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Fostering Language Awareness in a Plurilingual Learning Environment

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∞ Developing young learners' language awareness is becoming an important educational goal in a rapidly globalised world characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity. Drawing upon previous research in the field, the article highlights the importance of promoting language diversity and nurturing language awareness from an early age. We present a qualitative study's findings to analyse the potential of using pluralistic approaches to language teaching for developing young learners' language awareness. The study was based on a case study format involving pupils aged five and six years. By exposing the participants to a set of plurilingual activities following the DivCon model, we were able to observe and identify their language awareness development. In addition, the pupils' responses to language awareness activities and their perceptions of different languages were analysed through a survey in the form of interviews. The results of the study indicate positive outcomes, demonstrating an enhanced level of language awareness among the pupils, as well as an increased appreciation for language diversity.

Keywords: language awareness, linguistic diversity, pluralistic approaches, young language learners

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Spodbujanje jezikovnega zavedanja v raznojezičnem učnem okolju

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∞ V današnjem svetu, zaznamovanem z jezikovno in s kulturno raznolikostjo, postaja zgodnje razvijanje jezikovnega zavedanja pomemben izobraževalni cilj. Ta članek na podlagi dozrajšjih raziskav na tem področju poudarja pomen spodbujanja jezikovne raznolikosti in razvijanja jezikovnega zavedanja že od zgodnjega otroštva. Predstavljamo izsledke kvalitativne študije, v kateri preučujemo možnosti uporabe pluralističnih pristopov k poučevanju jezikov za razvijanje jezikovnega zavedanja mlajših učencev. Raziskava je temeljila na študiji primera, ki je vključevala učence, stare pet in šest let. Z udeleženci smo izvedli sklop raznojezičnih dejavnosti, ki so temeljile na modelu DivCon, hkrati pa smo opazovali in ugotavljali stopnjo njihovega jezikovnega zavedanja. Poleg tega smo z učenci izvedli intervjuje, katerih cilj je bil raziskati odzive učencev na izvedene dejavnosti in njihovo dožemanje različnih jezikov. Rezultati raziskave so pozitivni in kažejo na izboljšano raven jezikovnega zavedanja pri učencih ter večje sprejemanje jezikovne raznolikosti.

Ključne besede: jezikovno zavedanje, jezikovna raznolikost, pluralistični pristopi, mlajši učenci tujih jezikov

Introduction

In present-day society, characterised by increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, fostering young learners' language awareness has become an important educational goal. Although researchers agree that learners' positive attitudes towards other languages should be encouraged and linguistic and cultural awareness developed, little research focuses on young learners (YL) (Chik & Melo-Pfeifer, 2020; Muñoz, 2013). Our research, conducted in the form of a qualitative study, was aimed at analysing the potential of using pluralistic approaches to language teaching to develop young learners' language awareness. For that purpose, we designed and carried out a set of plurilingual activities based on the model 'Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context' (DivCon), which promotes systematic exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity (Bratož & Sila, 2021, 2022).

We start with a review of relevant research in the field of language awareness, with particular emphasis on young learners and pluralistic approaches to language learning, where we focus on the DivCon model. In the second part of the paper, we present the results of a qualitative study conducted in two groups of first-grade pupils. The main aims of the study were to investigate young learners' language awareness, their perceptions and attitudes towards other languages, and to observe their responses to the activities aimed at developing linguistic and cultural awareness.

Theoretical background

Language awareness and young learners

Language awareness refers to an individual's understanding and knowledge of language. It involves being conscious of language as a system and being able to reflect on language in various contexts (Hawkins, 1999; Muñoz, 2013). One of the key components of language awareness is metalinguistic awareness. According to Bialystok (2001), metalinguistic awareness involves actively focusing attention on explicit language properties. This implies the ability to reflect on linguistic structures, recognise grammatical rules and manipulate language for various purposes. Furthermore, Gombert (1997) explains metalinguistic awareness as the ability to use metalanguage in reference to all aspects of language, i.e., phonological (e.g., recognising and manipulating individual sounds, syllables and rhymes), syntactic (e.g., being able to recognise and use grammatical structures and sentence patterns), semantic (e.g., understanding the meaning of words and the relationships between them), or pragmatic (e.g.,

understanding the use of language in different contexts and being able to use language in different social and pragmatic contexts).

According to Muñoz (2013), few studies have focused on young or very young learners' language awareness and attitudes towards language learning. Chik and Melo-Pfeifer (2020) came to a similar conclusion in their meta-analysis of 44 papers on exploring language awareness using visual methodologies, arguing that there is a lack of extensive research focused on young learners' language awareness. Both Hawkins (1999) and Muñoz (2013) agree that developing learners' language awareness from an early age has many benefits, including facilitating YLs metalinguistic awareness and fostering their cultural understanding. Wagner (2020) reports that 4–5-year-olds show awareness of their own languages, are able to express their language preferences and even demonstrate emerging metalinguistic awareness. According to Roehr-Brackin (2018), researchers have found that children between the ages of 5 and 8 show great improvement in their metalinguistic development. As Roehr-Brackin (2018) maintains, children aged 6 to 7 begin to develop metalinguistic awareness by realising that words fundamentally serve as labels for objects, actions, and similar and are therefore able to understand synonymy and grasp the idea that different languages use different words. In another study on language awareness, in which Kurvers et al. (2006) compared illiterate adults to preschool children and literate adults, it was shown that children demonstrate a considerable level of phonological awareness as they are able to identify and produce rhymes, as well as segment words into syllables; they also show semantic awareness by being able to identify content words. However, they have more difficulties in other aspects of language, such as sentence segmentation and textual awareness.

Language awareness is also argued to play a significant role in the development of multilingualism and plurilingual competence (Cots, 2008; Finkbeiner & White, 2017; Oliveira & Ançã, 2009; Svalberg, 2007). Another important aspect of developing language awareness is also positive attitudes towards different languages and linguistic diversity in general (Little et al., 2013). By promoting linguistic diversity, pluralistic approaches aim to develop positive attitudes towards different language varieties and contribute to the development of multilingualism and language awareness (Sayers & Láncoş, 2017).

Cultural awareness is an additional concept that is closely related to language awareness and linguistic diversity. According to Chen and Starosta (1998), cultural awareness is a cognitive aspect of intercultural communication that involves understanding and recognizing cultural differences and similarities and refers to the knowledge and recognition of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices of different cultures.

Pluralistic approaches

The previous two decades have witnessed several initiatives aimed at promoting linguistic diversity in Europe. These endeavours are today commonly labelled as 'pluralistic approaches to language teaching' and refer to educational strategies that promote the appreciation of linguistic diversity and cultural understanding and recognise and value all languages, including home languages, dialects, sign languages, and regional languages, rather than focusing solely on 'foreign' or 'second' languages (Candelier et al., 2010). This is also emphasised by the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA), which provides a set of descriptors and guidelines for the development of plurilingual and intercultural competence. FREPA encourages educators to move beyond a monolingual and monocultural perspective in language education and underscores the idea that language learners should be exposed to and appreciate a variety of languages and cultures, including their home languages, regional languages, and languages of migration (Candelier et al., 2010). One of the approaches that developed from this idea is the 'evlang' or 'language awakening' approach (Candelier & Kervran, 2018; Darquennes, 2017; Finkbeiner & White, 2017), which aims to promote the appreciation of language diversity in the classroom and encourages learners to think about language as a system. The main idea of the approach is to help learners understand the role of language diversity both in their own lives and in society as a whole, or as Darquennes (2017) points out, the aim is not language learning as such but, more importantly, raising awareness of linguistic diversity.

Several projects have been carried out in Europe in the past twenty years that have promoted language diversity, as well as plurilingual and intercultural education. In Portugal, for instance, Szelei and Alves (2018) carried out a study aimed at promoting teacher learning for diversity. The authors emphasised the importance of in-service teachers' professional development aimed at fostering cultural awareness and developing competences for working in culturally and linguistically diverse educational environments. In Slovenia, the language-awakening approach was implemented with the *Janua Linguarum Comenius* project (*Ja-Ling*). The main objective of the project was to enhance the awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity among primary school pupils by creating effective plurilingual materials (Fidler, 2006). Fidler (2006) found that both the teachers and the pupils, as well as their parents, showed positive attitudes towards the materials and the approach itself. Another initiative for promoting multilingualism and interculturalism in Slovenia was undertaken by Pevec Semec (2018), who proposed the implementation of cross-border learning

mobility for primary and preschool teachers, aimed at developing teachers' plurilingual and intercultural competences.

Another concept that is closely related to language diversity and challenges monolingual ideologies is translanguaging (García & Otheguy, 2020; García & Wei, 2014), which is a pedagogical approach that encourages the use of a learner's complete set of language abilities, including their home language(s), in the learning process. Translanguaging practices foster fluency in separate languages and promote the idea that learning new languages is not just about acquiring another foreign language but about developing a broader linguistic and cultural repertoire. Through this, it promotes the idea that language diversity is a valuable asset, encourages the development of a bilingual or multilingual identity and aims to break down language barriers and power hierarchies by recognising and valuing all languages and language varieties (García & Wei, 2014).

One of the most recent pluralistic approaches aimed at promoting awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity among preschool children (aged 4–6) is the DivCon model (*Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context*) (Bratož & Sila, 2022). It integrates six basic aspects: the journey metaphor, exposure to linguistic diversity, exposure to cultural diversity, progression from concrete to symbolic level, effective second language teaching approaches, and children's participation. The model conceptualises the development of plurilingual competence as a journey on which children experience different languages and cultures through multi-sensory perceptions. It incorporates activities such as movement, singing, tasting, and artistic expression to enhance the learning experience. The DivCon model emphasises the importance of providing a context that promotes linguistic and cultural diversity. The model uses the journey metaphor to create a framework for children to explore and generate new ideas, which effectively develops their awareness of diversity. Another crucial aspect of the DivCon model is children's active participation. The model encourages children to actively engage in activities that expose them to linguistic and cultural diversity. Active participation allows children to develop positive attitudes towards different languages and cultures and enhances their perceptions of diversity. The model's focus on context and participation ensures that children have meaningful and immersive experiences with linguistic and cultural diversity, leading to the development of linguistic awareness and positive attitudes towards diversity at an early age (Bratož & Sila, 2022).

Our research was carried out in the form of a qualitative study aimed at analysing the potential of using pluralistic approaches to language teaching for developing young learners' language awareness. The main objectives of the

study were:

- to investigate young learners' (aged 5 and 6) language awareness
- to examine young learners' perceptions and attitudes towards other languages and cultures
- to observe young learners' responses to the activities aimed at developing linguistic and cultural awareness

Method

Participants

The study was based on a case study format involving two groups of first-year pupils aged 5 and 6 ($N = 42$) from a Slovenian primary school. In the first group, there were 14 male and 8 female participants; in the second group, there were 11 male and 9 female participants; 38 pupils were from Slovenia, three from Ukraine and one from Kosovo.

Instruments

Several tools were used to collect data. An observation sheet was used to record 1) pupils' reactions to the activities and 2) their comments on the activities, languages and cultures. In addition, the observation sheet also contained the Leuven well-being and involvement scales (Laevers, 2005), which involve five levels ranging from very low to very high. The scales were used to observe and identify the pupils' well-being and engagement during the lessons.

Furthermore, the pupils' perceptions of different languages, their attitudes towards other languages and their knowledge of words/phrases in other languages were analysed through a survey in the form of interviews. The interviews were carried out both before and after the intervention. The participants responded to three questions: 1) Which languages would you like to speak? 2) Do you believe that it is good to speak more languages? Why? and 3) Can you think of interesting words from other languages? The pupils' responses were then qualitatively analysed.

Research design

Since the research was conducted with young learners, we followed the methodological guidelines for studying children's attitudes proposed by Bratož et al. (2019). The study was carried out over a one-month period in February 2023. In the first part, we designed a set of eight lessons aimed at developing children's language awareness based on the DivCon model developed by Bratož and Sila (2022). An intervention in the form of a set of activities was carried out

in which pupils ‘visited’ eight different countries (one in each lesson): Slovenia, Italy, France, Great Britain, Austria, Croatia, as well as Portugal and Japan, which were chosen by the pupils when being encouraged to choose their own destinations. The activities were aimed at developing different aspects of plurilingual competence and language awareness and were based on pluralistic approaches to learning languages. As they ‘travelled around’ the countries, pupils were exposed to different languages and cultures through a variety of activities involving multi-sensory, cross-curricular, TPR and other approaches.

Results and discussion

Children’s language awareness

During the activities, children showed aspects of an enhanced linguistic, phonological and cultural awareness. This was reflected in their ability to use words in different languages (Table 1), their ability to compare and identify languages (Table 2), their ability to notice differences and similarities between sounds (Table 3) and their comments on the links between language and culture (Table 4).

Table 1

Examples of words and phrases in different languages given by the pupils before and after the intervention

	Words given before the intervention	Words added after the intervention
English	<i>hello, goodbye, good morning, good night, a teddy bear, a ball, a doll, a plane, a train, a car, board games, dog, cat, mouse, notebook, coloured pencils, glue, school bag,</i>	<i>thank you, a bike, a bus, fish, shark, dolphin, giraffe, ‘We’re going on a beach!’, passport</i>
French	<i>konjtravoje (sl. konj travo je = eng. the horse is eating grass)</i>	<i>merci beaucoup, bonjour</i>
German	<i>guten morning, guten tag</i>	<i>danke</i>
Spanish		<i>[h]ola</i>
Italian	<i>ciao bella, arrivederci</i>	<i>grazie, pizza</i>
Croatian	<i>dobar dan, dovidenja, dobra puta, dođi, kuća, zeko, hvala</i>	<i>ajkula, morski lav, ‘Dovidenja Jegulja Klepetulja.’</i>
Japanese	<i>sushi, konnichiwa, geisha, ‘piscanec pa liz’,</i>	<i>yo-yo</i>
Portuguese	<i>Ronaldo</i>	<i>girafa, tigre</i>

When the pupils were asked to give us some examples of interesting words in other languages before the intervention, they mostly reported

greetings (in English, Croatian, German, Italian and Japanese). They also listed words for toys (*a teddy bear, a ball, a doll*), means of transport (*a plane, a train, a car*), school supplies (*notebook, coloured pencils, glue, school bag*) and animals (*dog, cat, mouse, zeko*). Most of the words were in English. After the intervention, the most common words were still greetings, with the addition of French and Spanish (*bonjour, hola*). The children also added expressions of gratitude in English, French, German and Italian (*thank you, danke, merci beaucoup, Grazie*). As we can see from examples in Figure 1, before the intervention, the most common words and phrases reported by the children were in English and Croatian, whereas after the intervention, they offered examples of words in all the languages they were exposed to during the activities. This partly reflects the findings of other researchers (Kurvers et al., 2006; Roehr-Brackin, 2018), who claim that even young children show a certain degree of linguistic awareness by recognising content words and connecting them to their meanings.

Furthermore, the pupils exhibited a certain degree of linguistic awareness (Figure 2), which was reflected in their ability to notice and compare words and phrases in different languages, such as recognising that the word *yo-yo* is similar in Japanese, Chinese, English and Slovene (*They say yo-yo the same in Japan in China. And also in English. Well, in Slovene we also say jo-jo.*).

Table 2

Examples and comments reflecting pupils' linguistic awareness

Situation	Pupils' comments
General comments on different languages:	<p><i>'How do you say Slovenija in English?'</i> <i>'English and Italian are stealing words from our Slovene.'</i> <i>'Your mum is also margherita, just like pizza. – No, she is Margareta.'</i> <i>'In which language will you sing to us today?'</i> <i>'Maybe the language in Mojster Jaka is similar because the French flag is also similar to Italian.'</i> <i>[Portuguese] 'is a bit weird; it is maybe similar to French.'</i> <i>'They say yo-yo the same in Japan in China. And also in English. Well, in Slovene, we also say jo-jo.'</i> <i>'It could be Bosnia or Serbia; they all speak similarly.'</i></p>
When singing <i>Frère Jacques</i> in French, they commented:	<i>'This language is similar to the one we had last time when you sang in Italian.'</i>
When listening to the Japanese version of Brother John, a pupil commented:	<i>'I can't understand a single word they are saying.'</i>
Comparing the words basketball, handball and football:	<i>'they all have the word ball in them ... žogo.'</i>

Situation	Pupils' comments
Comparing the word 'tennis' in Slovene, English, Italian, Spanish and German:	<i>'it is all so similar, but they say it weird.'</i> <i>'To me it sounds the same, just as 'boks'(eng. boxing) – everywhere they say the same.'</i>
A conversation between two pupils:	<i>'Why didn't this Jegulja say anything in Italian?' – 'But she did, she said pica.'</i> <i>'Yes, I know, but I think this was Slovene pica, not Italian, don't you think so?'</i>
When introducing Slovene words taken from German, a girl commented:	<i>'My grandma and grandpa speak German every day.'</i>
When asked if they can communicate in Croatian, they said:	<i>'Well, yes. It's pretty similar, and you can also show with your hands, and it works.'</i> <i>'Of course, I understand them when they speak Croatian, and they understand me when I speak Slovene.'</i>
When learning the word 'dolphin', one child commented:	<i>'Another word that is similar to Slovene. There's more and more of them.'</i>

The results presented in Table 2 also indicate that the children exhibit emerging metalinguistic awareness, as was also shown by other researchers (Bialystok, 2001; Roehr-Brackin, 2018; Wagner, 2020). The pupils were able to identify and compare words with the same meaning in different languages ([dolphin] – *'Another word that is similar to Slovene.'*), they were able to recognise which languages the words belong to (*'Why didn't this Jegulja say anything in Italian?' – 'But she did, she said pica.'*), and they also commented on their own ability to use other languages (*'Of course, I understand them when they speak Croatian and they understand me when I speak Slovene.'*). Moreover, they demonstrated the ability to identify similarities between languages belonging to the same language family (*'it could be Bosnia or Serbia, they all speak similarly'*; when singing Frère Jacques in French, they commented *'this language is similar to the one we had last time when you sang in Italian'*). Finally, we found that they are aware that communication is not limited only to verbal language but also involves nonverbal communication (*'Well, yes. It's pretty similar, and you can also show with your hands, and it works.'*). From the children's comments, we can also observe their emerging metalinguistic awareness, as they were able to talk about the differences and similarities between languages; for instance, by commenting on the structure of the words basketball, handball, football (*'they all have the word ball in them ... žogo'*) or explicitly observing similarities between languages (*'This language is similar to the one we had last time when you sang in Italian.'*).

Another aspect that can be seen in the results is children's enhanced phonological awareness (Table 3).

Table 3*Examples and comments reflecting pupils' phonological awareness*

Examples and pupils' comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noticing that in the word <i>krokodil/crocodile/crocodilo</i>, the sound /k/ is represented by the letter K in Slovene, but in English in Portuguese they use the letter C. - Noticing the similarities between the Slovene, English and Portuguese words: <i>krokodil/crocodile/crocodilo</i>, <i>tiger/tiger/tigre</i>, <i>žirafa/giraffe/girafa</i>. - Showing surprise that the word <i>robot</i> in Japanese is more similar to Slovene than to Chinese. - Noticing that Japanese and Chinese use different symbols and letters to write words. - <i>'Pizza nogavica also rhymes.'</i>
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As we can see from the examples in Table 3, pupils were able to observe the differences between the sounds or pronunciation of words and their written representation (e.g., children commented that the Slovenian word '*krokodil*' is written differently than '*crocodile*' in English and '*crocodilo*' in Portuguese; they also noticed that Japanese and Chinese use different symbols and letters to write words). Another example showing their emerging phonological awareness is their ability to come up with new rhymes (e.g., '*Pizza nogavica also rhymes.*'), which was also shown by Kurvers et al. (2006), who found that preschool children exhibit a considerable degree of phonological awareness, which is reflected in their ability to identify and produce rhymes.

Table 4*Examples and comments reflecting pupils' cultural awareness*

Examples and pupils' comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>'We can't go to Japan by train. It's too far.'</i> - <i>'I always confuse China and Japan. Do the Japanese also eat with chopsticks?'</i> - When hearing the song <i>Bruder Jakob</i>, they said that their schoolmate's name is also Jakob and asked whether this is an Austrian name and if they should call their classmate Jaka in Slovenia. - When looking at the Chinese flag, one child commented: <i>'Do these stars mean that China is also in the European Union?'</i>
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Finally, as is shown in Table 4, the pupils also commented on the cultures and compared them, displaying a certain level of intercultural awareness (*'I always confuse China and Japan. Do the Japanese also eat with chopsticks?'*)

According to the results of our study, the pupils were able to notice the differences and similarities between the languages and words, which indicates the development of their linguistic awareness and a certain level of meta-language development. They also displayed a considerable level of phonological awareness by being able to notice the differences between pronunciation and written

representation of words, as well as identify and make their own rhymes in different languages. They showed great interest in the activities, also contributed their own suggestions and ideas, and displayed very positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures, which is presented in more detail in the following chapter.

Children's involvement in and their responses to the language awareness activities

The analysis of the children's responses recorded in the observation sheets indicates a very high level of pupils' involvement as well as their well-being in the activities dedicated to exploring Slovenia, Italy, Croatia, the United Kingdom, Portugal and Japan. During the activities, the children were excited, lively, actively engaged and eager to contribute their ideas. This goes in line with the findings of Bratož and Sila's (2022) research, which examined pre-school children's linguistic and cultural awareness using the DivCon model. Their results also revealed high levels of children's involvement in the activities and positive attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity. They eagerly shared their experiences with the countries, telling us they went skiing in Italy and that they spent their summer holidays in Croatia, saying all the words that they learned there. One girl said that she visited London and was really excited to learn more about the UK. With activities focusing on France and Austria, however, some variation in pupil engagement and well-being was observed, although the levels never dropped below moderate. Based on the Leuven scales, the children's involvement and their well-being when exploring France were estimated as high, whereas in Austria, the levels of pupils' involvement and well-being were estimated as moderate. According to the learners' responses, none of them had been to France, so they were not familiar with it. When learning about the waltz and polka in Austria, the Ukrainian pupil shared a popular dance from her country (*hopak*), which was well accepted among the other children. The children, however, were not particularly fond of waltz and polka, commenting that they 'would rather dance hip-hop'. We observed that learners' involvement and well-being were related to their prior experience of the country or language in focus and the opportunity to actively participate in the decision-making process regarding the choice of their destination. As Rutar (2014) emphasises, participation plays a crucial role in learning and teaching as it ensures that all children are actively engaged in the educational process, which creates a learning environment where children can collaborate and express themselves and their understanding of the languages to which they are exposed. When our participants were given the option to choose their next

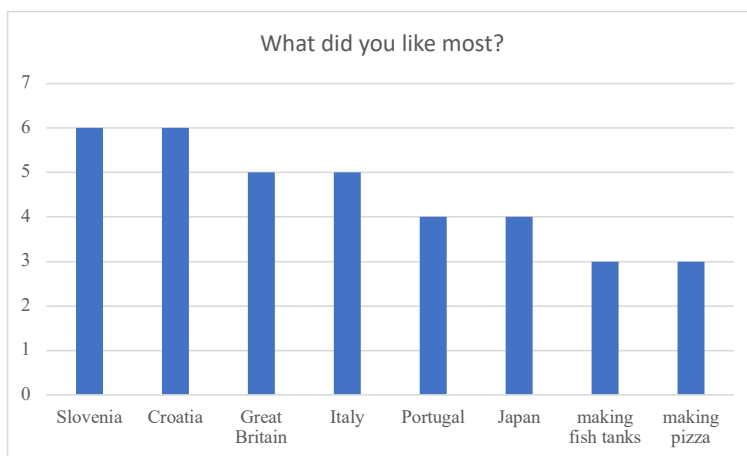
destinations, they were excited and shared their ideas and suggestions (for example, when talking about Japan, they also suggested ‘visiting China, which is close to Japan’ and comparing Japanese and Chinese as ‘they are so similar’.)

The children’s responses and comments regarding the activities were overall positive. At the beginning of each lesson, we first inquired about learners’ experiences with the country and its language and observed that they were more likely to actively participate in the activities if they had more experience and were more familiar with the countries and languages. For example, the most positive responses were observed when exploring Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy, as they were very familiar to the children and the United Kingdom, and the children felt confident using the English language. In contrast, when exploring countries they were not very familiar with (e.g., Austria and France), they needed some encouragement to participate in the activities.

After completing all of the tasks, the children were asked to tell us what they liked most about the activities. As shown in Figure 1, most of them (N = 30) chose different countries (Slovenia and Croatia were chosen by six children, Great Britain and Italy were pointed out by five children, Portugal and Japan were chosen by four pupils), while three pupils pointed out the activity where they created fish tanks, and three pupils chose the activity where they made pizza. Individual learners also pointed out Japan, the *Pizza Margherita* song, and new flags, and two of them reported liking everything.

Figure 1

Children’s favourite elements and activities from the lessons aimed at developing linguistic and cultural diversity



When asked whether they felt embarrassed speaking in other languages, the children showed no inhibitions, reporting that they didn't mind speaking other languages. This shows that the activities offered a safe and encouraging environment, where children were able to experiment with the languages, and thus enhancing their willingness to communicate in other languages as well as fostering positive attitudes towards those languages.

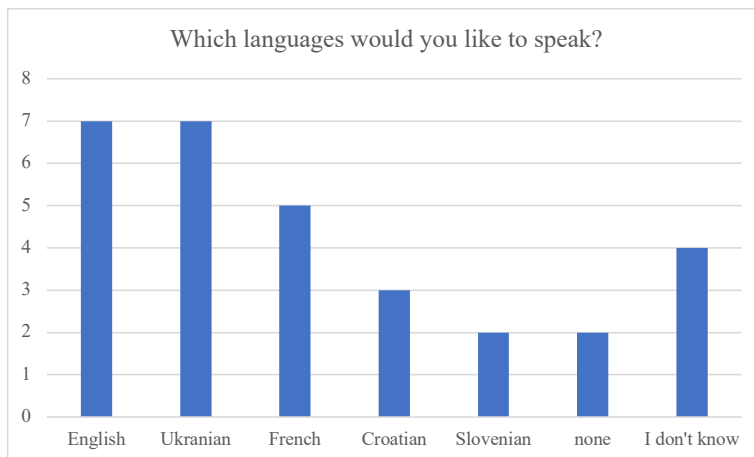
As the results from the observation sheets indicate, the children show high levels of involvement and well-being during the activities, which is reflected in their willingness to participate and their collaboration; they shared their own ideas and readily accepted the ideas of their peers. They showed genuine interest in discovering new languages and cultures and eagerly embraced the journey metaphor by offering their passports and boarding their imaginary train to travel to their destinations. The journey metaphor has proved to be an extremely strong scaffold in providing the learners with a meaningful learning context with the help of concrete aids (e.g., passport, the Brother John doll, the train engine) through which they can experience, compare and explore new languages and cultures, which also reflects the findings of Bratož and Sila (2022), who emphasise the role metaphor in providing an efficient contextual framework for fostering linguistic and cultural diversity.

Children's perceptions and attitudes towards other languages

One of the aims of the study was to establish the participants' perceptions of different languages and whether their perceptions would change after the implementation of the planned activities. We therefore interviewed the children before and after the intervention. The children were first asked which languages they would like to speak. The responses to this question asked before the implementation of the activities are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The languages the participants would like to speak before being exposed to the activities aimed at promoting linguistic and cultural diversity

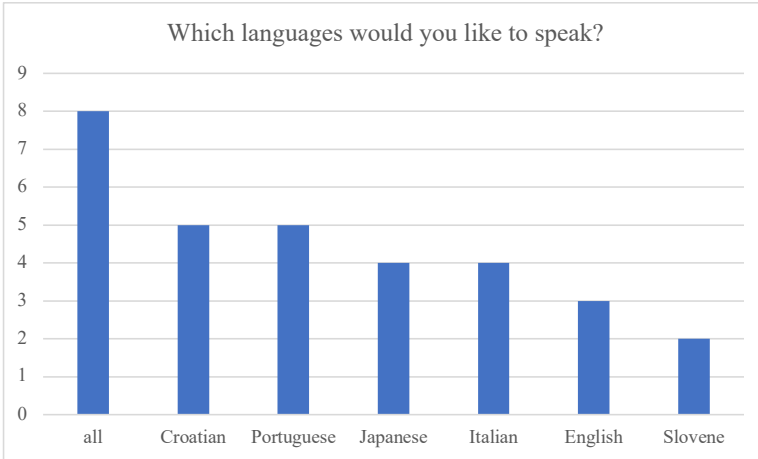


As shown in Figure 2, seven pupils responded that they wished to speak English, and the same number of pupils chose Ukrainian. Furthermore, French ($N = 5$), Croatian ($N = 3$) and Slovenian ($N = 2$) were mentioned. Four pupils reported that they did not know which language to choose, whereas two responded with 'none'. Individual participants also mentioned the following languages: Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish, Serbian, and Japanese, and some of them chose two languages: English and Russian ($N = 2$), English and Ukrainian ($N = 2$), English and Croatian, English and Slovenian.

The same question was posed to the children after being involved in the activities. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

The languages the participants would like to speak after being exposed to the activities aimed at promoting linguistic and cultural diversity



After being involved in activities aimed at promoting linguistic and cultural diversity, eight pupils expressed a desire to speak all languages, suggesting that the activities motivated them to learn about many languages and cultures. All the other learners' responses involved languages they were exposed to during the activities: they mentioned Croatian (N = 5), Portuguese (N = 5), Japanese (N = 4), Italian (N = 4), English (N = 3), and Slovene (N = 2). Other responses also included German, French, 'maybe English and German', French and Italian, English and Japanese (N = 2), Chinese and Japanese (N = 2), and English and Croatian (N = 2). In the second interview, no one responded that they did not want to speak any language.

As we can see from the results, the attitudes of the children changed after the intervention, with nearly a quarter of the pupils wanting to speak all languages. We might conclude that the intervention positively affected their perceptions of other languages, enhancing their positive attitudes and willingness to speak other languages.

The children's positive attitudes towards other languages are even more clearly reflected in their responses to the second question in which they were asked whether they believe it is good to speak other languages and why. In both interviews, almost all the responses were positive, with the exception of two pupils in the first interview, who could not decide. Among the most common reasons for speaking other languages, they explained that it is beneficial

when we want to travel to other countries. Some of them reported that knowing other languages helped them communicate with classmates who came from other countries, and some of the reasons reported were ‘*so that I can listen to English songs*’, ‘*so that I can understand cartoons*’ and ‘*so that I can play computer games*’. We can conclude that children’s motivation for learning other languages mostly lies in their desire to be able to communicate when travelling and being able to understand songs, cartoons and computer games, which partly reflects the findings of Mihaljević Djigunović (1993) and Nikolov (1999), who studied young learners’ foreign language learning motivation.

In the last question, they were asked to give examples of the most interesting words in other languages (also shown in Table 1). The most common words reported among the pupils were greetings in other languages (*hello, bye, good night, Guten tag, Guten morning, dobar dan, doviđenja, arrivederci*), many of them mentioned names of toys (*a teddy bear, a ball, a doll, board games*), means of transport (*a train, a plane, a car*), school supplies (*notebook, coloured pencils, glue, school bag*) and animals (*dog, cat, mouse, zeko*). Most of the words were in English. After the intervention, their responses were similar, but they added more words, which were not limited only to English. The most commonly listed words were still greetings, adding the greetings in Spanish and French (*hola, bonjour*); they also added expressions of appreciation (*thank you, danke, merci beaucoup, grazie*), more animal names (*fish, shark, dolphin, giraffe, ajkula, morski lav*), and food (*pizza*). Many pupils also pointed out that they liked all the words in foreign languages.

The results suggest that children hold positive attitudes towards languages and find words from other languages interesting, which was also established by several other researchers (Bratož et al., 2022; Enever, 2011; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). An interesting observation from our study is that before the intervention, the majority of the words offered by pupils were English, which changed after the intervention when they also added words from the languages they were exposed to during the intervention. This might suggest that the activities aimed at developing children’s language awareness successfully enhanced their language awareness and their interest in other languages.

Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated different aspects of first-graders’ language awareness and their attitudes towards different languages and cultures. The results indicate that children show sensitivity to linguistic and cultural diversity and are able to develop linguistic and phonological awareness at an early age by

being able to recognise and compare different languages, identify similarities and differences between words across languages and even use metalanguage when talking about languages. Our research has shown that the planned activities aimed at promoting linguistic and cultural diversity offer systematic exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity, which helps develop language awareness and positive attitudes towards diversity at an early age. The activities incorporated the journey metaphor, which provided an efficient context for children to explore and generate new ideas. Active participation of children was a key element of the activities, allowing them to engage in activities that enhance their perceptions of diversity. The learners showed great levels of interest and participation as well as well-being throughout the activities. We have observed that their involvement also depends somewhat on their previous experiences with the languages/countries and the opportunity to participate actively in the choice of destinations, topics, and activities. Since the activities encouraged learner participation and offered a safe and encouraging learning context, the learners' responses to the activities were very positive, demonstrating an enhanced level of language awareness and an increased appreciation for language diversity. Our findings are consistent with prior studies conducted by other researchers (Bratož & Sila, 2022; Bratož et al., 2022; Fidler, 2006; Hawkins, 1999; Muñoz, 2014), **who have argued that pluralistic approaches in language education offer benefits such as enhanced language learning and cultural awareness, and provide a holistic and inclusive framework for language education, promoting learners' engagement, motivation, and intercultural competence.**

Our study, however, has some limitations. First, the relatively small sample limits the generalisability of the results. We would suggest further research on the impact of the proposed activities on children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to determine if such activities are equally effective for all children. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could be conducted to examine the development of language awareness and metalinguistic skills in young learners over an extended period, providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing language learning and awareness at different stages of development. Studies could also focus on exploring the reasons behind children's motivation for learning particular foreign languages, which could contribute to developing effective language learning strategies. Another aspect worth exploring is the role of the teacher in implementing activities aimed at promoting linguistic and cultural diversity and identifying strategies to further enhance their support and stimulation of children's language experiences. In conclusion, based on the results of our study, we would like to argue that by fostering language awareness and embracing linguistic and cultural diversity, teachers can cultivate positive

attitudes towards languages and cultures in young learners, facilitating both their language acquisition process and their ability to communicate confidently in diverse environments.

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