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Effects of language and intercultural awareness on young learners' perceptions of language

Ja-Ling Comenius 2001-2004 (Ja-Ling is short for *Janua linguarum* or The Door to Languages) is an international project on language and intercultural awareness. Twelve countries participate in this project, which aims at building metalinguistic competence, developing a positive attitude to language and cultural diversity (including lesser used and immigrant languages), helping immigrant students to keep their mother tongue, and generally enhancing motivation for learning languages, mother tongue included.

Over the past year, the Slovene project group has evaluated some of the materials produced and tested in class by its members. Several evaluation tools developed by all the participating countries have been used, two of which involved pupils directly: a questionnaire about pupils' perceptions of language(s) and pupils' reflections on the language tasks done in class.

The questionnaire on language perceptions contained 10 questions and was given to 128 pupils aged 8-10, whereas 57 pupils aged 6-7 were asked similar questions orally. The questionnaire was given to the pupils twice, before they were exposed to the Ja-Ling approach, and after an average of 17 hours of work on languages and cultures. The perceptions of one class of fourth-graders were compared to their perceptions in the third grade, i.e. before they were included in the project. In their answers to the question *Do animals have a language? What makes you think so?*, more fourth-graders (48%) mentioned communication as an essential characteristic of language (11.1% in the third grade). In their answers to the question *What is language?*, 68% of the fourth-graders related language to communication and meaning, whereas one and a half years before in the third grade only 22.2% of the pupils did the same. As their answer to *What is a word?*, 36% of the fourth-graders associated words not only with letters but also with meaning, whereas in the third grade only 11.1% attributed meaning to words. Another interesting question for comparison is *What makes languages different from one another?* The biggest group (64%) of the fourth-graders related differences between languages to pronunciation/sounds, whereas a year and a half before, the percentage was slightly lower (51.9%). Direction of reading and writing was a novel element noticed by 8% of the fourth-graders.

A change in the pupils' perceptions can be noticed. However, a question that cannot be answered is how much of the language awareness that children possessed in the fourth grade actually came from the JaLing tasks, and how much of it was due to other factors such as their cognitive development, general education, language learning (their mother tongue and foreign languages) influence of parents, travelling experiences, individual interests etc. To answer this question, the language competence of some of the Ja-Ling classes will have to be compared with the language competence of some classes not included in the project.

After finishing a topic, pupils were asked to reflect on the activities (what they knew now more about concerning languages, what they would like to know more about, what they liked and disliked), and their answers show that they enjoyed the language activities and wished to find out more about other languages and cultures. Even a vast majority of the 6-7-year olds liked language and cultural awareness in the activities (84.2%); the percentage of the third- and fourth-graders who enjoyed such activities was also high (88.3%). When given opportunity to reflect, even some very young pupils had clear ideas about what they would like to know more about; for example, 26.3% of the 6-year-olds wished to know more about *how some words came to Slovenia*.

It seems that young learners can be very open to and interested in language and intercultural activities and that reflecting on these activities as well as on language in general might further focus and develop their interest. Further evidence to support this opinion was given by the parents' and teachers' answers in their questionnaires.

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