

Developing Linguistic and Cultural Awareness at an Early Age

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Chapter Objectives

- Discussing the relevance of developing plurilingual competence at an early age
- Examining teaching methods and activities aimed at raising children's language awareness
- Exploring different approaches and initiatives for fostering children's appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity
- Analysing the potential of the *DivCon model* for raising children's linguistic and cultural awareness in early childhood education (ECE)

Introduction

Language is a powerful tool that shapes how we understand the world and connect with others. In today's classrooms, where children often come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, embracing this diversity is essential for creating inclusive and enriching learning environments. This chapter introduces some key ideas and strategies aimed primarily at fostering linguistic and cultural awareness in young and very young learners. We first discuss the concept of *plurilingualism*, which sees languages as interconnected resources rather than isolated systems. Next, the chapter highlights the importance of *language awareness* in preschool and primary school settings, focusing on activities and teaching methods that help young learners understand how language works and appreciate its variety. Fostering language awareness is also an important element of the *pluralistic approaches to language teaching*, which encourage students to engage with and appreciate multiple languages and cultures. An important aspect of pluralistic approaches is creating welcoming and supportive learning environments for

children from diverse backgrounds, ensuring they feel included and valued in the classroom. This is also emphasised by the *DivCon model*, which will be presented in the fifth section. *DivCon* is an innovative framework designed to nurture children's linguistic and cultural awareness in a structured and engaging way. The model is based on a set of activities through which children are systematically exposed to different languages and cultures.

Plurilingual Competence

Multilingualism is often used as an umbrella term which encompasses any situation where multiple languages are used. However, it makes sense to distinguish between the use of different languages in a society or community and the way multiple languages are used by an individual. This is why the term *plurilingualism* was introduced, i.e. to emphasise the dynamic interplay of multiple languages within an individual. It views language as a resource and recognises that individuals can draw upon different languages and language varieties in flexible and creative ways. The focus is not on *knowing* multiple languages, but on how these languages interact and shape an individual's linguistic identity and communication strategies. In fact, the introduction of the concept of plurilingualism has shifted the perspective from understanding linguistic diversity in terms of the coexistence of different languages in a given society to the individual and the languages at his or her disposal. As highlighted in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4):

the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact.

In more practical terms, in order to communicate effectively with conversational partners, people might switch between languages or dialects, expressing themselves in one language while understanding the other. Alternatively, someone might use their knowledge of multiple languages to decode a text or spoken content in a previously unfamiliar language, such as by recognising shared international vocabulary in a new form. Even minimal language knowledge can be leveraged to assist successful communication by mediat-

ing between individuals who lack a common language. In situations without a mediator, people may still achieve some level of understanding by using their entire linguistic repertoire, experimenting with expressions across languages or dialects, relying on paralinguistic tools like gestures and facial expressions, or significantly simplifying their language use.

The scope of the plurilingual concept thus presupposes a communicative competence that encompasses the entire knowledge of and experience with languages as they interact and influence each other. Therefore, plurilingualism is above all a prerequisite for successful communication with people from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

An important aspect of plurilingual education is that it does not just focus on developing the linguistic resources and linguistic potential of learners but is also directly related to the acceptance of other people's languages and to a sense of curiosity about these languages (Beacco & Byram, 2007). In fact, developing positive attitudes or curiosity towards other languages and cultures should be a basic component of all language teaching. This also implies the inclusion of the learners' mother tongue or first language, which is not necessarily the language of instruction or the official language of the environment.

One way of making the plurilingual concept tangible is to create visual representations of language repertoires (e.g. language portraits and landscapes) which help us understand the complexity and diversity of one's linguistic abilities (Busch, 2021). Language repertoires are very personal and individualised, reflecting the unique linguistic experiences, backgrounds, and preferences of each person. They incorporate the languages, dialects, registers, and even non-verbal communication means that individuals use in their daily lives. Figure 1 presents an example of a language portrait created by a 6-year-old child from Slovenia.

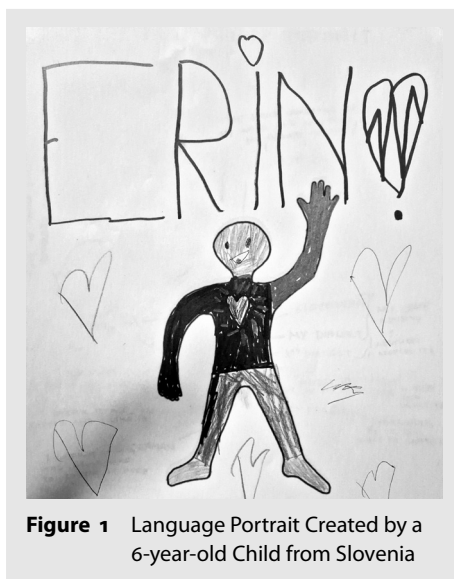


Figure 1 Language Portrait Created by a 6-year-old Child from Slovenia

Reflection Point

1. Create a visual representation of your own language repertoire. You can use the whole-body silhouette, as in Figure 1, or other templates, such as

trees, houses, etc. Another alternative is to create your own personal language landscape.

2. How does acknowledging students' plurilingual competence foster an inclusive learning environment?
3. Discuss the role of different languages or language varieties from your repertoire in your society. Are some languages in your repertoire undervalued or stigmatised?

Language Awareness

Language awareness (LA) refers to an individual's understanding of language as a system and their ability to reflect on language in different contexts. One key aspect of this is metalinguistic awareness, which involves focusing on language properties such as phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Metalinguistic awareness allows individuals to recognise and manipulate language structures, understand word meanings, and use language in various social contexts.

While research on LA in young learners is limited, studies suggest that early development of LA is beneficial, enhancing metalinguistic skills and cultural understanding. Children as young as 4–5 years old show awareness of their own language, express language preferences, and begin developing metalinguistic awareness. Between ages 5–8, children's metalinguistic abilities improve, and they begin understanding synonyms and the relationship between different languages. Young children also demonstrate significant phonological and semantic awareness, although they may face challenges in sentence segmentation and textual awareness. (Muñoz, 2014; Wagner, 2020).

Garrett and James (1993) talk about five LA domains: the cognitive, affective, social, power and performance domain. The cognitive domain focuses on the structure of language and the comparison between the learner's first and second language, promoting analytical skills to explore language patterns and their uses. The affective domain relates to attitudes and the emotional aspect of language awareness, with the aim of fostering curiosity, openness, and positive attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity. In the social domain, the focus is mainly on language as a tool for effective communication and interaction, and, more generally, on the ways how language operates in social contexts, including issues of identity, power, and community dynamics. The power domain is mainly thought of in terms of awareness that language can be a tool for manipulation, addressing issues like language hierarchies, marginalisation, and how certain languages or di-

Table 1 Language Awareness Domains and Examples of Activities

LA domains	Goal	Activity examples
Cognitive	Promoting understanding of how language works, focusing on patterns, structures, and functions.	Building phonological awareness by helping children recognise similar sounds by teaching rhyming words through songs or poems in the target language. For example, in Italian <i>gatto</i> (cat) and <i>matto</i> (crazy), in German <i>Haus</i> (house) and <i>Maus</i> (mouse).
Affective	Fostering positive attitudes and emotional responses toward language.	Sing traditional songs and rhymes in different languages and encourage children to dance traditional dances (for example, Italian Tarentella, Greek Sirtaki, Slovenian Polka, etc.).
Social	Help children understand how language reflects social identity and relationships.	Create pretend-play situations where students use language for a particular purpose, such as to greet, ask for help, etc. For example, a game in which children are given cards with flags of different countries and greet each other in the language spoken in that country.
Power	Raise awareness of how language use can reflect power dynamics and social hierarchies.	Read or act out a story where characters have different roles (e.g. a king, a farmer, and a child). Highlight how they speak differently based on their status.
Performance	Develop practical communication skills in multilingual or intercultural contexts.	Simulate interactions in different situations, such as buying ice cream from an ice cream vendor.

alects are privileged over others. The performance domain links language awareness directly to communicative competence in a given language. It focuses on the practical use of language, emphasising communication skills and the ability to navigate multilingual or intercultural settings effectively.

By engaging learners across these domains, educators can foster not only linguistic proficiency but also a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of language.

Reflection Point

1. How can we encourage children to explore language patterns, sounds, and structures in different languages?
2. How do we ensure that children from different linguistic backgrounds feel supported in learning the sounds of a new language?
3. Discuss additional activities which could be used to develop the five language awareness domains.

Pluralistic Approaches to Language Teaching

Over the past two decades, several initiatives have been launched to promote linguistic diversity in Europe. These efforts are now collectively known as ‘pluralistic approaches to language teaching’ – approaches which focus on fostering an appreciation of linguistic diversity and cultural understanding. These approaches recognise the value of all languages – home languages, dialects, sign languages, and regional languages – rather than concentrating solely on ‘foreign’ or ‘second’ languages (Candelier et al., 2010). This perspective is further supported by the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA)*, which offers descriptors and guidelines for developing plurilingual and intercultural competence. FREPA advocates for moving away from a monolingual and monocultural view in language education, encouraging educators to expose students to a range of languages and cultures, including their native languages, regional languages, and languages of migration.

One initiative stemming from this concept is the ‘evlang’ or *Language Awakening* approach, which aims to raise awareness of language diversity in the classroom and encourages students to see language as a system. The primary goal of this approach is not to teach specific languages, but to raise awareness of linguistic diversity and its significance in both personal and societal contexts (Darquennes, 2017). Several Language Awakening projects have emerged in Europe in the past two decades. For example, the *Janua Linguarum* initiative (Candelier, 2004) was designed to promote linguistic and cultural diversity among young learners in different European countries and foster the development of plurilingual and intercultural competencies in early education. The primary goal was to expose children to a variety of languages through activities involving interactive games, storytelling and songs, etc., fostering an appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity from a young age.

A concept closely connected to language diversity with a strong focus on challenging monolingual ideologies is translanguaging (García & Otheguy, 2020). This pedagogical approach encourages learners to use their full range of language skills, including their home language(s), in the learning process. Translanguaging practices not only support fluency in individual languages but also promote the idea that learning languages is not just about acquiring a new foreign language, but about expanding one’s overall linguistic and cultural knowledge. It views language diversity as a valuable resource, fosters the development of bilingual or multilingual identities, and seeks to disman-

tle language barriers and power imbalances by recognising and valuing all languages and their varieties (García & Wei, 2014).

In the next section, we will look closely at the pluralistic approach based on the *DivCon model* (Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context), developed by Bratož and Sila (2022). The model is aimed at promoting linguistic and cultural awareness among preschool children (ages 4–6). It integrates six key aspects: the journey metaphor, exposure to linguistic diversity, exposure to cultural diversity, progression from concrete to symbolic thinking, effective second language teaching methods, and children’s active participation. The model views the development of plurilingual competence as a journey

where children experience languages and cultures through multi-sensory activities such as movement, singing, tasting, and artistic expression. By using the journey metaphor, the model creates a framework that encourages children to explore and generate ideas, fostering their awareness of diversity. A key focus is on children’s active participation in these activities, which helps develop positive attitudes toward different languages and cultures. This immersive, participatory approach promotes linguistic awareness and an appreciation for diversity from an early age.

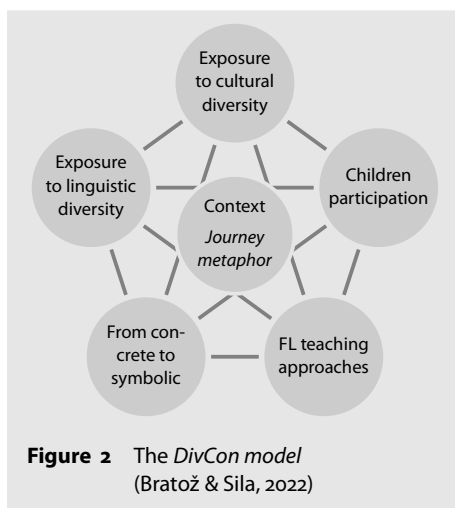


Figure 2 The *DivCon model* (Bratož & Sila, 2022)

The DivCon Model

The *Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context (DivCon) model*, depicted in Figure 2, originated from piloting several activities aimed at fostering plurilingual and pluricultural competence in preschool children (ages 4–6). These activities were initially implemented in the *Languages Matter* project under the title ‘Language Train,’ which was developed as a teacher’s guide (Bratož & Sila, 2022). As mentioned in the previous section, the model is built upon a framework that incorporates six key dimensions: the journey metaphor, exposure to linguistic diversity, exposure to cultural diversity, progression from concrete to symbolic understanding, effective foreign language teaching methods, and active participation by children.

The model has been piloted on several occasions. Bratož and Sila (2022)

analysed preschool children's responses to the various dimensions of the model. Čeh (2022) implemented the model in the first-grade primary school settings, examining children's reactions to activities designed around the model. Jolić Kozina et al. (2024) explored the model's potential for fostering language awareness among primary school children. Additionally, Žefran et al. (2025) assessed the model's effectiveness in preschool settings.

The Journey Metaphor

The *DivCon model* employs the metaphor of a journey to represent the development of plurilingual competence. This metaphor is pivotal as it offers children a conceptual framework to visualise their learning path, fostering an awareness of diversity. Through an imaginary train journey, children 'travel' to various countries, engaging with the languages and cultures they encounter using multisensory experiences such as movement, singing, tasting, and artistic expression. The experience is brought to life by having children move around the classroom following a makeshift engine (e.g., a cardboard train), accompanied by the 'Choo choo choo' song, which begins slowly and builds into a rapid rhythm, mimicking a train's departure. This simulation reinforces the journey metaphor, enriching children's exploration of linguistic and cultural diversity.

The journey metaphor is intricately embedded throughout the model, influencing songs, learning activities, and props such as passports, a stationmaster's whistle, and postcards. Teachers can also use items like a suitcase containing objects from different countries to deepen the connection between the metaphor and the learning process. The model is grounded in the principles of metaphorical thinking, recognising the significant role metaphors play in shaping perceptions of abstract concepts, including linguistic and cultural diversity. This aligns with the conceptual theory of metaphor (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which posits that the metaphor of life as a journey is a fundamental aspect of human cognition, influencing how we experience learning and diversity.

The studies by Bratož and Sila (2022) and Jolić Kozina et al. (2024) have proven the journey metaphor to be a stimulating and effective contextual framework. Teachers involved in the study observed that children enthusiastically embraced the metaphor, actively participating in role-playing activities such as simulating a train journey and taking on roles like passengers, station master, and engine driver. Children also showed a strong interest in sharing personal experiences, such as trips abroad or visits to relatives, often highlighting specific attractions like a volcanic beach in Tenerife or a shop-

ping centre in a big city. The journey metaphor also inspired creativity, as children expanded on the concept with their own ideas. 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.

Exposure to Linguistic Diversity

As children travel to different countries, they are introduced to various languages. While English serves as the common lingua franca, they also come to understand that English alone is not sufficient. The choice of English as a global language stems from its perceived neutrality in groups of children from diverse sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. During their journey, children encounter linguistic diversity in multiple ways, beginning in their home country. At each stop, they engage with the local language by calling the railway station master, who is humorously ‘oversleeping,’ through the familiar tune of *Frère Jacques* sung in the language of the destination.

Children are typically acquainted with their own version of the song – such as *Mojster Jaka* in Slovenian, *Frey Juan* in Spanish, *Bruder Jakob* in German, or *Fra Martino* in Italian. Since they already know the melody, it becomes easier for them to adapt to and follow the song in a new language. The tune acts as a supportive framework, aiding them both phonetically and semantically. Beyond *Frère Jacques*, children are exposed to other songs and rhymes that include phrases relevant to the language and culture of the country they visit. For instance, in France, they listen to the song *I have a new fancy dress*, which concludes with the French phrase *Merci beaucoup!*

In addition to songs and rhymes, learners engage in a variety of activities designed to develop phonological awareness. For example, when meeting the railway station master, children sing *What’s your name?* and compare the lengths of their names by clapping out syllables. The instructor explains that words with one or two syllables are short, while those with three or more are long. For a more challenging task, children may also segment words into individual sounds. Other name-related activities include distinguishing between similar initial or final sounds and identifying or creating rhymes. The teacher adjusts the complexity of these tasks based on each child’s phonological development, progressing from manipulating whole words (e.g., combining *dog* and *house* into *doghouse*), to syllables (e.g., removing *li* from *lion* to form *on*), to onset-rime blending (e.g., combining /c/ and *at* to form *cat*), and finally to phoneme-level segmentation (e.g., blending /f/ + /i/ + /sh/ to form *fish*).

Another key figure in the journey is *Chatty Betty*, a sock puppet with a name

that varies by language (e.g., *Ramona Chiacchierona* in Italian, *Marcelina Parlanchina* in Spanish, or *Jegulja Klepetulja* in Slovenian, meaning ‘chatty eel’). Chatty Betty is a language expert with her own YouTube channel, where she explores topics like saying ‘thank you’ in various languages and highlighting similarities among related languages. Children also encounter different languages through songs and rhymes that feature language samples connected to the countries visited by the imaginary language train.

Studies by Bratož and Sila (2022), Jolić Kozina et al. (2024), and Žefran et al. (2025) have revealed that children respond to exposure to different languages with curiosity and creativity, noticing similarities and differences, expressing pride in their linguistic knowledge, and playfully mixing languages.

Exposure to Cultural Diversity

Exposure to cultural diversity naturally incorporates language learning. A key aspect of this exposure is providing children with opportunities to engage with cultural traits through various experiences such as food, music, dance, art, clothing, sports, storytelling, photos, and videos. Teachers can introduce cultural elements from different countries by focusing on specific topics, such as dance and music (Austria), sports (Slovenia), or food (Italy). The *DivCon model* operates as an open framework, using these topics as starting points for exploring different cultures and languages. This approach emphasises engaging children through music, movement, and the analysis of visuals like photos and videos.

As children ‘travel’ to different countries, they are introduced to various cultural features and practices, which naturally incorporate language exposure. A key aspect of exploring cultural diversity is providing children with opportunities to engage with cultural traits through diverse experiences such as food, music, dance, art, clothing, sports, storytelling, photos, and videos. For instance, an activity based on the rhyme ‘Waltz and Polka’ introduces children to Austrian culture by combining singing and dancing to the rhythms of the waltz and polka:

‘Waltz and Polka’

Ein, zwei, drei,

Ein, zwei, drei.

Dance with me.

Ein, zwei, drei,

Ein, zwei, drei.

Dance with me.

And now Polka!

One and two,

two and two.

Polka, me and you.

One and two,

two and two.

Polka, me and you.

The model operates on an open framework, allowing exploration of cultural diversity through themes like sports (Slovenia), food (Italy), sea animals (Croatia), clothing (France), and transportation (United Kingdom). These topics serve as entry points to learning about cultures and languages through music, movement, and visual analysis.

Children learn that some cultural traits are universal, while others differ widely. Examples include:

- *Eating habits:* Children explore various ways of eating, such as enjoying continental or English breakfasts, eating traditional dishes (e.g. jota in Slovenia, pasta in Italy, Sacher cake in Vienna), using chopsticks (China), eating with hands (India), or with forks and spoons (Europe). They also learn cultural nuances, such as slurping noodles being polite in Japan but considered rude in Western countries.
- *Clothing:* Traditional attire like the sari (India), kilt (Scotland), kimono (Japan), hijab (Muslim cultures), and national costumes are introduced. They also discuss school uniforms, common in many schools around the world.
- *Customs and practices:* Children discover cultural greetings, such as cheek-kissing in Latin American, Romance, and Arab cultures, bowing in Japan, and celebrations of festivals and religious events like Pust (Slovenia), Zagreb Folk Fest (Croatia), Sanfermines (Spain), Easter, Pesach, Qurban Bayram, etc.
- *Languages:* They learn that some regions, like South Tyrol (German, Italian, Ladin), or countries, like Switzerland (German, Italian, French) have multiple official languages.
- *Sports:* Unique sports such as cross-country skiing (Norway), sumo (Japan), or caber toss (Scotland) are explored.
- *Transportation:* Children learn about modes of transport that vary by region, such as gondolas (Venice), suspension railways (Germany), Coco Taxis (Cuba), dog sleds (Alaska), and reindeer sleds (Lapland).

These cultural traits are best explored through collaborative projects and activities tailored to the children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds and the communities they live in. This culturally rich content encourages curiosity, active engagement, and participation, supporting social, emotional, and literacy development. Additionally, it allows teachers to create dynamic learning environments that foster child-initiated activities (Ahn & Kim, 2009).

The results of the piloting of the model showed that children 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 (Bratož & Sila, 2022).

Concrete to Symbolic Level

A key feature of the model is its emphasis on real-life situations and the inclusion of tangible items with symbolic significance. To simulate travel to foreign countries, children are provided with templates for identity cards and passports, which they complete with their own information and pictures. These items are used in sociodramatic play, where children assume various roles and establish their own rules. During the play, teachers engage as active participants, modelling language and play behaviours while offering visual aids such as items or pictures to support the activity.

As part of these activities, children expand their vocabulary by learning new words related to concepts like country, town, capital city, identity card, passport, anthem, flag, and president. Visual aids, including maps, videos, photographs, and concrete objects, help children grasp abstract concepts, while role-play teaches them how to use this knowledge practically.

The study by Žefran et al. (2025) revealed that the children demonstrated a clear grasp of abstract concepts like 'country' and 'language.' Almost all the children were able to accurately identify multiple countries and articulate the languages spoken in each, indicating a solid understanding of these complex ideas. During the interviews, the children explained that we need a passport to travel to other countries, and they talked about various things associated to different countries. However, in the study by Bratož and Sila (2022), 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 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. Nevertheless, the results of the study conducted by Jolić Kozina et al. (2024) showed that they eagerly shared their experiences with the countries they visited, often mentioning the words they learnt there.

Foreign Language Teaching Approaches

The model integrates a range of approaches and strategies that have proven effective in teaching young and very young learners. One key approach aligned with the model is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). CLIL combines methods and strategies to offer a dual-focused educational

experience, where an additional language is used to teach both content and language. It is described as ‘the experience of learning non-language subjects through a foreign language’ (Marsh, 2012) and has become widely adopted across Europe over the past three decades. In early education settings such as kindergartens and primary schools, CLIL naturally incorporates forms of early language learning (Marsh, 2012). The approach prioritises learning languages in realistic, natural contexts where the content takes precedence over language structure. The model provides opportunities to integrate language with various content areas such as creative arts, mathematics, social skills, and science.

Another effective strategy is Total Physical Response (TPR), particularly useful in the initial stages of language learning and the pre-literacy period. TPR emphasises listening comprehension through action-based learning, where students internalise language structures and phrases via physical commands. TPR is especially impactful when combined with other teaching strategies, as it highlights the benefits of using movement to enhance language acquisition. Research (Čok et al., 1999) indicates that pairing spoken words with physical actions strengthens language learning, as movement enriches the experience.

Physical play also supports cognitive, emotional, and social development while fostering positive attitudes toward language learning and self-esteem (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009). Incorporating physical activities into language instruction provides meaningful contexts for language use, aligning with children’s natural need for movement. This approach not only boosts attention spans but also facilitates verbal, visual, and kinaesthetic learning, making it highly compatible with young learners’ developmental needs (Čok et al., 1999).

The importance of movement was emphasised also by the results of the model piloting. The teachers observed that the children responded more readily and enthusiastically to the activities which were based on movement and TPR (Bratož & Sila, 2022; Žefran et al., 2025).

Children Participation

A key aspect of the model is children’s active participation, which is also reflected in the dimension of exposure to cultural diversity. As Rutar (2014) notes, participation is considered a fundamental element of an inclusive society, where it is important to recognise children and young people as active participants. This involvement must include all children, including the most vulnerable and those from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

When teachers listen to and engage with children's ideas, they are practising participatory pedagogies (Carey-Jenkins, 2018), which are teaching methods that support children's rights and agency in the classroom by encouraging them to express and act on their own ideas, perspectives, and knowledge. Shier (2001) emphasises the importance of listening to children's voices and supporting their views, including those of children who may not yet speak. These children can communicate through body language, non-verbal cues, pictures, or signs to express their thoughts.

For enhancing children's participation, we may follow the framework of developing participatory practices proposed by Kangas (2016), which consists of four core elements:

1. The starting point of developing children's participation is to create conditions and an environment which enables participation.
2. In the second core-element, teachers observe and gather information from children's skills and interests and learn to understand the child's perspective.
3. In the third core element, the teacher and children join in shared experiences. The teacher uses the information from children to support children to participate. This requires professional understanding of making interpretations and drawing conclusions from the information received from children.
4. In the last core-element, teachers adopt an interest in developing participatory activities in everyday life in the early childhood education settings.

The activities in this model are intentionally designed to promote children's participation and interaction with the teacher. For instance, teachers are encouraged to explore new destinations by train with the children, involving them in discussions about the journey and its different countries. Children and teachers collaboratively create new activities and develop new rhymes in various languages, with a particular focus on the additional languages the children bring to the group. As de Sousa (2019) points out, teachers can incorporate the children's home languages into the preschool environment, even if they do not speak them directly, as children can communicate through other means, such as visual aids or body language. Additionally, the internet provides many useful resources and tools that teachers can use to integrate languages into the classroom and interact with the children. Furthermore, an important connection with family members can be established

(Čotar Konrad, 2018), inviting them to participate in the learning process and share language samples, such as nursery rhymes or stories. By encouraging children's multilingual contributions, teachers create a learning environment where diversity is not just accepted but valued as a strength. Moreover, the teacher's role may evolve into that of a 'co-participant' in classroom activities, allowing for mutual feedback with children, thereby enriching the learning experience (de Sousa, 2019).

The results of all the piloting studies suggest a very high level of children participation. They were eager to show their knowledge of different languages, take part in discussions with the teacher and share their thoughts and experiences. The study by Jolić Kozina et al. (2024) showed that children's involvement depended strongly on whether they could participate actively in the choice of destinations, topics, and activities. However, Bratož and Sila (2022) also report that children's perceptions and their willingness to participate was still dependent on the teachers' guidance and support.

Reflection Point

1. Discuss some other ways in which the journey metaphor could be developed.
2. Discuss a new destination on the Language Train journey taking into account all six dimensions of the *DivCon model*.
3. Discuss other ways of encouraging children's active participation.

Conclusion

Developing linguistic and cultural awareness at an early age equips young learners with vital tools to navigate an increasingly interconnected world. Central to this effort is the concept of plurilingualism, which recognises languages as interconnected systems and highlights the dynamic interplay of multiple languages within individuals. This approach promotes not only linguistic skills but also cultural appreciation and respect for diversity. Language awareness, as discussed, fosters metalinguistic abilities and enhances learners' understanding of language as a social and cultural construct. By engaging with various domains of language awareness, such as cognitive, affective, and social aspects, educators can create enriching learning experiences that go beyond mere language acquisition.

Pluralistic approaches to language teaching further expand this perspective by emphasising the value of linguistic diversity and encouraging the inclusion of learners' native and heritage languages. The *DivCon model* exemplifies how structured, participatory, and multi-sensory activities can im-

merge children in diverse linguistic and cultural experiences. Through initiatives like Language Awakening and translanguaging, educators challenge monolingual ideologies and promote inclusive, equitable environments. The *DivCon* framework's journey metaphor provides a creative and exploratory approach, fostering curiosity and positive attitudes in children from a young age.

Ultimately, cultivating linguistic and cultural awareness not only enhances communication skills but also nurtures empathy and a deeper connection to the global community. These foundational efforts in early education have the potential to shape inclusive, culturally sensitive individuals who value diversity as a resource for personal and societal growth. By integrating these approaches, educators can contribute to a future where linguistic and cultural diversity are celebrated and harnessed for mutual understanding.

Key Takeaways

- Plurilingualism views languages as interconnected systems within an individual, enabling them to draw from their entire linguistic repertoire for communication and problem-solving.
- Early exposure to language awareness activities fosters metalinguistic skills and cultural understanding in children, enhancing their ability to reflect on language as a system.
- By recognising the value of linguistic diversity, pluralistic approaches foster intercultural competence and challenge monolingual ideologies.
- Innovative models like the *DivCon* framework engage young learners through multi-sensory, participatory activities that expose them to linguistic and cultural diversity.

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