

Analysing preschoolers' awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity through the DivCon model

SILVA BRATOŽ

University of Primorska, Slovenia

ANITA SILA

University of Primorska, Slovenia

Received: 30/09/2022 / Accepted: 1/12/2022

DOI: 10.30827/portalin.vi.26211

ISSN paper edition: 1697-7467, ISSN digital edition: 2695-8244

ABSTRACT: The article focuses on developing the awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity at the pre-school level. We first present the DivCon model (Diversity in Context) which promotes systematic exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity and is based on a framework which 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 participation. In the second part of the paper we present the results of a qualitative study conducted in three kindergarten groups (n=40) to evaluate the model in the Slovenian context. The main aim of the study was to analyse pre-school children's responses to the different dimensions in the model and the ways they perceive different languages and cultures. The results indicate that the participants responded positively to the activities carried out in order to evaluate the proposed model and showed that they are aware of linguistic and cultural diversity in a variety of ways. We argue that the model offers effective strategies for developing linguistic awareness and positive attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity at an early age.

Key words: linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, language awareness, young language learners, language awakening

DivCon: un modelo para desarrollar la conciencia de la diversidad lingüística y cultural a temprana edad

RESUMEN: El artículo se centra en el desarrollo de la conciencia de la diversidad lingüística y cultural en preescolar. En primer lugar, presentamos el modelo DivCon (Diversidad en Contexto), que propicia la exposición sistemática a la diversidad lingüística y cultural y se basa en un marco integrador de seis aspectos: la metáfora del viaje, la exposición a la diversidad lingüística, la exposición a la diversidad cultural, la progresión de lo concreto a lo simbólico, los enfoques eficaces para la enseñanza de segundas lenguas y la participación de los niños. En la segunda parte presentamos los resultados de un estudio cualitativo llevado a cabo con tres grupos preescolar (n=40) para evaluar el modelo en el contexto esloveno. Dicho estudio tenía como finalidad analizar las respuestas de los niños a las diferentes dimensiones del modelo y la manera en que ellos perciben las diferentes lenguas y culturas. Los resultados indican que los participantes tuvieron una respuesta positiva a las actividades realizadas para evaluar el modelo propuesto y mostraron que son conscientes en varios mo-

dos de la diversidad lingüística y cultural. Consideramos que el modelo ofrece estrategias eficaces para desarrollar la conciencia lingüística y actitudes positivas hacia la diversidad lingüística y cultural a una edad temprana.

Palabras claves: diversidad lingüística, diversidad cultural, conciencia lingüística, aprendientes de lenguas muy jóvenes, despertar lingüístico.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children's perceptions are directly linked to their experiences with languages and the different ways they have been exposed to them. One way of enriching their language experiences and thus develop awareness of linguistic diversity is to give them the opportunity to start at an early age. The study presented in this article is related to the project 'Languages Matter' whose principal goal is to determine which factors support and which hinder the creation of a supportive learning environment for the development of plurilingualism in the Slovenian pre-school and school context. An important aim of the project is to develop approaches for encouraging positive attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity and raising language awareness at different levels of schooling, from pre-school to university level. The research presented in this article focuses on pre-school children aged 4-6.

We start by reviewing the relevant literature on language awareness with a focus on different dimensions of linguistic diversity. We then present the model 'Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context' (DivCon) which promotes systematic exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity. In the second part of the paper we present the results of a qualitative study conducted in three kindergarten groups to evaluate the model. The main aim of the study was to analyze children's responses to the different dimensions in the model and identify ways in which they perceive different languages and cultures.

1.1. Linguistic diversity and language awareness

Linguistic diversity is directly related to the area of language awareness (LA) which has played an important role in the development of multilingualism and plurilingual competence (Finkbeiner & White, 2017; Cots, 2008; Svalberg, 2007). However, as argued by Sayers & Láncoš (2017), linguistic diversity is a multifaceted and complicated concept which includes both an inventory of languages as well as all the possible variations within and between them. An important aspect of linguistic diversity and, more broadly, LA is also the promotion of positive attitudes towards different varieties of a language, other languages, as well as languages in general (Little, Leung & Van Avermaet, 2013), and consequently a positive influence on different components of foreign language learning, such as foreign language reading motivation (Pirih, 2019).

Several initiatives have tried to promote language diversity in Europe over the last two decades. They are today referred to with the common name 'pluralistic approaches to language teaching'. The 'evlang' or 'language awakening' approach, for example, promotes the appreciation of language diversity in the classroom (Candelier & Kervran, 2018; Darquennes, 2017; Finkbeiner & White, 2017). The main idea is to encourage learners to think about

language as a system and in this way start appreciating the role of language diversity in their own lives and society as a whole. An important aspect of language awakening is that it does not encompass just the languages being taught in school but all the languages to which the learner is exposed, including home languages, dialects, sign languages, etc. This is also emphasized in the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA) which provides a list of descriptors for the concept of plurilingual and intercultural competence. As accentuated by its authors (Candelier et al., 2010), the FREPA framework is relevant for all levels of education and it integrates:

all languages, whatever their status, not just “foreign” or “second” languages, but the languages of education and the home languages of “allophone” learners (languages of migrants and regional languages) (Candelier et al., 2010, p.10).

In a typical language awakening program, children actively participate in activities which enable them to develop their linguistic repertoires, such as comparing and contrasting languages, exploring and trying out sounds in different languages, or observing language as a system. In addition, by being exposed to linguistic diversity, they are also encouraged to reflect on cultural diversity. In an intervention study aimed at exploring the potential of a language awakening approach in a preschool environment, Coelho, Andrade & Portugal (2018) concluded that children are genuinely motivated to learn about different languages and cultures and are more than willing to take part in discussions related to diversity.

A relevant concept which also promotes linguistic diversity and goes beyond the perception of language from a traditional perspective is translanguaging (García and Otheguy, 2020; García & Wei, 2014). As emphasized by García and Otheguy (2020), the translanguaging pedagogy goes beyond the idea of using various scaffolding strategies in order to learn a second or foreign language. Translanguaging practices challenge monolingual ideologies and the power hierarchies which position languages in a certain way according to their status in a society and focus on ways bilinguals perform their bilingualism and identify with the role of bilingual beings (*ibid.*). According to the translanguaging framework, the real purpose of learning new languages is not to learn another foreign or additional language but rather to develop a bilingual or multilingual identity (Wei, 2018; García & Wei, 2014). In this spirit, translanguaging is seen as having transformative power from both a socio-political and socio-educational perspective. By fostering the use of the complete set of a child's language abilities in the learning process and encouraging fluency in separate languages, translanguaging promotes the idea that diversity is a valuable asset both in the classroom and our society (García & Wei, 2014).

1.2. The DivCon model

The model ‘Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context’ (DivCon) in Figure 1 has emerged as a result of the piloting of a number of activities designed for developing plurilingual and pluricultural competence of pre-school children (aged 4–6). The activities were first carried out in the Languages Matter project under the name “Language train” which was designed as a teacher’s book (Bratož & Sila, 2021). The model is based on a framework which integrates six basic aspects: the journey metaphor, exposure to linguistic diversity,

exposure to cultural diversity, concrete to symbolic level, effective foreign language teaching approaches and children participation.

The DivCon model is based on a metaphor in which developing plurilingual competence is conceptualized as a journey. This is an important aspect as it provides the children with a conceptual framework which helps them visualize their learning path and thus build an awareness of diversity. As children travel to different countries by an imaginary train, they experience the languages and cultures they meet through multi sensory perceptions (through movement, singing, tasting, artistic expression, etc.). The journey by train is made more realistic with the children actually going around the classroom following an engine (which the teacher can improvise using a cardboard engine or other prompts) and humming a rhyme (the Choo choo choo song) which starts with a slow teaser and turns into a fast-paced rhythm in the third verse, imitating the departure of a train. The travel simulation enhances the journey metaphor and the way children experience linguistic and cultural diversity.

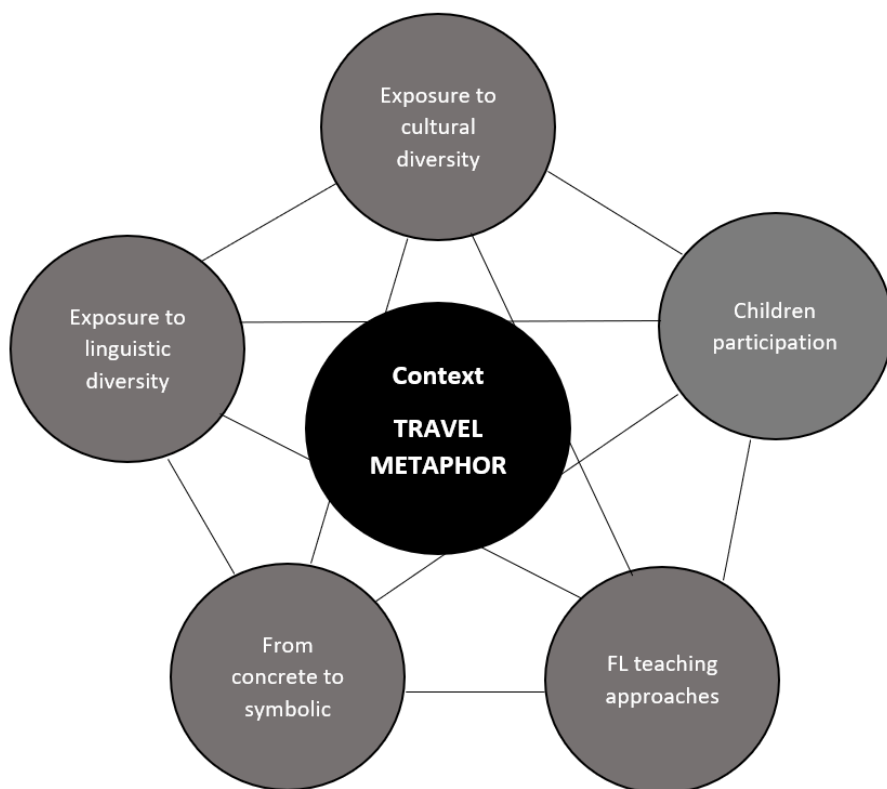


Fig. 1. *The DivCon model*

1.2.1. *The Journey Metaphor*

The journey metaphor is woven into every little part of the model, i.e. through the songs the children sing, the new things they learn, various items, such as passports, the stationmaster's whistle, etc. In addition, the metaphor allows us to discover and use new analogies between the source and target domain. For example, the teacher may include a suitcase in which different objects from different countries are stored or write postcards from different places. The DivCon model relies on the principles of metaphorical thinking and the realization that metaphors play a significant and powerful role in the ways people perceive abstract concepts, including the perceptions of linguistic and cultural diversity. This is an important tenet of the conceptual theory of metaphor (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), according to which the conceptualization of our experience as a journey is an all-pervasive metaphor in our everyday life, which includes also learning in general and experiencing linguistic and cultural diversity in particular.

1.2.2. *Exposure to linguistic diversity*

As they travel to different countries, children are exposed to various languages. English is used as the lingua franca but children also learn that English is not enough. The decision to use English as a global language was based on the realization that in groups of children with mixed sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds, using English may be seen as a neutral ground for all. On their journey to different countries, children are exposed to linguistic diversity in several ways. They always start in their own country (in our case in Slovenia). As the train stops, they call the railway station master 'who has overslept' by listening and joining in the tune *Frere Jacques* in the language of the country. Children are usually familiar with the version of 'Frère Jacques' in their own language (Mojster Jaka in Slovenian, Fray Juan in Spanish, Bruder Jakob in German, Fra Martino in Italian, etc.) and as they already know the tune, they will find it easier to follow the version of the nursery rhyme in a new language. The tune thus works as a scaffold, both phonologically and semantically.

Another important figure who accompanies them on their journey is "Chatty Betty", a sock puppet which can be given an interesting name in different languages (e.g. Ramona Chiacchierona in Italian, Marcelina Parlanchina in Spanish). In Slovenian she is called Jegu-lja Klepetulja (Eng. chatty eel). She is an expert in languages and has her own You Tube channel in which she discusses a variety of language issues, such as how to say 'thank you' in different languages or how similar some words are in related languages. In addition, children are exposed to different languages through songs and rhymes which contain samples of the language related to the country in which the language train stops.

1.2.3. *Exposure to cultural diversity*

Exposure to cultural diversity inevitably integrates the aspect of language. An important element of exposure to different cultures is the opportunity for children to experience cultural traits in a variety of ways (through food, music, dance, art, clothing, sports, storytelling, videos and photos). The teacher can bring in cultural characteristics of different countries by developing a topic area, such as dance and music (in Austria), sports (in Slovenia), food

(in Italy), etc. At the same time, the DivCon model is based on an open framework for exploring cultural diversity as these topics function as a point of departure into exploring different cultures and languages prevailing through activating music, movement and analyzing visuals (photos and videos).

Through a range of activities children learn that certain cultural traits are shared around the world while others vary. For example, they develop the awareness that people around the world eat different things and in different ways (e.g. eating with forks and spoons in Europe, eating with chopsticks in China, hand eating in India or noisily consuming food in Japan which is considered rude in Western countries). These culture traits are best discovered together with children through various projects and activities. The selection of topics depends above all on the linguistic and cultural background of children in each preschool group but also the wider community the children live in. The cultural content discussed with the children fosters their curiosity, active participation and engagement in learning, as well as their social, emotional and language development. Such content and culturally-rich environment gives the teacher the opportunity to build a learning space which opens the possibility for child-initiated activities (Ahn & Kim, 2009).

1.2.4. Concrete to symbolic level

An important aspect of the model is also the focus on real-life situations, including concrete items which have a symbolic dimension. In order to travel to foreign countries, learners are presented with an identity card and a passport template which they complete with their own data and pictures. These items can be used for sociodramatic play in which children take on different roles and create their own rules. While children are acting, teachers can interact with them as participants in the play, modelling language and play behaviors as well as offering items or pictures as visual support. During activities with teachers, children broaden their vocabulary as they learn new words, such as country, town, capital city, identity card, passport, anthem, flag, president, etc. Through visual support (e.g. maps, videos, photographs, concrete items) they learn about abstract concepts and through play they learn how to use them. The linguistic input to which children are exposed in the preschool period is an important environmental factor that contributes to individual differences in early vocabulary development (Hoff & Naigles, 2002).

1.2.5. Foreign language teaching approaches

The model leans on a combination of approaches and strategies which have proven to be effective in the young learners' and very young learners' classroom. The approach that is particularly in line with the proposed model is the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach, more commonly known as CLIL. CLIL, which is seen as a blending of different methods and strategies rather than one only approach, has been defined as "a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010) and as "the experience of learning non-language subjects through a foreign language" (Marsh, 2012). The main focus in CLIL is learning languages in realistic natural situations in which the content is more important than the form of language. The proposed model gives the instructor a number of

opportunities for linking language to content areas, such as creative arts, mathematics, social skills, science and technology and others.

Another approach that has proven to be effective is the Total Physical Response (TPR), which is particularly useful in initial stages of language learning and in the pre-literacy period. TPR is based on providing learners with plenty of comprehensible listening input related to actions (Asher & Silvers, 2003). The focus is on language structures and formulas, which are internalized through commands. TPR can also be perceived as a useful tool, especially if combined with other effective teaching strategies. In addition, it points to the benefits of using physical action and movement to facilitate the acquisition of a foreign language. The songs and rhymes used in the activities were all designed with the idea of movement linked to a particular context on the journey.

1.2.6. Children participation

One of the most salient elements of the model is children participation, which is reflected also in the dimension Exposure to cultural diversity. As Rutar (2014) observes, participation is today seen as a crucial component of an inclusive society in which children and young people need to be recognized more clearly as participants. Participation presupposes involvement of all children, including the most vulnerable, and children from different socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

All the activities in the proposed model are designed to foster children's participation and interaction with the teacher. For example, the teachers are encouraged to discover and discuss new destinations by train with the children, having experienced the journey across other countries, children with their teacher design new activities, make new rhymes in other languages, with a special focus on additional languages which the children bring to the group. As de Sousa (2019) points out, teachers may include the home languages of the children in the pre-school group even if they do not speak them as they can respond in other ways, such as through visual support or body language. Also, the web offers a number of useful sources and tools which the teacher can use to bring the languages into the group and communicate with children. What is more, important connections with the family members can be established (Čotar Konrad, 2018) and they may be invited to take part in the learning process and contribute samples of the language, for example in the form of nursery rhymes or stories. By encouraging children's multilingual contributions, the teacher builds a learning space in which diversity is not just the norm but is seen as a valuable asset and an advantage. In addition, the teachers' role may be extended to that of 'coparticipant' in the classroom activities which gives him/her the opportunity to both give and gain feedback from children and thus enhance the learning process (de Sousa, 2019).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1. Background and aim

Pre-school education in Slovenia is generally monolingual, with the exception of bilingual schools in north-east Slovenia where the Hungarian national community is located, and a few private initiatives based mostly in the capital city. Nevertheless, the country is charac-

terised by a relatively high linguistic and cultural diversity which is partly a consequence of an increased immigration rate since Slovenia became independent in 1991. This also means that there are a considerable number of children with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, mostly as a consequence of immigration from former Yugoslav countries. In 2018/19, 4,000 children enrolled in kindergarten did not have Slovenian citizenship and the majority did not speak or understand Slovenian (Lesar, Majcen & Podlesek, 2020). In addition, while Slovenian is the official language of the Republic of Slovenia, Italian and Hungarian have the status of co-official languages in areas populated by Italian and Hungarian ethnic communities. The preschool institutions which participated in the present study are located in the bilingual Slovenian-Italian area in which children attend kindergartens and schools with either Italian or Slovene as the language of instruction. However, while there are no bilingual educational institutions as such, Slovenian and Italian are taught in both types of schools as compulsory subjects.

Rutar (2014) argues that in order to ensure effective inclusion practices, we need to accept that there is a considerable difference between children from non-dominant cultures and children from home-language environments. This is why it is of utmost importance to create multilingual learning environments and provide opportunities for the inclusion of all children's first languages. As discussed by de Sousa (2017), the preschool time is critical for the development of the child's foundation which reflects future school performance. This suggests that it is crucial to start with exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity as early as possible. In addition, Candelier et al. (2012) point out that there is a considerable discrepancy between the concepts laid out in EU documents and the reality of everyday language teaching and learning in schools in which diversity is often the norm.

Bearing this in mind, the main objectives of our study were:

- to explore the benefits of using the DivCon approach in preschool settings,
- to analyse the children's involvement and their responses to the activities based on the DivCon model,
- to study children's perceptions of linguistic and cultural diversity.

2.2. Methodology

In order to evaluate the model, we carried out a qualitative evaluation study based on the observation of the learning module in action. As pointed out by Štemberger (2019), observation in authentic environments is one of the most reliable techniques in carrying out research with younger children. A number of activities were developed following the DivCon model and were carried out by three certified preschool teachers who completed an observation sheet which consisted of questions related to the six dimensions of the model: the journey metaphor, exposure to linguistic diversity, exposure to cultural diversity, progression from concrete to symbolic level, effective second language teaching approaches and children participation.

In addition to the observation sheet, the Leuven well-being and involvement scales (Laevers, 2005) was used to measure the children's well-being and involvement during the activities. The score in the scales range from 1 to 5, whereby 1 refers to the lowest score and 5 the highest. A high well-being score means, for example, that children feel great, they

radiate vitality and have an open and receptive attitude towards their environment. A high involvement score means children are highly concentrated and absorbed by their activity. They show interest, motivation and even fascination (ibid.).

2.3. Participants

The participants were three groups (n=40) of preschool children aged 4-6. About half of the children were identified as having non-Slovenian linguistic and cultural background. The children's first languages were varied, mostly from former Yugoslavia, such as Albanian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian but also Russian, Spanish and German. During the time the research was conducted, three new children joined the groups, two Ukrainians and a child with German as L1.

2.4. Data collection

The activities were carried out once a week (45 minutes) over a five-month period in three pre-school groups. During and at the end of each session, the participating teachers completed the observation sheet recording the children's reactions to the activities, their comments during activities and in discussions, and their ideas. The observation sheet contained six sections reflecting the six dimensions of the model. Teachers were presented with a set of questions aimed at gaining the children's responses to the individual dimensions. The questions were meant to lead and support the teachers in their observation and draw their attention to specific aspects. For example, with respect to linguistic exposure, they were directed to observe the general attitude of the participants towards the languages in the activities, their perception of the phonological aspect of language, their metalinguistic skills, and the ways they expressed curiosity about languages. The questions in the observation sheet were the following: How did the children respond to the input in different languages? Did they enjoy the language activities and how did they show this? Did they like to play with the new words? Did they try to pronounce them correctly? Did they try to compare the languages and how? Did they joke or make faces? What comments did they make? In addition, the children's well-being and involvement level was measured using the Leuven well-being and involvement scales. During the implementation of the learning module, the teachers also received unplanned and spontaneous feedback from parents who commented on their children's reactions to the activities.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Contextual teaching and learning: children's response to the journey metaphor

The children's responses recorded by the teachers in the observation sheet indicate that the journey metaphor was well accepted by the children as they were immersed in the journey context and showed a high motivation to take part in all the activities. All the teachers reported that the children openly embraced the journey metaphor as they were eager

to simulate the train and play the part of passengers, station master, and engine driver. The children easily recognized the travel elements in the activities, such as singing the Choo choo choo song, which was quickly adopted as a travelling routine, and calling the station master by singing the song in different languages. An important observation made by the teachers was also that the children were openly interested in sharing their own experiences, talking about visiting relatives in different countries and giving details about trips abroad. The children were eager to talk about things they found especially attractive, be that a volcanic beach in Tenerife or a shopping center in a big city.

They also responded to the journey conceptualization with new ideas and further developed the metaphor in unpredictable ways. For example, one of the children insisted on checking the picture on the identity card and making sure it was the right one. They shared their experience with crossing the border and showing documents and were able to say where they come from. These observations show that the journey metaphor was an effective contextual framework which presented a powerful stimulation both in terms of motivation to take part in activities and the perception of different aspects of diversity. The results are in line with the research by Satriani, Emilia & Gunawan (2012) who have recognised several benefits of contextual teaching and learning. First, it motivates learners to take charge of their own learning and establish a relationship between knowledge and its application in the different contexts of their lives. Secondly, it can make the learning process more meaningful as children like to learn through hands-on activities. And finally, memory and understanding of the concept are strengthened because students learn through the material they have gained from their experiences and their new knowledge. In other words, they link their previous knowledge and their new knowledge to gain a new understanding.

3.2. Exposure to linguistic diversity

During the observation of the learning activities children responded to the different languages they were exposed to in different ways. They immediately noticed the differences and similarities between languages, such as the different names for Brother John in or names of sports. In general, children showed pride in knowing other languages or words from foreign languages and were observed mashing up different languages (e.g. Slo. “*To je clownfish.*”, Eng. “This is a clownfish.”). This reflects the conclusions drawn by Wagner (2020) that 4/5-year-olds are able to demonstrate awareness of their own languages and show emerging metalinguistic awareness, which is also expressed in the way they noticed the differences and similarities between languages. In addition, the fact that children mixed up languages in their comments shows that they use languages spontaneously to fit their particular situation which is in line with the translanguaging paradigm (García & Wei, 2014).

Another indication that they responded positively to the activities was in their answers to the question which languages they would like to learn. They were asked this question before the activities and at the end of the module and the instructors noticed that while they mentioned a variety of languages before and after the module, the most frequently mentioned language before the module was English, while after the module, the majority mentioned Italian and other languages, while English was mentioned by only one child. During the activities, the teachers had several discussions with the children about languages and they were always willing to contribute their opinion. In their study, Coelho, Andrade & Portugal

(2018) also found that pre-school children are keen to engage in meaningful conversations about diversity and are genuinely motivated to learn more about other cultures and languages.

The teachers observed that children were generally very keen on learning new words, such as learning the names of animals from their favourite picture book in different languages. They were also willing to experiment with languages by playing with the new sounds, inventing new words and making faces. An important observation was also that they used the newly acquired language creatively in their plays. For example, they played a conversation between waiter and client in a restaurant by using the communication pattern “*Una pizza margherita, per favore. – Buon appetito.*” which was the main line of the song they sang when travelling through Italy. Studies (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019) have shown that young learners have a very positive attitude towards foreign languages and are motivated to learn them.

Besides in-group observation, two of the teachers reported receiving spontaneous feedback from parents who noticed an increased interest in languages in their children. Several parents commented that their children were keen on mentioning the ‘special’ words they learnt in kindergarten and were eager to ask questions about languages. For example, one child asked her grandmother why she sometimes spoke Croatian and which other languages she knew. One parent also mentioned that their child recognized the languages of songs they listened to in the car. The parents were also surprised when children spontaneously expressed thanks in different languages. These observations suggest that the children showed overt curiosity about and interest in the new languages which points to the role of curiosity in developing linguistic awareness and positive attitudes towards language diversity (Beacco & Byram, 2007).

3.3. Exposure to cultural diversity

The observation of the learning process indicates that children responded to cultural diversity in a variety of ways. Their comments were always direct and honest. For example, when they discussed a picture of African children engaged in a game with pebbles and were asked if they would like to play with them, the majority thought the game was interesting and said they would join them. On the other hand, some expressed their concern that the children would tease them, some commented on the color of their skin. One of the children said that “It’s interesting that they play with stones. I wouldn’t go because they have blue hands. Maybe I would get blue hands”. Another child commented “I would go there but I don’t know what language they speak because I’ve never been there”, showing that he was aware that they probably speak another language. Another example of how children responded to cultural practices was in the activity in which they learnt to dance polka and the waltz when travelling across Austria. They commented on the fact that we also have similar dances in Slovenia and were very eager to try them.

The participating teachers also reported that when they discussed items from different cultures, the children brought to the kindergarten a variety of cultural objects which they acquired on trips abroad: a sombrero, a Venetian mask, English tea, a flamenco dress, Turkish football mascots, Mozart balls, etc. The activities in which children showed particular interest were those where they talked about and tried different dishes. The children showed that they knew the origins of some types of food. For example, they knew that

spaghetti Bolognese, pizza, and lasagna come from Italy and that *burek* and *čevapčići* are typical Bosnian dishes. On the basis of these observations, we would like to argue that the children who participated in the activities embraced cultural diversity and perceived it in a pleasurable and positive way. They were eager to contribute their ideas and experiences with different aspects of culture and were willing to try new things. This partly reflects the findings of a research (Yuriichuk, Kurhannikova, Demchenko, Tolchieva, & Holiuk, 2022) conducted among Ukrainian preschool children which concluded that the majority of them showed an interest in the culture and traditions of other nations. At the same time, they showed a neutral attitude towards representatives of different ethnic groups expressing that they did not really care who they played with although they said they would prefer children of their own nationality.

3.4. Children's perception of symbolic elements

By engaging in activities based on concrete items (maps, photographs, flags, etc.), the participants in the module showed a clear, albeit limited understanding of concepts, like town and country. For example, they were able to connect a flag to the concept of a country and the language spoken in that country. When listening to Jegulja Klepetulja, they noticed that she had a flag on her tongue, recognized it as the Slovenian flag and concluded that it was because she spoke Slovenian. In addition, they used concrete objects in their unprompted sociodramatic play, such as identity cards created by themselves when playing while going on a trip.

Valuable feedback with respect to the ways children perceive the symbolic dimension was also provided by the parents who reported to the teachers that children started asking them about which towns and other places were located in which country. They asked for confirmation, for example, that Cres was in Croatia or Trieste in Italy. One boy mentioned to his parents that he would like to visit Ptuj (a town in north-eastern Slovenia) because of the Kurenti (a traditional carnival figure).

While the children showed an overt understanding and interest in the location of towns, the teachers also observed that only a few children were able to make more complex logical connections, such as between a famous person and the country (e.g. the NBA basketball player Luka Dončić and Slovenia) or the country and its shape on the map (e.g. Italy and its boot shape). It is clear that at this developmental stage children are still not fully able to absorb and comprehend certain abstract concepts. At the same time, the observation of their reaction shows that the activities carried out in kindergarten triggered children's curiosity about concepts like town and country. This observation points to the importance of teacher-child interaction in the development of abstract concepts. In their analysis of children's emerging understanding of science concepts, Adbo & Carulla (2020) concluded that at the preschool stage, the transfer of knowledge occurs with 'sustained shared thinking' which emerges from an effective interaction between the children and the teacher.

3.5. Language teaching approaches

Children responded to the activities which reflect different teaching approaches very positively. In the activities based on movement and TPR they showed a high level of mo-

tivation, actively joining in and, most importantly, offering their own ideas. For example, when travelling to the UK, they sang the song *Let's go to London*. The teacher asked them to provide their own movement suggestions to show different means of transport (plane, train and bus) and they responded with engagement and creativity. In all the activities which were based on cross-curricular links and CLIL children were also actively engaged and eager to participate. One of the areas in which they showed intense involvement was art. For example, when travelling around Italy, they designed their own creative versions of a pizza, in Austria they drew a figure of Mozart, etc. By creating pieces of art, they were able to make sense of the cultural and linguistic dimensions of their journey. Multiple studies (Anderson, McDougald, & Cuesta Medina, 2015; Cortina-Pérez & Pino Rodríguez, 2021) have concluded that CLIL is an effective approach to be used with young language learners as it offers children realistic and natural opportunities to focus primarily on content.

The teachers observed that the children responded more readily to the activities which were based on movement and TPR. All the teachers emphasized that children participated more enthusiastically if movement was involved, including in CLIL-based activities which connected language with science or art. An important observation made by the teachers was also that the children were actively using verbal or nonverbal scaffolds to convey meaning. We may conclude that the use of movement enhanced both language learning and children's engagement in activities. As Duan (2021) emphasizes, TPR is undoubtedly an effective language learning method for the preschool level as there are clear benefits in connecting language and movement.

3.6. Children's participation level

Throughout the module, children actively participated by contributing their own experiences with languages and cultures. They were eager to show their knowledge about different languages, take part in discussions with the teacher and share their thoughts and experiences. They openly commented on the languages of their friends (e.g. "You speak Croatian, like my grandma.") and made observations about languages in discussions with the teacher. Teachers also noted an increased incidence of sociodramatic play in which children used the language they learnt in the planned activities. They often replayed scenes or communication patterns which were used in songs or in the video with *Jegulja Klepetulja*. A teacher also gave the example of two girls playing with Barbie dolls in which the dolls spoke different languages.

However, the teachers also observed that the children liked to share their knowledge of different languages but only if they were prompted to do so by the teacher. They rarely acted on their own initiative and did not show interest to do so. This suggests that the children's perceptions and their willingness to participate is still dependent on the teachers' guidance and support. De Sousa (2019) emphasizes the significance of the interaction between the instructor and the children in multilingual settings, arguing in favor of using instructional conversations to facilitate learning and engage children as active participants.

3.7. Children's well-being and involvement level

According to the results of the Leuven scale for well-being, the children expressed an extremely high level of well-being throughout the activities. They appeared very relaxed and

showed no signs of tension or stress. They were eager to try to sing or speak in different languages and spontaneously played with the new sounds. The teachers also reported that the children showed pride and self-confidence when they knew words from different languages.

With respect to the scale for involvement, children showed a very high level of engagement. They expressed a strong desire to take part in activities and interact with their peers and the teacher. This was especially evident with the children who were new to the group and did not speak Slovenian as they were able to communicate through English and were eager to contribute information about their language and culture. An important observation by one of the teachers was that a child with speech difficulties did not hesitate to take part in the interaction, while the involvement scale for a child with autism was also ranked extremely high. All the teachers reported that the children were completely absorbed in the activities. Similar conclusions were recorded by Kirsch (2020) who analysed the responses of early childhood practitioners following a training course aimed at developing competences in translanguaging pedagogy. The participants observed that children were willing to accept new languages and participated well in multilingual activities.

4. CONCLUSION

An important objective of this study was to examine the potential and benefits of using the DivCon model to develop awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity in preschool settings. A particularly useful observation made by the teachers was that the journey metaphor provided a fruitful and efficient context for the children to explore and generate new ideas. As noted, children developed the potential of the metaphor in unpredictable ways which suggests that it provided an effective contextual framework for developing linguistic and cultural diversity.

Secondly, the study was aimed at analysing the children's involvement and their responses to the planned activities. On the basis of the observation of the learning module implementation and the Leuven scale of well-being and involvement, we may conclude that the activities in the DivCon model enhanced the children's perceptions of diversity and contributed to their positive perceptions. At the same time, it was noted that the children were still largely dependent on the teacher for stimulation and support in sharing their language experiences. We may argue that this highlights the importance of the role of the teacher in developing a safe and diversity-friendly learning space.

Another important objective was to investigate the children's perceptions of linguistic and cultural diversity. In this respect, the teachers reported that the children showed overtly positive attitudes. They expressed an intense interest in and curiosity about languages and cultural elements and were willing to explore and experiment with new languages. The observations also revealed that children expressed an increased interest in abstract concepts, such as town and country, although it was also observed that at this developmental level children's perceptions of symbolic content are still limited and not fully developed.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge some limitations to the present research. First, the data gained were collected mostly through observation of the learning process by the pre-

school teachers which necessarily means that we were faced with a degree of subjectivity and personal bias. At the same time, this data collection method gave us the opportunity to gain important insights into the perceptions of children in this age group as they are still not able to express themselves efficiently in other ways. Secondly, any attempts at generalization on the basis of observation may be seen as unreliable. Despite this limitation, we believe we managed to gain a deeper understanding of how children perceive linguistic and cultural diversity through the activities in the DivCon model. We do believe, however, that the proposed model needs to be further evaluated and studied. A particularly useful line of enquiry would be to explore the potential of the model in different linguistic and cultural settings and compare the perceptions of children with different backgrounds.

5. REFERENCES

- Adbo, K., & Vidal Carulla, C. (2020). Learning about science in preschool: Play-based activities to support children's understanding of chemistry concepts. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(1), 17-35.
- Ahn, G. S. & Kim, S. H. (2009). The effects of child-initiated singing activities through the literature approach on children's music concepts. *Asian-pacific journal of early childhood*, 3(2), 145-160.
- Anderson, C. E., McDougald, J.S., & Medina, L. C. (2015). CLIL for Young Learners. In C. N. Giannikas, L. McLaughlin, G. Fanning, & N. D. Muller (Eds.), *Children Learning English: From Research to Practice*, (pp. 137-151). Garnet Education.
- Asher, J. & Silvers, S. M. (2003). How to TPR abstractions: the critical role of imagination. *The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning and Teaching*, 7(1), 1-29.
- Beacco, J. C., & Byram, M. (2007). *From linguistic diversity to plurilingual education. Guide for the development of Language Education Policies in Europe*. Council of Europe.
- Bratož, S. & Sila, A. (2021). Developing plurilingual competence at an early age. In C. J. McDermott & A. Kožuh (Eds.), *Educational challenges* (pp. 101-119). Department of Education, Antioch University.
- Candelier, M., Camilleri, A., Castellotti, V., De Pietro, J. F., Lőrincz, I., Meißner, F. J., Noguero, A., & Schröder-Sura, A. (2010). *A framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures. Competences and resources*. Council of Europe.
- Candelier, M., Daryai-Hansen, P., & Schröder-Sura, A. (2012). The framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures—a complement to the CEFR to develop plurilingual and intercultural competences. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 6(3), 243-257.
- Candelier, M. & Kervran, M. (2018). 1997-2017: Twenty Years of Innovation and Research about Awakening to Languages-Evlang Heritage. *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education (IJBIDE)*, 3(1), 10-21.
- Coelho, D., Andrade, A. I., & Portugal, G. (2018). The 'Awakening to Languages' approach at preschool: developing children's communicative competence. *Language awareness*, 27(3), 197-221.
- Cortina-Pérez, B. & Pino Rodríguez, A. M. (2021). Analysing CLIL teacher competences in pre-service preschool education. A case study at the University of Granada. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 1-19.

- Cots, J. M. (2008). Knowledge about language in the mother tongue and foreign language curricula. In J. Ceniz & N.H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 15-30). Springer.
- Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh. D. (2010). *Content and Language Integrated Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Čotar Konrad, S. (2018). The role of preschool teacher in empowering functionality of family of preschool child. *Didactica Slovenica*, 33(1), 70-81.
- Darquennes, J. (2017). Language Awareness and Minority Languages. In J. Cenoz, D. Gorter, & S. May (Eds.), *Language Awareness and Multilingualism, Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 297-308). Springer.
- Duan, Y. (2021). The Application of Total Physical Response Method (TPR) in Preschool Children's English Teaching. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11(10), 1323-1333.
- Finkbeiner, C. & White, J. (2017). Language awareness and multilingualism: A historical overview. In J. Cenoz, D. Gorter, & S. May (Eds.), *Language Awareness and Multilingualism, Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 3-17). Springer.
- García, O. & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- García, O., & Otheguy, R. (2020). Plurilingualism and translanguaging: Commonalities and divergences. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(1), 17-35.
- Hoff, E. & Naigles, L. (2002) How children use input to acquire a lexicon. *Child Development*, 73(2), 418-433.
- Kirsch, C. (2020). Translanguaging Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education in Luxembourg: Theory Into Practice. In C. Kirsch & J. Duarte (Eds.), *Multilingual Approaches for Teaching and Learning* (pp.15-33). Routledge.
- Laevers, F. (2005). *Well-being and involvement in care settings. A process-oriented self-evaluation instrument (SiCs)* (Research Centre for Experiential Education, Leuven University). Kind & Gezin.
- Lakoff, G. (1993). The contemporary theory of metaphor. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (pp. 202-251). Cambridge University Press
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lesar, I., Majcen, I., & Podlesek, A. (2020). Stališča (bodočih) pedagoških delavcev kot temelj kakovostnega vključevanja otrok priseljencev. *Dve domovini*, 52, 147-164.
- Little, D., Leung, C., & Van Avermaet, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Managing diversity in education: Languages, policies, pedagogies* (Vol. 33). Multilingual Matters.
- Marsh, D. (2012). *Content and language integrated learning (CLIL): A development trajectory*. Córdoba: University of Córdoba.
- Mihaljević Djigunović, J. & Nikolov, M. (2019). Motivation of young learners of foreign languages. In M. Lamb, K. Csizér, A. Henry, & S. Ryan (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Motivation for Language Learning* (pp. 515-533). Cham: Springer.
- Pirih, A. (2019). Extensive reading and changes to reading motivation in EFL among Slovene primary school pupils. *Journal of Elementary Education*, 12(4), 291-314.
- Rutar, S. (2014). Multilingual learning and teaching as a principle of inclusive practice. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies/Sodobna Pedagogika*, 65(1), 10-25.
- Satriani, I., Emilia, E., & Gunawan, M. H. (2012). Contextual Teaching and Learning Approach to Teaching Writing. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 2(1).10-22.
- Sayers, D. & Láncoš, P. L. (2017). (Re) defining linguistic diversity: What is being protected in European language policy? *SKY Journal of Linguistics*, 30, 35-73.

- de Sousa, E. B. C. (2017). Promoting the contributions of multilingual preschoolers. *Linguistics and Education, 39*, 1-13.
- de Sousa, E. B. C. (2019). Five Tips for Engaging Multilingual Children in Conversation. *YC Young Children, 74*(2), 24-31.
- Svalberg, A. M. (2007). Language awareness and language learning. *Language Teaching, 40*(4), 287-308.
- Štemberger, T. (2019). Raziskovanje o otrocih/z otroki: vprašanje participativnega raziskovanja z otroki. *Pedagoška obzorja: časopis za didaktiko in metodiko, 34*(1), 3-18.
- Wagner, C. J. (2020). Multilingualism and reading identities in prekindergarten: Young children connecting reading, language, and the self. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 21*(6), 423-438.
- Wei, L. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied linguistics, 39*(1), 9-30.
- Yuriichuk, I. R., Kurhannikova, O., Demchenko, O., Tolchieva, H., & Holiuk, O. A. (2022). Formation of multicultural competence of preschool children. *Revista Tempos e Espaços em Educação, 15*(34), 1-11.