

# LANGUAGE AWARENESS: AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

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## 1.- A new social context, a new educational challenge

Europe is becoming a melting pot of cultures mainly because of two reasons: on the one hand, cultural contacts are increasing through the use of new technologies and on the other hand, communities become multicultural & multiethnic as a result of migration processes. The only real danger of this situation is the fact that the emerging social context may result in a greater cultural standardisation or even enhance a “western” perception of language and culture. Today’s schools are also characterised by the presence of a vast number of languages and cultures (Candelier, 1998), consequently, formal education can no longer aim at meeting the needs of a non-existing homogeneous group of monolingual students. Moreover, if we really believe one of the duties of schools is to educate students to become active citizens in a multicultural society, schools should take profit from the pros of this new social context and try to minimise the cons.

The Socrates/Lingua project number 42137-CP-1-97-FR-Lingua-LD, referred to as *L’EVEIL AUX LANGUES DANS L’ECOLE PRIMAIRE (EVLANG*, from now onwards), took up the challenge of designing, implementing and experimenting school materials which would face students with a vast amount of languages in an attempt to help them realise how languages work and how they structure culturally-bound human experiences. It was believed that if students had a broader view on linguistic diversity, they would develop positive attitudes towards language and language learning, which in turn would enable them to build up the learning skills they need to improve their language aptitudes. In addition, as Noguero1 (2000) states, the kind of learning *EVLANG tasks* promote is not restricted to the activities itself, instead, such tasks constitute an open door to a better acceptance of the other as a person.

The *EVLANG Project* was co-ordinated by professor Michel Candelier, who is now working at the *Université du Maine* (France), and was possible thanks to the participation of primary, secondary and university teachers from a few European countries, namely Austria (Gratz),

France (Paris, Grenoble & Reunion Island), Italy (Naples), Spain (Barcelona) and Switzerland (Genève & Neuchâtel). It ran for three years and its results are about to be published. Nevertheless, the project has not come to a standstill because the experience was worthwhile and the institutions that took part in it have decided to apply for a new Socrates programme this forthcoming year. The new Project, which has already been named after the title of one of Copernicus' books *JANUA LINGUARUM RESERATA* –an open door to languages–, will embrace twenty more countries including, among others, Bulgaria, Iceland, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, The Czech Republic, The Netherlands, Russia and Sweden. At the moment, all the institutions that will take part in that potential Socrates programme are already working together through the 1-2000 language workshop of Gratz.

The *EVLANG tasks* were only addressed to fifth and sixth graders (children aged 10-12) because the research group felt the need to limit the number of classes that were going to implement the tasks and the amount of data to be analysed. Even so, 150 classrooms of the participating communities experimented the 30 tasks designed by the research group, each of which contained a number of lessons ranging from 2 to 5 and included audio-recorded documents which presented, in total, more than 40 languages. The *JALING project* plans to adapt *EVLANG tasks* or create new materials to cater for all educational levels, from kindergarten to adult education, primary and secondary inclusive.

## **2. The concept of Language Awareness**

As the dictionary suggests, “being aware of something” means “knowing about it, either because you have thought about it or because you have just noticed it”. The concept of awareness was first associated to language in the late 1950s, when linguists and researchers in Australia and scholars like Hawkins or Halliday in Great Britain supported the idea that language teachers should not limit to help their students learn the target language, but ought to guide them about how to cope with issues related to language in general, to culture and to learning. This view was not widely accepted by academics in those days, but in the last two or three decades the so-called “language awareness movement” has re-emerged in the field of language learning, in part, thanks to the work of Hawkins (1984) who claimed that the observation of languages promotes linguistic reflection and favours the acquisition of the metalinguistic competence.

In the context of second language learning, Stern (1992) argued in favour of developing language programmes whose educational goals went beyond proficiency objectives and stated that there was the pedagogical need to introduce a general language awareness component into the language curriculum. Stern believed that what he referred to as “the general language education syllabus” should have four major educational goals. First, it should help students understand the nature of language and overcome, if any, misconceptions about learning and language. Second, it had to approach language and the speech community bound to it. Third, it ought to give students some insights into first language acquisition to help them come to grips with the process of learning a second language. And finally, it had to enable learners to develop their autonomy and become responsible for their learning.

If we get back to the definition of awareness as noticing, we should cite here the work of Schmidt and van Lier who associate language awareness or consciousness with the ability of mastering languages. Schmidt (1995) states that learning is only possible if there is intention – willingness to learn–; attention –to different features of the same linguistic input–, noticing – detection and perception– and understanding –recognition. Parallel to this, van Lier (1996) postulates that the learning process is characterised by a set of interwoven stages, namely Awareness –perception and attention–, Autonomy –development of cognitive processes such as processing and understanding– and Authenticity –mastery of the language.

### **3. Underlying premises in the *EVLANG tasks***

The *EVLANG tasks* were designed by different groups of project participants but they are all based upon the contributions of the “language awareness movement” and the principles of the socioconstructivist approach to language learning. For example, the six thematic domains of the language awareness curriculum suggested by Hawkins (op. cit.) were analysed and expanded by the *EVLANG* research group and, as a consequence, *EVLANG tasks* fit one of the resulting domains stated below:

- 1.- The relationship between language and culture
- 2.- Language contacts: Language evolution and history; loan words, etc.
- 3.- The mismatches between oral and written communication

- 4.- Verbal and non-verbal systems
- 5.- The letters and the written code
6. - Regular linguistic patterns: morphosyntax, lexis, text organisation, etc.
7. - Linguistic variation
8. - Phonological systems
9. - Languages in the world: children and languages, languages contexts, Europe, the world, etc.
- 10.- Bilingualism and diglossia
- 11.- The status of languages
- 12.- Language appropriation: acquisition and learning

In the design of *EVLANG tasks* the essence of Schmidt's learning stages and Van Lier's concepts of awareness and autonomy are, somehow, interrelated to a socioconstructivist learning approach that advocates the use of discovery techniques. As a consequence, *EVLANG tasks*, which need to be carried out along something between 2 and 5 lessons of forty-five minutes, are structured in three phases: Sharing knowledge, Creating knowledge and Reinforcing knowledge.

In the first phase, sharing knowledge, the teacher presents the task's goals to the learners, who must share their views on the issues they are about to deal with. This phase is particularly important to ensure that learners understand what they are going to do and why, but also to detect misconceptions about language or learning which will need to be modified throughout the course of the task. In the second phase, creating knowledge, students are distributed in groups whose goal is to solve cognitive problems related to languages and language use. In order to be able to do so, students should observe and analyse oral or written data, which will lead them to challenge what they know about that particular language phenomenon or linguistic concept. Finally, in the third phase, reinforcing knowledge, students must become aware of what they have learned and how they have learned it, which means they have to restructure their knowledge to incorporate the information they gained from the task. Moreover, after having carried a few of the *EVLANG tasks* they will also be ready to transfer their learning strategies to other tasks and to other situations.

#### 4. Why is language awareness important?

Sentences such as “*Explícame un cuento*”, “*No te muevas de donde estás que ahora vengo a buscarte*” or “*Si yo sería alto, cogería todas estas frutas*” would never be produced by a monolingual Spanish speaker because they reveal that the person who uttered them is transferring the culturally bound realisation of certain linguistics concepts into the Spanish code. For example, the second sentence is very likely to be produced by a Catalan speaker, because the interpretation of the verbs “go” and “come” in this language differs from the one they have in Spanish or English. In these two languages, the verb “go” indicates that the speaker moves either away or towards their interlocutors and the verb “come” is used to invite the interlocutors to move towards the speaker. In Catalan, on the contrary, the verb “go” only indicates that the speaker moves away from their interlocutors, because moving towards them is always expressed by the verb “come”.

This simple example illustrates how speakers’ first language tailors the way they view and perceive the world. If this situation occurs with bilingual individuals, the transfer of beliefs about language is even more common when someone is learning a foreign language. English teachers, for instance, will recognise the situation in which a student gets angry because he does not understand why the teacher insists that the sentence “is a very beautiful girl” must be preceded by the pronoun “she” when it is too obvious that he is describing a female. Again, one linguistic feature of the mother tongue, in this case subject omission, is interfering in the learning process of a language that perceives the notion of subject in a different way.

*EVLANG tasks* offer students the possibility of getting in contact with different languages not because designers feel they should learn them, but to favour a process which Piaget referred to as “decentralisation”. We know things thanks to our personal experiences and our mind is always trying to find a balance between what we know and what we are experiencing. This means that if we experience different alternative ways of perceiving the same phenomenon we would be able to understand it better and at the same time we would broaden our outlook on the world. In addition, the study of certain linguistic concepts, say gender, within a single language makes little sense. For example, in Spanish the noun “man” is masculine and the noun “woman” is feminine, but can the linguistic concept of gender be understood when one thinks that a “lemon” is masculine but a “strawberry” is feminine? Yet, if one is able to compare and classify languages according to how they reflect the gender distinction (*el limón*,

*il limóne* and *le citron* but *la llimona* or *die Zitrone* versus *lemon* –neuter– ) or how they use it (in Spanish, for example, the masculine-feminine distinction may indicate, among other things, a change in shape, like in “*el farol*” versus “*la farola*”, whereas in German the “neuter” may indicate “youth” as in “*das Kind*” or “*das Mädchen*” versus “*der Mann*” or “*die Frau*”), this linguistic feature makes much more sense.

However, language awareness activities related to cultural and linguistic diversity have the danger of presenting language and culture as a set of stereotyped anecdotes. As Noguero (2001) suggests, it is important to get children experience diversity as a phenomenon that shapes their identities as individuals who speak a given language or who belong to a particular culture that, in either case, was shaped by the contributions of many people with distinct origins. The same author claims that the proposals about cultural and language diversity cannot be simplified, instead we should admit that by giving prominence to these issues we are deepening into the construction of the self (he who loses his origins and roots, loses his identity), but at the same time we are building the scaffolding for a tolerant and integrative society.

## **5. How can we provide critical and practical solutions instead of ready -to-use “recipes”?**

The research study in the *EVLANG project* had an empirical approach and aimed to validate a set of hypotheses, both quantitatively –by setting up tests at the beginning and at the end of the process and comparing *EVLANG* classes with control groups– and qualitatively –by taking into account the whole process of creation and implementation of the *EVLANG tasks* and using interviews and field notes obtained through the observation of some of the lessons. Among those hypotheses, we could cite the following:

### a) Hypotheses related to attitudes

- H 1. Language awareness helps students develop positive representations and attitudes towards other languages and cultures.
- H 2. Language awareness gets students to respect people who have a different linguistic or cultural background.

### b) Hypothesis related to aptitudes

- H 7. Language awareness favours language(s) learning because it promotes positive attitudes towards language as a cultural construction.

c) Hypothesis related to the methodology of the research study conducted

- H 10. It is possible to create user-friendly materials for the primary teacher. The results of the implementation of such materials will be observable and assessable

In order to allow researches to verify or falsify the research hypotheses, *EVLANG tasks* were designed to serve at least three major goals:

- To get learners to develop positive representations and attitudes
  - towards the acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity
  - towards language and language learning
- To develop learners' aptitudes to enhance the learning process (of any L1, L2, Ln or FL), which includes
  - linguistic aptitudes
  - metacognitive aptitudes
- To remedy western ethnocentrism and favour linguistic and cultural diversity.

At this point, it is necessary to examine a few activities taken from two *EVLANG tasks* to understand what the tasks were like.

### 5.1. From the student's languages ... to the languages in the world

Language awareness domains: Languages in the world: children and languages

Languages presented: Arabic, Basque, Brazilian, Catalan, Chinese, Czech, English, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese & Welsh (apart from the ones in a world map, Berber inclusive)

Goals:

- To become aware of the languages one knows
- To reflect upon how one knows (of) a language
- To become familiar with how *EVLANG tasks* work
- To start using a portfolio to keep a record of what they will learn.

Timing: Six lessons of 45 minutes

Brief description of the task:

This is the first *EVLANG task* and it should be understood as a discovery module in which students have to verbalise how they view familiar and non-familiar languages.

The task takes students’ linguistic background as a starting point from which they will discover new languages and sounds while they reflect upon linguistic diversity and complexity in certain countries. Throughout the course of this task, students must share their discoveries and experiences with their peers and should also write them down on their portfolio “Awakening to languages”.

In the first phase, *sharing knowledge*, students must play a sort of bingo. They all have a grid with questions and must talk to their classmates to see who can answer one of the questions positively. When they find one person, they must ask her to sign on the grid. The first student to have nine signatures of at least three different people is the winner.

<p>At home, do you speak a language other than Basque or Spanish?</p>	<p>Can you count from one to six in a language other than Basque, English or Spanish?</p>	<p>Can you name countries in which people speak Spanish?</p> <p>Can you name countries in which people speak English?</p>
<p>Can you say “Good Morning” in a language other than the ones you use at school?</p>	<p>Would you like to learn more languages?</p>	<p>Can you name two classmates who speak a language other than Basque, English or Spanish?</p>
<p>Do you ever see a TV programme in a language other than Basque or Spanish?</p>	<p>Have you ever seen a book written in Arabic or Greek?</p>	<p>Have you ever heard a song in a language other than Basque, English or Spanish?</p>

Figure 1. Sample of grid for Basque students of English

The goal of this activity is to get students become aware of the linguistic diversity and richness they are exposed to. Once the activity is over, the students whose signature is in one of their classmates' grids must tell the rest about their experiences with the mentioned languages. For example, a few students in Catalonia could count from 1 to 6 in Korean because that is the language used occasionally by their martial arts trainer.

In the second phase, *creating knowledge*, students are asked to draw their linguistic biography. Individually, children must draw a four-petal daisy and write on each petal the names of the languages they speak (red petal), they don't speak but understand (green petal), they don't speak but have heard (blue petal) and the ones they don't speak but have seen (yellow petal). This activity makes them realise that there are several degrees of knowing a language and that today everybody is in contact to more than one language.

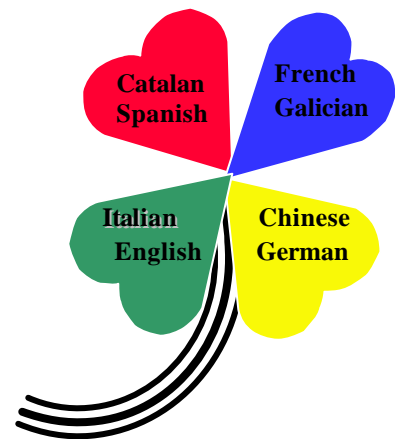


Figure 2. A sample flower

Later on, they are asked to reflect upon what they have learned. For instance, in one of the activities of these sessions, they must work in small groups to do a survey on the language background of the class (they have to find out which languages appear more often and in which context) and reflect upon whether they expected such results or not. In addition, they can stick all the flowers on a poster to build up a linguistic garden.

In the subsequent lessons, students have to listen to sentences in different languages and try to recognise them. In the third phase, *reinforcing knowledge*, they also start using the portfolio “Awakening to languages” in which they will keep a record of what they will be learning through the *EVAIL tasks*.

## 5.2. Languages day by day

Language awareness domains:	The relationship between language and culture
	Regular linguistic patterns: word formation
Languages presented:	Arabic, English, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese & Welsh

Goals:

- To discover word-formation rules in an unfamiliar language
- To discriminate unfamiliar sounds
- To establish the sound-letter relationship in different languages
- To learn that not all languages are read from left to right

Timing:

5 sessions of 45 minutes

Brief description of the task:

Students are given a set of cards with the name of the days of the week written on them in six languages –Arabic, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian & Portuguese– and are asked to classify them by language, to order them and to observe regularities in the way languages represent the days of the week. In order to do so, they must pay careful attention to the written code. Broadly speaking, we can say that all students are able to recognise common parts and deduce the rules of word formation.

<b>MONTAG</b>
<b>2a FEIRA</b>
<b>LUNEDÍ</b>
<b>יום א'</b>

They can see, for example, that the words are made by a combination of the word day (-tag, -dí, feira, -th) and another word (the name of a planet, in many cases) or a number.

In order to check whether their hypotheses are correct, students must listen to a recording and try to discriminate unfamiliar sounds and establish a sound-letter correspondence. They can, for instance, perceive that in Hebrew the sounds which are repeated

all the time are the first ones, whereas the graphs which represent those sounds occur at the end of the word, which indicates that in this language words are read from right to left. They also realise that since they are not familiar with the letters of the Hebrew and Arabic alphabets, they cannot rely on the pronunciation of the words and need to make use of authentic documents such as calendars to verify whether they ordered the words correctly. Again, they must focus on the written code, but need to look at the words from right to left.

In order to verify whether students can apply what they have learned, the whole procedure can be repeated again with three other languages –English, French & Welsh.

As in all *EVLANG tasks* one of the underlying objectives here is to develop positive attitudes towards language diversity while encouraging students to discover things by themselves. The

choice of languages is not done at random, the presence of Arabic, for instance, gives recognition and prestige, within the school community, to the mother tongue of a few students and at the same time, these students gain respect because they possess knowledge which is new to their classmates and their contributions can undoubtedly enrich the task. This does not mean, however, that *EVLANG tasks* should only be implemented in classes whose students have different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. As it has been argued, language awareness tasks based on linguistic and cultural diversity are interesting because they sharpen students' wits and help them develop their cognition and their understanding of the world. The fact that they also serve to integrate the wealth of experience of immigrant students into the school practices should be seen as a big plus, not as an excuse to refuse using language awareness activities in classes with no immigrant children. On the contrary, perhaps it is in these classes in which learners are not naturally exposed to linguistic and cultural diversity where tasks like the ones we endorse here are more profitable.

## **6. When is language awareness important?**

The results of the *EVLANG project* reveal that the tasks favour the development of the ability to think and reflect about language because they succeed in getting learners to be conscious of their language learning process. In this line, Gómez and Rivera (2000) expose that the opportunity of implementing *EVLANG tasks* was really worthy for them because apart from seeing that their students were gaining linguistic knowledge, they were amazed and delighted to listen to the explanations their children provided about the strategies they were using to spot languages. The two teachers express they were satisfied with such explanations because they clearly revealed that students had developed metacognitive abilities and were able to reflect upon their learning.

*EVLANG tasks* in Catalonia were only implemented in first language classes, but the experiences carried out in a few of the participating countries clearly prove they should not be restricted to this context. Stern (op.cit.), for instance, claims that language awareness should be a component of:

- (a) an introductory language course, or
- (b) a course related to L1 or FL, or
- (c) the syllabus of a language course

The *EVLANG group* does not strongly support any of these three proposals, but there is a tendency to subscribe to the third one, basically because the first two are unlikely to be feasible in most educational contexts. The proposals of introducing students to language awareness through a preparatory module for a much more specific language course or as an independent subject related to either L1 or FL are interesting and useful and I could personally defend them as I could also recommend courses on note-taking, time management or studying skills. However, if we take into account the time restrictions of the current school curriculum, we should accept they cannot be put into practice. In consequence, the inclusion of a language awareness component as an integral part of any first, second or foreign language course should be a must rather than an option, precisely because of the three reasons Stern (op. cit.) himself proposes:

- a) To enhance the acquisition of language learning techniques;
- b) To provide students with an insight into language and culture; and
- c) To promote positive attitudes to language, culture and language learning.

The *JALING project*, however, is a bit more ambitious and participants will take the compromise of supporting local schools so that they can develop educational programmes which include a language awareness component as a linking element between the different areas of the curriculum, or at least between the different language programmes (L1, L2 and FL).

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