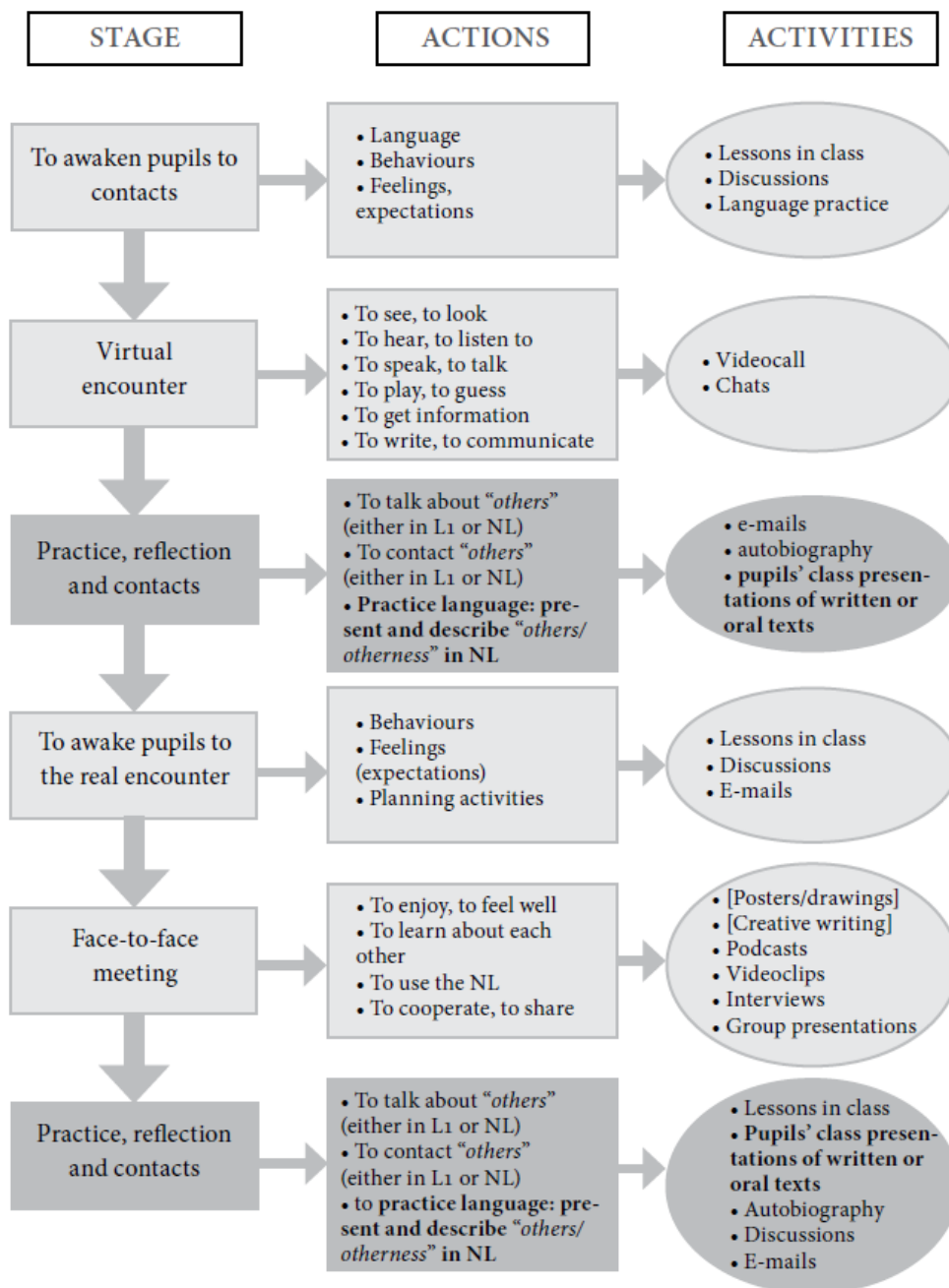


Fig. 1: The CoBLaLT model (Cavaion 2016: 195)

The first format of the model was developed between 2011 and 2013, involving two mainstream secondary schools from the border municipalities of Trieste (Italy) and Koper (Slovenia). The aim was to identify new practices drawing on collaborative research where the theoretical knowledge of the researcher and the experiential view of teachers were integrated in order to complement each other based on the five-step model of educational action research (Kemmis/McTaggart 1990). After that, the CoBLaLT model was re-applied and implemented at various Slovenian

primary schools in the municipalities of Koper, Piran, Izola and Italian lower secondary schools in Trieste and Muggia. About 20 classes, hundreds of pupils and ten neighbour language teachers make up the current CoBLaLT community (locally the project is known as *Progetto Contatti!*).

The model is intended for twinned mainstream primary schools along the border that teach the respective neighbour language to pupils between 11 and 15 years old. When in contact, whether face-to-face or by virtual means, pupils can freely choose the language they want to use, and this choice is not restricted or judged by teachers. Intercomprehension is not fostered as a founding principle, but it is accepted as a linguistic transition strategy. The aim is the improvement of NL competence through peer learning and autonomy of choice. Controlled language practice occurs in the classroom and pupils are expected to prepare class presentations or short written texts on the basis of their experiences. As regards the pupils' role within the model, pupils do not play the role of future adults or European citizens. Rather, they are the owners and creators of their local versus globalised 'space-time (neighbour) language learning path'. Pupils within the CoBLaLT method choose their assignments, the skills they want to improve, the language they want to use and the way they will contact each other in what Kumaravadivelu (2006) calls "liberatory pedagogy"; that is, learners are enabled to 'make choices' (Kramersch 2019).

Meetings with parents and the school community are also a crucial element as pupils are all minors and need permission and parental supervision for internet and out-of-school activities. Supportive parents and supportive, participative schools are a great resource and positively influence pupils' attitudes towards learning.

3 The Teacher's Guide to Contact-Based Neighbour Language Teaching and the Multimedia Autobiography

The Teacher's guide and Multimedia Autobiography described here were developed as part of the above-mentioned postdoctoral research project from 2017 to 2019. The aim of the project was precisely to co-construct teaching tools for neighbour language learning in collaboration with teachers who joined the proposed action research. They were stimulated by the low motivation of pupils to learn the language of the neighbour country at a time when English seems to be the only language in which students are interested (Čok 2009; Čok/Pertot 2010).

The guide and the multimedia autobiography of cross-border encounters have their origins in the years of implementation of the CoBLaLT model along the Slovenian-Italian coastal border, where research on the state of learning Italian in the bilingual

Slovenian area (Čok/Pertot 2010; Cavaion 2020b) and learning Slovenian in the Italian compulsory education sector (Cavaion in press) show the urgent need for innovative pedagogical intervention to promote a more functional and inclusive historical multilingualism in border areas.

3.1 The structure and aims of the guide

The guide is the result of collaboration between the researcher and teachers where the researcher provided the theoretical framework available both in English (Cavaion 2016) and now in Slovenian (Cavaion 2020e), which were discussed and shared with teachers. Teachers ran the program and collected the materials that now represent the rich list of activity examples included in the guide.

The guide is bilingual, written in Italian and Slovenian, and follows the principle of reciprocity for teachers with an understanding that there are activities which may not be entirely applicable in both Slovenian and Italian classes. It is aimed at teachers and language teachers in primary schools in the Italian-Slovenian border area in Slovenia and lower secondary schools in the Italian provinces of Trieste and Gorizia. The guide is also meant for researchers in the field of language teaching methodology, advisors for the teaching of Italian in Slovenia and Slovenian in Italy and for language policy makers. The format of the guide is digital and contains the link to the website for the *Contatti!* project (<http://contatti.splet.arnes.si/>) set up by the Slovenian National Agency for Research, where additional activities can be found. This site is constantly being developed and updated.

3.1.1 The principles, theories and specificities of the cross-border context for the teaching of languages

The guide has a theoretical introduction with a description of the principles and theories underlying the model, the aim of which is to engage the reader as they reflect upon their role as a teacher of neighbour languages.

Key words introduced here are *co-construct*; *experience*; *feel good*; *cooperate*; *reflect*; *imagine*; *make decisions*. They can be related to today's key issues in teaching and learning FL (Foreign Languages) such as socio-constructivism in FL teaching, development of Language Awareness, the psychology of language learning and language learner autonomy. The underlying theories focus on the development of intercultural and interethnic relations, virtual and face-to-face encounters, communication readiness and the development of interactional skills. They can be assumed to be central and far more significant within a teaching method that is based on real and virtual contact than in a context of simulated communication in the traditional FL classroom.

The underlying concept is that we are surrounded by opportunities for interpersonal and interethnic contact, but in most cases do not really have the skills or knowledge to truly engage in it. This is related to the fact that frequency of contact does not necessarily lead to in-depth encounters (cf. Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998; 2008). Hence, the guide advocates that in depth interpersonal cross-border encounters should be based on deep, guided, structured reflection on experience.

The introductory part of the guide includes a section dealing with code choice in the multilingual environment of language learning and teaching. Here, it is stressed that language choice in neighbour language teaching should be approached realistically and pragmatically and without taking ideological standpoints. With view of the different status the neighbour languages can have, that is depending on their prestige or, on the contrary, on their stigmatisation (see Cavaion, 2016), it is important to treat both languages with mutual respect and without exercising power (Levine 2011).

The guide further describes the CoBLaLT model and CoBLaLT-based activities consisting of discussions (see Figure 2), video calls, virtual contact (i.e., through chat, email and blogs); collaborative tasks on selected topics on the day of the encounter and activities focused on specific linguistic aspects of the respective neighbour language. Real examples of activities implemented in the classes are included.

The guide then describes the specific tool developed for the contact-based neighbour language learning classes, namely the multimedia autobiography of cross-border contact presented in Section 3.2.



Fig. 2: Mindmap of a discussion activity about the meaning of contact for teenagers in border areas.

3.2 The multimedia autobiography of cross-border contact

My multimedia autobiography of cross-border contacts is a digital journal created for pupils participating in the *Contatti!* project in order to help them develop their intercultural competence and metacognition.

As the literature on intercultural learning informs us (Bennett 1993; Byram 1997a; 1997b; 2006; Byram/Morgan 1994), intercultural competence and sensitivity develop through intercultural encounters in which we become aware of the other's and our own cultural framework. As such, awareness develops by critically relating the *self to others*. This reflection must be nurtured and guided. For this reason, we identified the autobiography as an excellent tool for a contact-based language education with the function to stimulate, accompany and enrich students' intercultural and linguistic reflection through guiding questions, quizzes and interactive games.

This teaching tool is largely inspired by the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Council of Europe 2009) by Michael Byram, which has become an important reference document for intercultural reflection promulgated by the Council of Europe. The autobiography proposed here is indeed an important tool for valorising situations of linguistic and ethnic contiguity of border regions, which become valuable cultural points of contact and, above all, opportunities for common and human growth, to the extent that one can stimulate a process of reflection on the characteristics of such border areas. Indeed, the interactive digital autobiography aims

to be a tool for understanding local specificities, entrepreneurial and personal experiences also in relation to historical memory of the border area and its complex intertwining with the phenomena of globalisation.

The autobiography is a place for collecting observations, an invitation to tell stories and a place for imagination. That way it stimulates the development of (1) curiosity about the *other*, (2) visions inspired by real experiences and (3) an analysis of difficulties and potential related to linguistic and intercultural encounters.

The digital version is the result of experimentation with a paper version of the autobiography that pupils criticised for being too static a tool. In it, pupils are asked to reflect on any difficulties they faced when attempting to communicate with their cross-border counterparts. This could be (1) linguistic difficulties (e.g., understanding the other's language, expressing themselves, technical issues of communication), (2) visual difficulties (e.g., how we see others, how their environment appears to us), (3) emotional difficulties (how I feel in the encounter with the other) or (4) communicative (e.g., how we express ourselves there). In addition, digitisation has enabled bilingual access to content. This means that the pupils can choose to read the instructions and activities in Italian or Slovenian each time they go through them. However, the texts produced and stored by the children remain unchanged, i.e., in the chosen language in which they were written.

The autobiography is an interactive digital diary that chronologically accompanies the six phases – and the respective activities – proposed in the CoBLaLT described in Section 2 (see Figure 1) with all the characteristics of a digital product in which navigation is possible by moving in several directions, always returning to a start menu, and with the possibility of editing the texts or media files. This aspect is to be used as a way of extending and improving reflection, following the desire expressed over the years by pupils to enrich and personalise their own path of reflection. The multimedia nature of the tool, which offers the possibility to narrate, remember, and interpret lived experiences, not only through written texts but also through short videos, audio recordings, songs and apps (e.g., Google Earth, Duolingo, Vocaroo, Wordclouds and others), is certainly a didactically innovative feature, because it allows for a better grasp of the sensory aspects of reality, thus, allowing for richer expression. It is also close to the communicative modes used by teenagers in their everyday life and, thus, acknowledges and integrates the skills they have developed in them.

The autobiography includes an autobiographical part (who am I; who are my relations; what is the territory that separates or unites us; our schools, etc.) and a part of report and reflection on the proposed activities (video calls; chats; class discussions; thematic lessons; real-life meetings, etc.).

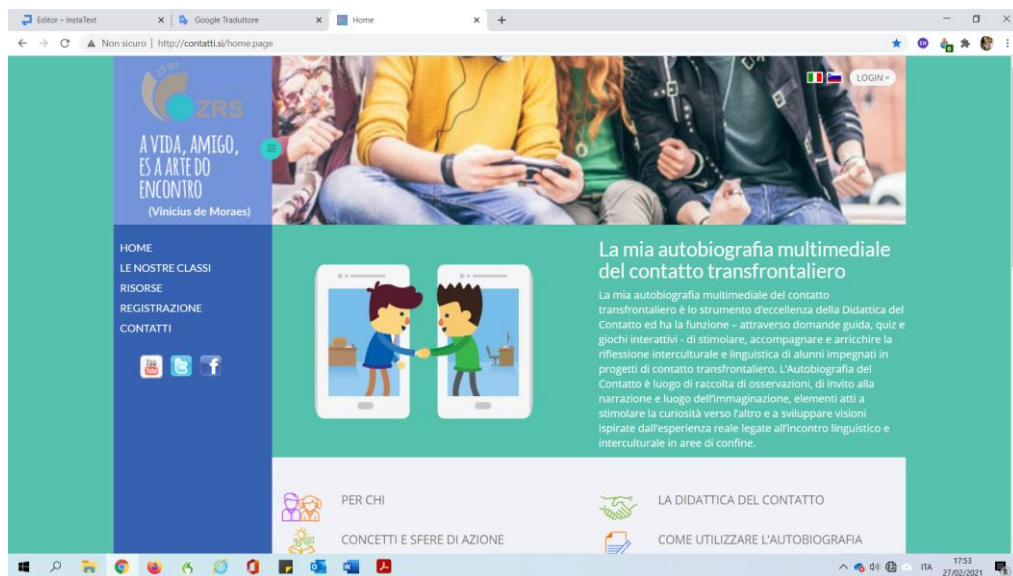


Fig. 3: The homepage of the website My multimedia autobiography of crossborder contacts

3.2.1 The spheres of action and the interactive pages of the autobiography

The autobiography is based on the spheres of action contained in the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Council of Europe 2009) with some additional topics that were developed on the basis of our own experiences with face-to-face encounters, maintained contact in the schools and, more specific, related to the border context. We list them below (additional topics and spheres of action developed in the project are printed in **bold**).

Sphere of action Attitudes and feelings:

- recognition and respect: identity and *otherness*; one's own and others' history,
- one's own and others' institutions; territory; **one's own and others' opinions**,
- feeling empathy,
- recognising positive/negative emotions,
- tolerance of ambiguity.

Sphere of action Behaviour:

- be flexible,
- be sensitive in how you communicate,
- be (conscious) and mindful in your choice of linguistic code,
- **be reliable and polite to those with whom you are in contact, assuming that there may be habits, different types of friendliness and varying degrees of formality/informality.**

Sphere of action Knowledge and skills:

- get to know others; their territory; their institutions,
- be curious and take pleasure in discovery,
- **reflect on the development of their own and others' linguistic skills,**
- **reflect on the pragmatics of language,**
- **organise tools for language learning,**
- interpret and relate these tools,
- be critical,
- become aware of prejudices and preconceptions.

The sphere of action Action:

- show initiative,
- connect with others,
- wanting to get involved,
- be cooperative.

Sphere of action Pleasure:

- **being comfortable with others and with oneself,**
- **feeling good about activities,**
- **having the pleasure of experiencing and discovering something,**
- **having fun.**

Sphere of action Friendship:

- **recognise the difference between contacts and friendships,**
- **know how to maintain virtual contact,**
- **know how to recognise aspects and actions that create friendships,**
- **know how to maintain cross-border friendships.**

These spheres of action inspire the pages of the autobiography, which is divided into thematic interactive pages that pupils can complete individually and, most importantly, with the possibility of personalising their narratives and, as previously described, expressing themselves through multimedia by uploading videos, audios, images and writing in any language they feel comfortable with or they think will be effective for the purpose.

Tab. 1: Pages and content of the My multimedia autobiography of cross-border encounters

PAGES	CONTENTS
Who am I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stories / pictures of me - What I like to do - I am special because
My friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are their names - What they like to do - The things about them that I like - Similarities and differences in our lifestyles
Our places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The place where we live or come from - Our schools - The history of our places
Our discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Title of the discussion - Keywords - Pictures - <i>Food for thought</i> (i.e., notes reflecting on the activity) - Conclusions
Our video calls and chats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Title / theme of the virtual meeting - How I spoke / how they spoke to me - Writing each other in real-time - How I felt / how they made me feel/ how do I think they felt? - Let's take a look ... (mp4 file) - Let us read each other
Us and them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What they said about us - How they seemed to us - How are we alike? How are we different?
Before the face-to-face meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My ideas - My expectations - My preparation exercises - <i>Rescue phrases</i> (i.e., a personal dictionary specific for the situation)
Together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Topic of the meeting - Impressions of the meeting - Meaning of the meeting - My memories ... - The most beautiful activity
Final reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Our virtual meetings - Our live meetings - Our discussions - The chats - The year of contacts
Our stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My special story this year - Our projects and wishes for the next year and for the future - My contact page - Measure friendship or quiz about friendship - My chat-room for connecting with them
Let's play!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quiz! - Interactive maps - Did you know that ... facts and figures about the others - Guess songs ... - Visual dictionary: guess where I am?

3.2.2 The use of the autobiography

From the pedagogical point of view, the autobiography is an instrument of self-assessment proposed by contact-based pedagogy each time a related activity takes place. The autobiography must therefore be filled in to prepare for a contact activity and as a moment of reflection after the encounter has taken place.

The autobiography is intended to be presented in class, once the cross-border encounter and reflection on it have been completed. While this can be an initial moment of completion of the task, students should be strongly encouraged to constantly update their digital autobiography to document the growth of their cross-border relationships and mutual understanding, as well as the knowledge of the others' territory, their language, institutions, families, etc.

The fact that the autobiography is a digital tool with personalised access guarantees pupils' protection in the peer group. Also the teacher, who has access to the pupils' pages, should use this power wisely and treat the individual pupil's right to privacy with respect. The autobiography, in fact, corresponds to the functions of a diary, which is the instrument par excellence of a very personal collection of impressions, comments and memories.

If used on a regular basis, the teacher can also use the autobiography to monitor student development across time. We believe that the documentation in the *autobiography* represents valuable information that can ultimately and objectively enrich the assessment of pupils' development of intercultural and metacognitive skills.

To conclude the description of the autobiography, we would like to underline the importance of its role in times of rampant sharing of experiences on social networks. The logic underlying the autobiography goes in a different direction, rather encouraging personal and individual reflection in the context of intimacy and only later leading to collective reflection. It is a process that we believe can be used in a pedagogical way by providing a place for inner reflection for children (and adults).

4 Further research and the importance of tools, of sharing and dissemination: A network of NL teachers as a future development?

The tools described in the previous sections, which were ready at the beginning of the school year 2020-21, were only partially tested in classrooms, because the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted all school exchanges, cross-border mobility and, for some time, classroom instruction. Nevertheless, a new project¹¹ just approved by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije) will have the function to test the tools and application of the CoBLaLT method. Here, teachers are invited again to implement tools and to contextualise them within their school's realities. This is a very important aspect to which we draw attention, as we believe that teachers and school communities in general have the right and the duty to shape their own learning environment, especially when the context is as specific as is the case in border regions. Here, teachers, head teachers, and parents should work together to make the border a matter of social and relational growth, also thanks to the learning and teaching of the neighbour language. Also pupils should be involved in building their learning path. The real world outside the school must meet the school environment.

Tools for teaching must therefore be tools for co-construction, sharing and dissemination. Neighbour language teachers could work and interact together in a network to be proposed within wider associations and organisations for the promotion of plurilingual education like the Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning in Leeuwarden. A neighbour language teachers' network would help the circulation and visibility of ideas and best practices. As already written elsewhere (Cavaion 2020c) and as suggested in the literature (ECML 2012), the functions of a network would certainly represent:

- a tool for professional and identity growth of its members,
- a context for didactic innovation,
- a place for the consolidation and exchange of an approach that follows the principles of multilingual and intercultural teaching,
- a way to disseminate specific knowledge about historical national minorities settled along national borders to non-members and to promote a culture that respects linguistic diversity, starting from the knowledge of historical presence as an element of real diversity from an eco-linguistic point of view.

¹¹ *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*, Slovenian research agency, basic project J6-3132, 1/10/2021 – 30/9/2024.

5 Conclusions

This paper describes the results of a project that has developed teaching and learning tools for neighbour languages in the Slovenian and Italian border areas, which we believe can inspire teachers from other European border areas. The tools are based on socio-constructivist principles and affective language learning.

We also believe that teachers of neighbour languages in border areas should form a network to exchange tools such as the ones presented here and to present other ideas in order to make the issue of teaching neighbour languages more visible, capable of making use of all the advice that Europe has given with respect to neighbour language learning and teaching in border areas in the past and recently.

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