

**Soca Fidler**

## ***THE DOOR TO LANGUAGES IS OPEN***

*The Door to Languages*, as translated from Latin *Janua Linguarum*, was started in 2001 as an international project on language and intercultural awareness (Ja-Ling Comenius 2001-2004). Twelve countries participate in the project, and Slovenia is one of them. For more about the historical background, aims and content of the project see the article titled ***JA-LING PROJECT – JANUA LINGUARUM – THE DOOR TO LANGUAGES*** in *Vestnik*, 36, 1-2, 2002.

The Slovene project group, which comprises over 20 teachers (mainly classroom teachers), has produced 20 sets of Ja-Ling materials to be used in the first two triads of primary school. Over the past year, intensive evaluation of the project's work has been carried out in nine Slovene primary schools, wishing to find out what pupils, their parents and teachers thought of it, and whether the pupils have changed their perceptions of language due to their exposure to the JaLing approach. The following evaluation tools have been used:

- Pupils' perceptions of language/s
- Teacher's diary
- Teachers' questionnaire
- Pupils' reflections
- Parents' questionnaire

All the tools will be briefly presented, however, special emphasis will be placed on the following: pupils' perceptions of language/s and their reflections after doing language activities.

### **1. Perceptions of language/s**

What did young pupils know and think about language/s before being involved in different activities focused on languages and cultures? In what way did one class of ten-year olds change their perceptions of language/s after more than a year's work? The questionnaire on language perceptions was given to them twice, before and after an average of 17 hours of work on languages and cultures. Their initial perceptions are included in a bigger sample, and also directly compared to their perceptions after the above mentioned period of time. The questionnaire was given in two formats, orally to 6-7-year olds, and in written form to 8-11-year olds. The oral questionnaire, which contained 9 questions, was conducted in two classes (grade one – six-year olds, 21 pupils, and grade two – seven-year olds, 18 pupils, making a total of 39 pupils). The answers to this questionnaire were grouped into two categories: minority and majority answers.

The written questionnaire, which contained 10 questions, was given to 7 classes (2 second-grade classes – eight-year olds, 16 and 21 pupils, totalling 37 pupils, three third-grade classes – nine-year olds, 14, 17 and 27 pupils, totalling 58 pupils, and two fourth-grade classes – ten-year olds – 24 and 9 pupils, totalling 33 pupils, which makes a complete total of 128 pupils in all). Some questions

were slightly different, but the ones that both groups were asked were the ones analysed below.

The same or similar answers of the pupils are grouped together; literal translations are written in italics.

### **1.1. Summary of the pupils' written answers to 7 questions before they were involved in the Ja-Ling tasks. The information about the sample is given after each question.**

#### ***1. Which language or languages have you heard about?***

**Sample:** 2 fourth-grade classes, 2 third-grade classes, 1 second-grade class, a total of **85 pupils**

The most frequently mentioned languages are: English 69x, German 52x, Croatian 51x, Italian 47x, Slovene 38 (some pupils did not consider the official language of instruction), and some not frequently cited but interesting languages on the list are: Swedish 2x, Albanian 1x, Czech 2x, Slovak 1x, Irish 2x, Korean 2x, Hungarian 5x, Japanese 11x, Arabic 10x.

85 pupils mentioned 39 different languages, which seems to be quite a reasonable range.

#### ***2. Is Dolenjšcina a language? Why (not)?***

**The same sample as above.**

24 pupils (28.2%) thought Dolenjšcina was a language; 55 pupils (64.7%) did not think so, of which 26 pupils (30.6%) knew Dolenjšcina is a dialect, which was also their argument. 28 pupils (32.9%) gave other reasons to support their opinion that Dolenjšcina is not a language: *different pronunciation; it belongs to Slovene; it is spoken with an accent; some words are different; it is different from Slovene; it is similar to Slovene; it is a place, a country; it is not a country; it is Slovene and Croatian together; it is not spoken*. Reasons given by pupils that Dolenjšcina is a language: *it is Slovene; it is similar to Slovene; Dolenjska is a place/country; it is spoken; it is spoken differently*.

The largest number did not provide a real argument but only said that Dolenjšcina is a dialect. The pupils' observations brought up pronunciation, accent and some different words as differentiating characteristics of something that is not a language but may be a dialect; they even touched on the geographical factor, but as expected not the social one. 3 answers (3.5%) were unclear, 2 pupils (2.4%) did not know the answer, and 1 pupil (1.2%) did not answer the question.

#### ***3. What makes languages different from one another?***

**Sample:** 2 fourth-grade classes, 3 third-grade classes, 2 second-grade classes; a total of **128 pupils**

*Pronunciation; pronunciation and spelling; sounds; different words; words in combination with either pronunciation or spelling; spoken in different countries; different scripts; different accent; mistaken for tongue (homonyms in Slovene).*

The biggest group thought it was pronunciation or sounds that make languages different (57 pupils – 44.5%). It is only too natural that the pupils focused their

attention on speaking, as writing was generally not yet part of their learning experience. The other categories were: words – 24 pupils (18.8%), countries – 17 pupils (13.3%) and other – 11 pupils (8.6%). 19 pupils (14.8%) did not formulate a clear answer (due to a lack of time or ideas?).

#### **4. Do animals have a language? What makes you think so?**

##### **The same sample as for question 3.**

Reasons for positive answers (89 pupils – 69.5%): *animals communicate in their own way; have an animal language; animals make sounds; animals speak differently in different countries; children talk about their experience with animal language (Cats miaow, cows moo ...); animals can use body language.* Reasons for negative answers (32 pupils – 25%): *animals have a different communication; are not human beings; do not have an alphabet.*

Pupils were expected to reflect on definitions of language. Most pupils from both groups connected language with communication and sounds (87 pupils – 68%), 4 pupils (3.1%) mentioned body language as an integral part of language, 6 pupils (4.7%) gave an example of animal language, and 2 pupils (1.6%) attributed language to humans only. 1 pupil (0.8%) said that only some animals have a language. 17 pupils (13.2%) offered no arguments for their either positive or negative answer, 1 pupil (0.8%) gave an unclear answer and 5 pupils (3.9%) did not provide one. There were 5 (3.9%) single answers.

#### **5. How do people learn languages?**

##### **The same sample as for question 1.**

*At school or by attending courses; in your family; by being taught either at school or at home; by repeating; by listening; by hearing it a lot of times; by listening and reading/repeating; from one's birth on; by reading; by imitating others; by learning hard/practising a lot; by meeting foreigners/learning in that country; by singing; gradually.*

The question did not specify whether it referred to mother tongue or foreign language learning, and was therefore open to both. Most pupils thought of second and foreign language learning (*at school or by attending courses, by meeting foreigners and learning in that country, by learning hard/practising a lot, by singing* – 32x – 37.6%); a large number of pupils' answers were not clear in specification and could have referred to both (*by being taught at school or at home, by repeating, by hearing it a lot of times, by listening, by listening and reading/repeating, by reading, by imitating others, gradually* – 29x – 34.1%), and some pupils bore in mind mother tongue learning (*in your family, from one's birth on* – 17x – 20%). 7 pupils (8.2%) provided either no or an unclear answer.

#### **6. What is a word?**

##### **The same sample as for question 3.**

*A group of letters/ with a meaning; a word has a meaning; what we say; part of language; part of a sentence and is made up of letters; part of a sentence; a name of certain objects; an example (Hello is a word); used for communication; what we say and write/ common in writing; a thing or a concept we say; an agreement among several people.*

A lot of pupils (45 – 35.2%) did not give a precise enough definition (*what we say*). However, the second largest group did (*a group of letters with a meaning* –

23 pupils – 18%). 14 pupils (10.9%) attributed meaning/communication to a word and so did 4 more pupils (3.1%) – *name of certain objects*. 4 pupils (3.1%) gave concrete examples of words. 14 pupils (10.9%) defined it as part of a sentence/language. 10 pupils (7.8%) gave other answers (one of the answers implied the original arbitrary relation between a word and its meaning – *an agreement among several people*). It is surprising that quite a large number of pupils (14 – 10.9%) did not really know what to say, and either did not finish their answer (4x) or said *I don't know* (1x), or left it blank (9x).

### **7. What would you like to investigate if you were a language researcher?**

#### **The same sample as for 1.**

*Specific language(s); modern languages; old(est) languages; human languages; old scripts; specific script; how animals speak; words; language/how babies learn language; pronunciation/spelling; how many languages there are in a country; languages and how many there are; how languages originated; how people named things; how words differ; purpose of language; fairy tales in different languages.*

It is normal for young pupils both to admire a particular language and to wish to find out more about one (33 pupils – 38.8%). 8 pupils (9.4%) wished to learn modern languages and 5 pupils (5.9%) old/est languages. Some interest (6 pupils – 7.1%) was probably aroused by the questions in the questionnaire (*how babies learn language, how animals speak*). 4 pupils were interested in scripts (4.7%), 5 pupils (5.9%) in pronunciation/spelling and 3 (3.5%) in words. 8 pupils (9.4%) expressed different interests. 13 pupils (15.3%) might have lacked ideas or time to put them down as this was the last question in the questionnaire.

### **1.2. Summary of the pupils' oral answers to the same 7 questions before they were involved in the Ja-Ling tasks.**

**Sample:** 1 first-grade class, 1 second-grade class, a total of **39 pupils**

#### **1. Which language or languages have you heard about?**

Grade 1: Slovene – 4x; English – 8x; Croatian – 13x; French – 3x; German – 2x; Chinese – 2x; Spanish – 1x; American – 1x.

Grade 2: without numbers: English, German, Croatian, Romanian, Italian, Japanese, Equatorial?, French, Bosnian, Serbian, Macedonian, Portuguese, Spanish, Argentinian?, Mexican?, Swedish, Danish, Cameroonian.

The first-graders mentioned 8 languages, whereas second-graders cited 18 languages (although three of them were their own inventions).

#### **2. Is Dolenjšcina a language? Why (not)?**

Majority answers: Yes (everybody) – *people in Dolenjska have a strong accent which is hard to understand; because we can talk and find out something.*

Minority answers: Yes (everybody) – *so that people can speak Dolenjšcina there; so that people do not speak the same everywhere; because it is different from other languages.*

All the pupils believed Dolenjšcina was a language, the majority was aware that its characteristic was a strong accent hard to understand (both classes happened to be from the Dolenjska region), a minority of pupils thought that its difference

from other languages made it a language. It seems that the mutual influence was strong, smothering more diverse ways of thinking that might have come from shyer pupils.

### **3. What makes languages different from one another?**

Majority answers: *Pronunciation; they are spoken in different countries.*

Minority answers: *They are just different; words are different; speaking is different; some don't know the language and have to learn it.*

A majority of pupils attributed differences to pronunciation and believed that each country had a different language. A minority of pupils ascribed differences to different words and speaking, although *speaking* is too vague a word to ascertain what exactly they meant (sounds, rhythm, intonation?).

### **4. Do animals have a language? What makes you think so?**

Majority answers - YES – *animals can use body language; animals make sounds; mistake language for tongue - homonyms in Slovene (When they drink, they put out their tongues; they use them when they eat; when they eat grass).*

Minority answers - NO – *because cows moo and do not talk; some animals have it and others do not.*

Most pupils associated animal language with body language and sounds; some pupils made a difference between animal sounds and talking, and some said that not all animals had a language.

### **5. How do people learn languages?**

Majority answers: *by listening; in your family; at school; by travelling to other countries.*

Minority answers: *by attending a language course; by repeating; by practising; if somebody else tells you; if one has lived in a foreign country, they can teach you.*

The answers mostly relate to foreign/second language learning. The pupils thought of a variety of ways experienced or close to them, as is normal for this age.

### **6. What is a word?**

Majority answers: A word has a meaning (*it means something*); *what you say*, examples: *if you ask for something; if you fall you call for help; if you apologise.*

Minority answer: letters put together (*you have to know the alphabet*).

Most pupils associated words with their essential characteristic: meaning. Some pupils added the other component: letters.

### **7. What would you like to investigate if you were a language researcher?**

Majority answers: *I'd go around the world; names in different countries.*

Minority answers: *pronunciation; if speaking corresponds to what it says in books.*

Speaking and its component (pronunciation) seem to be natural priorities of young pupils. Some pupils have set themselves a very ambitious task: to check whether textbooks teach authentic language.

### **1.3. Comparison of the answers provided by a class of pupils who have been in the project for one and a half years.**

**Grade 3: 27 pupils, mostly 10-year olds, third year of English (February 2002)**

#### **1. Do animals have a language? What makes you think so?**

Reasons for positive answers (25 pupils – 92.6%): *animal sounds; a special animal language; when a dog barks he communicates with another dog; each kind of animal has its own language; each living being has a language and communicates in a certain way; all animals have a language and also talk to each other.*

15 pupils (55.6%) thought animals have a (special) language/sounds, 3 pupils (11.1%) said it is used for communication, and 7 pupils (25.9%) provided no reason. 1 pupil (3.7%) did not answer the question and 1 pupil (3.7%) did not provide any arguments for the negative answer.

#### **2. What is language ?**

*Language is something in which we can talk and understand each other; everybody has their own and different language; language is man's communication; language enables communication; language is something that animals and people speak, we talk in language; language is words that come from our mouth; language is what we speak; every country has a language – we all speak it in the same way although in different dialects; if there wasn't a language, we couldn't talk; language is a thing we all speak – languages are different; language is something we learn since we are born and we speak it – it is a sort of thing; language is what is spoken in foreign countries; language is words we use to talk to each other and write; language is a language we speak since we are born; language is that there are differences; language is that people speak their language and they are different; if there wasn't language, nobody would understand what we want, therefore each country has its own language; language is something with which we understand each other; tongue is something we have in our mouths and if we didn't have it we couldn't talk; language is our speech and if there wasn't language, we couldn't talk; language is the different speech of citizens; language (tongue?) helps you to talk nicely.*

It is amazing that a vast majority of pupils (19 – 70.4%) came up with a definition of language, some of which were very good, e.g. *language is man's communication, language enables communication, if there wasn't language, nobody would understand what we want* (6 pupils - 22.2% - related language to communication/meaning). 3 pupils (11.1%) associated language with different countries. 2 pupils (7.4%) gave the definition of a tongue, and 3 pupils (11.1%) did not answer the question.

#### **3. What makes languages different from one another?**

*The way you speak; different pronunciation of the words that mean the same; different words, letters and pronunciation; different sounds; speech and sounds; pronunciation; words and pronunciation; words are spelled and pronounced differently; different words; some speak one language, others another; languages differ in their name and character; each country has its own language – they differ according to the country; script and speaking; America can't have the Slovene language because they are not in Slovenia – that's the way we distinguish languages; the French can't speak Slovene because they are from France.*

It is obvious that this class is fairly language conscious since the range of differences the pupils mention is fairly wide: pronunciation is a frequent answer (also in combination with words, letters or sounds - 14 pupils – 51.9%), followed by words (4 pupils – 14.8%), and script (2 pupils – 7.4%). One pupil (3.7%) produced a fairly sophisticated answer: *languages differ in their name and character*. 4 pupils (14.8%) ascribe a language to a country. 1 pupil (3.7%) gave a vague reply and 1 (3.7%) did not answer the question.

#### **4. What is a word?**

*A word is something we say; we communicate with words; a word is something we use in a sentence; a word is a sound that comes from the mouth, what we pronounce; a word is composed of letters – it can be long or short – it is used in a sentence; we write words on worksheets and we also say them; a word helps the language and is its part; a word is part of a sentence and has at least two letters – we talk in words; two or more letters and name are also a word; a lot of letters make up a word; words are different because there are a lot of words in the world; a word is something we say and write; a word is composed of letters and has a meaning.*

An admirable range of answers shows that the pupils liked to think about this question: 6 pupils (22.2%) defined a word as composed of letters, 2 of which (7.4%) said it has a meaning; 1 pupil (3.7%) said the same, but using other words (*we communicate with words*). 18 pupils (66.7%) gave broader definitions (*what we say, part of a sentence/language ...*) and 2 pupils (7.4%) did not answer the question.

#### **5. Would you like to learn any more languages? Why?**

**NO:** *I don't feel like learning foreign languages; I'm not interested in other languages;*  
**YES. Why?** *English: it is good to know more languages; Egyptian?: I'm very interested in Egypt; English: to be able to talk to people who know that language; German, French and Italian because it can help you a lot later in life; French because I like it and it seems unusual to me; I'd like to travel around the world and if I came to a foreign country I could speak their language; French because it is very interesting; French because I like it and because I'll go with my dad to France; that I will know more languages; I like other languages and I'll go to other countries; if we go to foreign countries I'll understand what they want; because I like it and if you travel and a German person asks you something you will understand them; Chinese: I'd like to travel to China; I'd like to understand the people of that country; I'd like to know more languages, I'd like to learn Mexican?; German to learn about how other nations speak; when I go to that country I can speak that language; to be able to talk, write letters and similar things; to understand how people from other countries speak; Norwegian, Spanish and English because they would be very useful.*

20 pupils (74.1%) would like to learn more languages; the range of their choice of languages is wide, French, English and German being the most common options. As the pupils already learn English, their desire to learn it can be understood as a wish to continue to learn it. 6 pupils (22.2%) would not like to learn any more languages (only two pupils gave a reason). 1 pupil (3.7%) did not answer the question.

#### **1.4. Grade 4: the same 25 pupils who answered the questionnaire a year before, now mostly 11-year olds, fourth year of English (June 2003)**

##### **1. Do animals have a language ? What makes you think so?**

Reasons for positive answers (22 pupils – 88%): *animals produce sounds; they communicate with each other – there are often examples: by barking, whining etc; every living creature has their own language; they give signals; its structure is a bit different.*  
Reasons for negative answers (1 pupil – 4%): *they communicate in a different way.*

6 pupils (24%) said that animals produce sounds, 12 pupils (48%) said animals use their language for communication and some also gave examples of their communication; 1 pupil (4%) said animals give signals (was body language also meant here?); 2 (8%) pupils provided general argumentation and 1 answer (4%) was unclear. 1 pupil (4%) did not think animals have a language. 2 pupils (8%) did not provide an answer. In comparison with the third-graders, more pupils now mentioned communication as an essential characteristic of language (11.1% - 48%).

##### **2. What is language?**

*Language is an organ in the mouth or a concept we communicate with; we communicate with it and we learn them; language is a means of communication; what we say and communicate with; what we pronounce and say; part of our body we communicate with, each country has its own language; what we say and hear, they differ in letters, speech; expressions and movements; a group of words for communication; words for communication, also with people from other countries; words that name something; what we have in our mouths, what is spoken in other countries – languages can be different; what we communicate with – there are several different languages – it is also an organ used for speaking; what we speak e.g. French; letters and words for communication; what we say every day – in other countries there are other languages; source of communication – there are many different languages spoken all over the world; an organ used for speaking; a way of communication necessary for everyday use – we need language otherwise our life would not be sufficiently developed.*

15 fourth-graders (60%) connected language with communication, 2 pupils (8%) with sounds, 2 pupils (8%) with meaning and 1 pupil (4%) with expressions and movements; 1 pupil (4%) thought of the tongue only (homonyms in Slovene), and 3 pupils (12%) gave more concrete examples. 1 pupil (4%) did not answer the question. 68% of the fourth-graders related language to communication and meaning, whereas one and a half years ago only 22.2% of the pupils did the same.

##### **3. What makes languages different from one another?**

*Sounds, spelling, speed of speech, length; spelling, pronunciation and direction of writing; speech, spelling, faster speech; pronunciation, accent, spelling and speed; pronunciation and stress; pronunciation; spelling and pronunciation; letters and pronunciation; words sound different; letters, speed of speech, other countries have their own language that is spoken differently; speed of speech, length; letters, words, pronunciation, speed of speech, some speakers stress words more; letters and sounds; letters, script, syllables, direction of reading and writing; dialects as each country has the same language; different in different countries; different words for the same things and different letters; different words for the same things.*

16 fourth-graders (64%) related differences between languages to pronunciation/sounds, whereas a year and a half before the percentage was slightly lower (51.9% - 14 third-graders). One more fourth-grader (5 - 20%) connected a language with a country (4 pupils - 14.8% a year ago), which is still acceptable as the pupils were too young to rely on other distinguishing features and the materials did not shed light on this aspect. Direction of reading and writing is a novel element noticed by 2 fourth-graders (one of the two is also in the pronunciation category - 8%). 3 pupils (12%) attributed differences to words.

#### **4. What is a word?**

*Composed of letters and used for communication; composed of letters or symbols in China; part of language; part of a sentence; a group of letters that name something when said; composed of letters as a sentence is made up of words and a text of sentences; one or more letters, what we say, hear; something we say; composed of letters, signs; a group of letters that have a meaning; a word is most important - if there were not any words there would be no language; composed of letters, sentences made up of words - used for communication; made up of letters, sometimes words are very long but mean very little; made up of words - if there were no letters there would be no words, differences in languages and words; what we write and in different countries words are pronounced and written differently; made up of letters; part of language with a meaning; made up of letters and is what we say; part of a sentence, which is part of language necessary for life.*

9 fourth-graders (36%) associated words not only with letters but also with meaning, whereas in the third grade only 3 pupils (11.1%) attributed meaning to words. 8 pupils (32%) defined a word as a group of letters or signs and 6 pupils (24%) as part of language or a sentence or what we say. 1 pupil (4%) mentioned that words are different in different countries. 1 pupil (4%) gave no answer.

#### **5. Would you like to learn any more languages? Why?**

Reasons for positive answers (17 pupils - 68%): *because they would come in handy - Spanish, German; I'd like to visit other countries and communicate with the natives; Belgian because they speak in a funny way and write in nice letters; French and Chinese because they are very interesting; I'd like to learn Spanish because it is an interesting language, it has interesting letters and because I have liked it since I was a little girl - I understand it a little; to be able to communicate with other people; Chinese because I find the pronunciation very interesting; I'd like to know Spanish, Italian and English; because of the proverb "The more languages you know, the more worthy you are"; Chinese/Italian/French because it is an interesting language; because I'd like to talk to people when visiting a foreign country; I'd like to find out even more about all the languages in the world. The more languages I know, the better a profession I'll have.*

Reasons for negative answers (8 pupils - 32%; 7 pupils gave no explanation): *because I have other goals in my life.*

The number of the pupils who are not interested in learning more languages has slightly increased: from 22.2% in the third grade to 32% in the fourth grade. This could be due to difficulties some pupils may have encountered while learning English within the curriculum. The range of languages pupils would like to learn has not changed much, especially if we consider that two pupils were absent during the second questionnaire. Neither have changed the reasons:

it is still because a particular language is interesting, languages in general are useful, or because of a wish for direct communication with native people. Only three fourth-graders give a more detailed reason: letters or pronunciation of a particular language.

## Conclusions

The pupils' perceptions of language/s have changed over a period of one and a half years (see answers to questions *What is language?*, *What makes languages different from one another?* and *What is a word?*). 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 education (in 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.

## 2. Teacher's diary

After finishing a set of materials, each participating teacher was asked to fill in the teacher's questionnaire, which consisted of a shorter, quantitative and a longer, qualitative part. In the example below, nine teachers assessed the material called *Linguistics*.

How far do you agree with the following statements? <b>1 : very little</b> <b>5 : very much</b>	1	2	3	4	5	Average points
The materials were an appropriate level for my pupils.			2	4	3	4.1.
The topic was interesting for my pupils.			1	2	6	4.6
The activities were interesting for my pupils.			1	2	6	4.6
The proposed objectives have been reached.			1	2	6	4.6
The materials were easy to use.			1	3	5	4.4
The materials facilitated the pupils' involvement in the activities.			1	1	7	4.7
The materials enable the setting up of activities in other subjects (promote interdisciplinary dimension).		1	2	2	4	4

In the qualitative part, the teachers were asked to answer questions such as what worked extremely well for the pupils, for the teacher, what difficulties they encountered, and they were also asked to suggest improvements. On the basis of their reflections, which were generally very positive, the materials were modified.

### 3. Teachers' questionnaire

16 teachers assessed their agreement with 24 statements about the JaLing approach and 8 statements about the materials. For example, the degree of agreement with the following statements was very high: *Language awareness activities can make a positive contribution to changing pupil attitudes towards other communities and cultures* (4.8 pts out of 5), *This approach stimulates curiosity and interest in language learning* (4.6 pts), *This approach develops aural discrimination* (4.4 pts), and *This approach should be integrated into the school curriculum* (4.6 pts). Also in this questionnaire, the teachers evaluated the materials they had tested in class. Below, there is an example of the quantitative evaluation of the same material as above, which was again very positive (compare some questions above).

#### Assessment of the material called *Linguistics* using the scale from 1 – 5.

Usefulness of objectives: 5.0

Appropriateness to children's abilities: 4.4

Appropriateness to children's interests: 4.3

Quality of materials (e.g. easy to use, attractive): 4.5

Efficiency: 4.6

### 4. Pupils' reflections

After doing each set of materials on language and intercultural awareness, pupils were asked to reflect on the 4 'questions' below. The questionnaire aimed at making pupils think about what they had learnt as well as giving the material writer feedback on what was good, what could be improved and what new topics pupils would like to explore. It was divided into two parts and contained two open statements and two questions:

#### *Thinking about languages*

1. Now I know that \_\_\_\_\_

2. I would like to know more about \_\_\_\_\_

#### *Thinking about the topic and tasks*

3. Is there anything you liked very much? Say what. \_\_\_\_\_

4. Is there anything you didn't like? Say what. \_\_\_\_\_

Below, four examples of pupils' reflections will be given, two of which will give an insight into the reflections of a larger number of pupils and two will highlight the reflections of a single class taken from the bigger sample for comparison.

#### 4.1.

**57 pupils from three primary schools** - 3 classes (Primož Trubar, Velike Lašce, grade 1: 19 pupils; Trnovo, Ljubljana, grade 2: 21 pupils; and Šentjakob ob Savi, Crnuce, grade 2: 17 pupils) answered the questions after doing the material titled *Cooking Detective Junior*. The main aims of the activities were to look for food words in three foreign languages, and to find similarities between words in those languages.

**Question 1:** 18 pupils (31.6%) said they knew now more about words, 8 pupils (14%) about languages and 21 pupils (36.8%) gained more knowledge. 9 pupils' (15.8%) answers were not related to the question and 1 pupil (1.8%) did not answer the question. The percentage of the pupils who were aware of the linguistic input was high (82.4%).

**Question 2:** 18 pupils (31.6%) wished to know more about words, 4 pupils (7%) about languages, 3 pupils (5.3%) about particular languages, 13 pupils (22.8%) about countries, 3 pupils (5.3%) about customs, 1 pupil (1.8%) about spelling and 1 pupil (1.8%) about nothing. Unrelated answers were given by 10 pupils (17.5%), vague answers only by one (1.8%) and 3 pupils (5.3%) did not answer the question. Approximately a third of the pupils would like to know more about words (31.6%), which was probably due to the nature of the tasks. A satisfactory percentage (73.7%) of the pupils expressed a linguistic and cultural interest.

**Question 3:** The materials were obviously likeable, as 52 pupils (91.2%) liked something very much and only 5 pupils (8.8%) did not. The largest group (10 pupils – 17.5%) liked everything, the second largest groups (each comprising 7 pupils - 24.6%) liked looking for words in other languages and watching the video with native speaker pupils reading the menu in their language, and the third largest group (6 pupils – 10.5%) liked working with maps. Some other likes were looking at the menu(s) - 7.0% (4 pupils), talking about other countries - 5.3% (3 pupils), gaining knowledge - 5.3% (3 pupils), and learning about words – 3.5% (2 pupils), apart from some more sporadic answers (6 pupils – 10.5%). 2 pupils (3.5%) produced vague answers and 2 pupils (3.5%) did not give an explanation. A vast majority of the pupils liked language and cultural awareness in the activities (84.2%).

**Question 4:** The number of the pupils who did not have any dislikes is high (50 pupils - 87.7%); 4 students (7%) had some dislikes: 2 pupils (3.5%) did not like looking for similar words – linking similar words; 1 pupil (1.8%) disliked not knowing a few languages, which is actually very positive, and 1 pupil (1.8%) did not like the group *yelling* at him/her, which reflects discipline or behavioural problems within the group. In fact, this means that only two students did not like the language awareness activities (3.5%). 3 pupils (5.3%) did not provide an answer. Bearing in mind that there are also slow pupils, the *no* answer could have been due to lack of time.

#### 4.2.

**19 first-graders** were included in the bigger sample presented above. They were interviewed by their teacher on the same four questions after doing the material titled *Cooking Detective Junior*.

**Question 1:** 16 pupils (84.2%) said they had gained some knowledge and 3 pupils (15.8%) found out that some words are similar to Slovene words. All the pupils were aware of the linguistic input, probably due to the teacher's clear guidance.

**Question 2:** 5 pupils (26.3%) wished to know more about *how some words came to Slovenia*, 12 pupils (63.2%) were interested in words for other foods and 2 pupils (10.5%) did not say anything. A high percentage (89.5%) of the pupils expressed a linguistic and cultural interest.

**Question 3:** All the 19 pupils (100%) liked something very much; 10 pupils (52.6%) liked everything, 7 pupils (36.8%) liked looking for words on cards with names of dishes in three foreign languages, and 2 pupils (10.5%) did not give any examples of their likes.

**Question 4:** 17 pupils (89.5%) did not have any dislikes; 2 pupils (10.5%) did not like looking for and linking words.

## Conclusions

The range of the first-graders' answers is not as wide as that of the second-graders, which could be a result of their young age (less knowledge and less developed skills) and/or the way the questionnaire was carried out as the pupils very unlikely reflected independently; on the contrary, shyer pupils may have been influenced by their more outspoken classmates. However, it is obvious that six-year olds can be very open to and interested in language and intercultural awareness tasks.

### 4.3.

**162 third- and fourth-graders from 6 schools - 9 classes** (Rihard Jakopic, Ljubljana, grade 4: 25 pupils; Bicevje, Ljubljana, grade 4: 26 pupils; grade 3: 18 pupils; grade 3: 13 pupils; Trnovo, Ljubljana, grade 4: 23 pupils; grade 3: 20 pupils; Primož Trubar, Velike Lašce, grade 4: 17 pupils; Šentjakob ob Savi, Crnuce, grade 4: 9 pupils; Veliki Gaber, Veliki Gaber, grade 3: 11 pupils) reflected on the 4 questions after doing the material titled *Linguistics*. The main aims of the activities were to motivate pupils to think about ways of finding out the meaning(s) of unfamiliar words and to help them learn about a linguist's job.

**Question 1:** The biggest group said they knew more about languages (58 pupils – 35.8%). The second biggest group pointed out words (31 pupils – 19.1%), some pupils mentioned dictionaries (23 pupils – 14.2%), linguists (16 pupils – 9.9%), scripts (6 pupils – 3.6%), knowledge (4 pupils – 2.5%), particular languages (3 pupils – 1.9%), corruptions of words (1 pupil – 0.6%), pronunciation (2 pupils – 1.2%) and skill to communicate (1 pupil – 0.6%). Only 4 pupils (2.5%) did not give related answers, although 10 pupils (6.2%) answered too vaguely (e.g. *country*) and 3 pupils (1.9%) did not answer the question. The percentage of the pupils who were aware of the linguistic input was high (88.9% – the category knowledge is included).

**Question 2:** 50 pupils (30.9%) wished to know more about particular languages, 41 pupils (25.3%) about languages, 22 pupils (13.6%) about words, 13 pupils (8%) about linguists, 8 pupils (4.9%) about linguistics, 8 pupils (4.9%) about dictionaries, 5 pupils (3.1%) about dialects; 7 pupils' (4.2%) wishes were dispersed over 6 more areas of interest. 2 pupils (1.2%) were not interested in anything. 4 pupils' answers (2.5%) were not related (e.g. *Football*), 1 pupil (0.6%) answered too vaguely and 1 pupil (0.6%) did not answer the question. 95.1% of the pupils expressed a relevant linguistic and cultural interest, which was fairly varied.

**Question 3:** 155 pupils (95.7%) liked something very much, 5 pupils (3.1%) did not have a great liking and 2 pupils (1.2%) were undecided. Browsing through the dictionary was enjoyed by 56 pupils (34.6%), gaining knowledge by 18 pupils (11.1%), everything by 12 pupils (7.4%), particular languages by 12 pupils (7.4%), the story *Dutch without pain* by 7 pupils (4.3%), working in groups by 6 pupils (3.6%), to mention the more frequently occurring answers. 2 pupils (1.2%) gave unrelated answers, and 2 pupils (1.2%) did not answer the question. The percentage of the pupils who liked linguistic activities was fairly high: 88.3%. The students' likes were varied and very few were unrelated to language or cultural awareness.

**Question 4:** 132 pupils (81.5%) did not have any dislikes, 25 pupils (15.4%) had some and 5 pupils (3.1%) did not answer the question. The range of dislikes is quite wide, but very few touch on linguistic and cultural awareness: most of the pupils (7 – 4.3%) did not like looking up words and the other dislikes are represented by very few pupils (1 – 3, 1 being the most common number) and often relate to organisation (e.g. working in

groups, quarrelling, noise, too-easy questions, not knowing everything, little time). The percentage of the pupils who did not have any linguistic dislikes is quite high - 77.2%.

#### 4. 4.

**26 fourth-graders** from Bicevje Primary School were included in the bigger sample presented above and their reflections are as follows:

**Question 1:** Most pupils (13 – 50%) said they now knew more about languages, 7 pupils (26.9%) about words, 3 pupils (11.5%) about dictionaries, 1 pupil (3.8%) about pronunciation and 2 pupils (7.7%) gave vague answers. The percentage of the pupils who were aware of the linguistic input was high (92.3%).

**Question 2:** Most pupils (12 – 46.2%) would like to know more about languages in general, 5 pupils (19.2%) about particular languages, 3 pupils (11.5%) about dialects, and 2 pupils (7.7%) about words; single wishes were pronunciation, language rules, history of literary language, and dictionaries (4 pupils - 15.4%). All the pupils were interested in a linguistic and cultural input.

**Question 3:** 23 pupils (88.5%) liked something very much, 1 pupil (3.8%) did not, and 2 pupils (7.7%) were undecided. Most pupils (12 – 46.2%) enjoyed browsing through the dictionary, 3 pupils (11.5%) enjoyed gaining knowledge, 2 pupils (7.7%) doing research and another 2 pupils (7.7%) the story *Dutch without pain*; 4 pupils (15.4%) enjoyed different things: everything, dialects, discussion, and working in a group. The percentage of the pupils who liked linguistic activities was fairly high (84.7%).

**Question 4:** 22 pupils (84.6%) did not dislike anything, 3 pupils (11.5%) disliked different things: not knowing all languages, which is naïve thinking and also cannot be considered a real dislike, not being in a good group, and English. In fact, only the dislike of English touches on the linguistic and/or cultural sphere. 1 pupil (3.8%) did not answer the question. 80.8% of the pupils did not have any linguistic dislikes.

### Conclusions

The fourth-graders from Bicevje seem to have been slightly more aware of the linguistic and intercultural input than the whole sample as they surpassed the average awareness by 3.4% (question 1); their interest in language awareness tasks was higher by 4.9% (question 2), although they enjoyed doing the linguistic activities less by 3.6% (question 3). They also had by 3.6% fewer linguistic dislikes (question 4). On the whole, the pupils' responses to the language awareness tasks were very favourable.

### 5. Parents' Questionnaire about JaLing

193 parents out of 227 (85%) filled in a 6-item questionnaire; 5 questions will be highlighted here to shed additional light on the first- and fourth-graders' attitude to the JaLing project.

#### 5.1. Opinion of first-graders' parents

Further evidence to support the opinion that the six-year olds included in the project (see Pupils' reflections, 4.2.) were interested in the JaLing tasks is the results of the questionnaire given to their parents after three months of the

JaLing approach implementation. 13 parents out of 16 (81.3%) knew about the JaLing project as their children talked about it at home. 6 parents (37.5%) noticed a change in the child's attitude towards foreign languages or cultures and traditions: 1 parent said their child was becoming more open-minded, 1 noticed their child acquire more knowledge, and 4 parents (25%) said their child showed an increased interest in other cultures and languages. 10 parents (62.5%) were often asked about the meaning of a word or about its origin or about languages and cultures. 15 parents (93.8%) thought that awakening to languages was something positive for the development of their child and justified their opinion mostly by saying that it promotes language learning in general and develops a positive attitude to other languages and cultures. 12 parents (75%) thought that language awareness should be part of the school curricula.

## **5.2. Opinion of fourth-graders' parents**

Did the fourth-graders exhibit their enthusiasm at home? 16 out of 23 parents (69.6%) said they knew about the JaLing project as their children talked about it at home. 11 parents (47.8%) noticed some changes in their child's attitude towards foreign languages or cultures and traditions, 5 of which said their child showed an increased interest in languages, 3 said their child showed an increased interest in other cultures and languages, 2 noticed their child acquire more knowledge, and 1 parent noticed their child becoming more open-minded. 21 parents (91.3%) were often asked about the meaning of a word or about its origin or about languages and cultures, which of course cannot be only attributed to the JaLing approach. The same number of parents (21 – 91.3%) thought that awakening to languages was something positive for the development of their child and justified their opinion mostly by stating that their child could acquire more knowledge, would increase his/her interest in other cultures and languages, would become more open-minded, would develop his/her intellectual potential, and would develop a better understanding of the world as well as tolerance. 20 parents (87%) were in favour of language awareness becoming part of the school curricula, although a few suggested that it should not be a new obligatory subject. Their concern is understandable in view of overcrowded schedules schoolchildren have to cope with on a daily basis.

## **Conclusions**

Generally, the parents' answers were very positive and it is encouraging that 75% of the first-graders' parents and 87% of the fourth-graders' parents were in favour of language awareness becoming part of the school curricula. If the whole sample of parents is taken into consideration, the percentage is even higher (90.1%).

## 6. Additional (subjective) observations about the JaLing project

The evaluation has shown that pupils not only like the JaLing approach but also benefit from it, which was noticed by their teachers and parents. Ideally, materials should include all the languages spoken in class to turn bilingual or even multilingual pupils into little language experts who arouse their classmates' interest in other languages and cultures; for the time being not all materials can pride themselves on that, but when they do include languages spoken in class, the pupils react delightedly. To mention only a few examples: this year, third- and fourth-graders enjoyed writing and reading Cyrillic and Arabic script; the latter activity engaged a mother, who readily helped the teacher prepare the tasks, whereas her son acted as an expert in class. Another illustrative example is that Romany pupils after the whole class was actively involved in some tasks including also the Romany language, appeared in the eyes of their classmates superior to them since they possessed extra knowledge, and were showered with questions about the meaning of certain words in Romany, which made them feel almost like some pop stars. This year, two Romany pupils started to write a Romany-Slovene dictionary for their teacher and classmates. Another example: after six-year olds were motivated to put down or remember unknown or »foreign« words while on holiday (not necessarily abroad but also in other parts of Slovenia or even at home making new friends) and were asked to present them to their classmates at the beginning of the new school year, several pupils remembered the task and did so. The next year, a lot of pupils brought lists of words they did not know on their own initiative and proudly shared them with their classmates.

The teachers like the approach too, but confess that they are afraid of spending more time doing language and intercultural awareness activities as they feel they might deprive their pupils of the time that should be devoted to the tasks in their regular and overcrowded syllabi. Some of them even resent the fact that they did not have the opportunity to do such activities during their schooling.

In conclusion, we can hope that the JaLing approach will not have to wait long to be approved by our school authorities for its door to be wide open in Slovene schools, as two most important conditions have been met: its aims and objectives are in line with those of most of Slovene primary school curricula, and it seems to pursue its aims successfully.

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### **Summary**

#### **THE DOOR TO LANGUAGES IS OPEN**

The language and intercultural awareness approach (JaLing Comenius project) has been introduced into nine Slovene primary schools, one and a half years ago. This article describes the evaluation of the project, which has been carried out over the past year. The results are very positive and show that the pupils involved in the project enjoyed the activities very much, were highly aware of their linguistic input and were also interested in other languages and cultures. Comparison between a class's initial perceptions of language and their perceptions one and a half years later shows higher language awareness. The teachers assessed both the used materials as well as the approach on the whole positively, and the parents showed a very favourable attitude to the JaLing philosophy. The door to languages is open and we can only hope that more schools will let their pupils enter it.

### **Povzetek**

#### **VRATA V JEZIKE SO ODPRTA**

Pristop jezikovnega in medkulturnega ozaveščanja (projekt JaLing Comenius) se je pričel izvajati pred letom in pol na devetih slovenskih osnovnih šolah. V pricujočem članku je opisana evalvacija projekta, ki je potekala v preteklem letu. Rezultati so zelo ugodni in kažejo, da so učenci uživali v dejavnostih, se dobro zavedali jezikovne vsebine v le-teh in kazali zanimanje za druge jezike in kulture. Primerjava v enem razredu med začetnimi jezikovnimi percepcijami in percepcijami leto in pol kasneje kaže na večjo jezikovno ozaveščenost. Učitelji so ocenili tako uporabljena gradiva kot tudi pristop v celoti pozitivno in starši so izkazali veliko naklonjenost filozofiji JaLing. Vrata v jezike so odprta in lahko samo upamo, da bo več šol dovolilo učencem vstopiti skozi nj.

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