

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND BIODIVERSITY

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Target audience

- Pre-service teachers
 - Primary teachers
 - Secondary teachers
- In-service teachers
 - Primary teachers
 - Secondary teachers

Itinerary

- Exploring linguistic diversity and biodiversity

Abstract:

These didactic materials are aimed at discussing the concepts of *linguistic diversity* and *biodiversity*. The participants are invited to think of the context in which they have heard these two concepts and they try to find out whether there is a connection between the concepts of *linguistic diversity* and *biodiversity* or not. They are asked to produce evidence for their answers. Within their groups they write a slogan, a presentation or a plan how they would start a campaign in order to let other people know about the importance of the subject.

Rationale

In this activity, several of the aims and objectives outlined in the kit orientations are met:

The *personal and social awareness* of the individual and the community as language users, thereby indirectly responsible for the survival of a given language and/or varieties of this language or for the loss of certain domains where a particular language is used as well as the knowledge and skills associated with such a domain.

The *professional dimension* is developed in that teachers will be involved in conveying to their pupils the urgency in maintaining the world's linguistic richness. The activity also highlights the risks of not deliberately working to stop this language elimination trend.

Plurilingual skills are presented as a necessity for the survival of threatened languages. Awareness of and reflection about *diversity* are core elements of the activity.

This activity model offers *generative flexibility* in the sense that it can be used at different levels of the educational system. Other aspects of diversity such as cultures/ethnicities or social hierarchies could also be explored using this activity as a model.

All teacher trainees – pre-service or in-service – will be able to apply some aspect of the *interactive models* used in this activity to their own teaching. It will be particularly useful in helping teachers develop ideas around creative responses by pupils to a reading task.

Personal and social dimensions

- observing how educators can influence the attitudes of learners towards languages, those who speak them and their culture as well as their motivation and curiosity with regard to languages;
- enhancing the role of languages and cultures by building societies that are fairer, more supportive and more democratic

Professional dimensions

- reflecting the new roles and functions of the language teacher as educator
- enhancing the role of school as a focal point of social and cultural development

Worksheet 1

Timing: 30'

Material required: sheets of paper.

The definition of linguistic diversity and biodiversity



First, on a piece of paper write your own definitions of the two concepts.



Then, in pairs share your ideas - what do you think comes to your mind when you hear it *linguistic diversity* and *biodiversity*.



Draw one strip of coloured paper.

(The teacher prepares strips of coloured paper with words LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY and BIODIVERSITY. The number of strips of the same colour should give groups of 4 members. For example: on strips of different shades of green there is the word BIODIVERSITY, and on strips of different shades of red there is the word LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY. Students form groups according to the shades of colour and words.



In groups, discuss what the word means to you - have you known it before, have you used it before, in what context...



Write down your group definition and later on introduce it to everybody in class.



Look up the two words in the dictionary. What does it say?

Worksheet 2

Timing: 90 min

Materials: green and red cards

Answering the questions

- On a piece of paper, write down your own answers to the questions:
 - 1) Are both diversities correlated or connected?
 - 2) If yes, how?
 - 3) If not, why not?

(Students whose answer is YES get a green card, those whose answer is NO get a red card).



Extract some features from those teachers that helped you in your professional development or in your life and write them on a piece of paper.



Each student should find one person who thinks differently. So we have red and green pairs.

(Students are invited to exchange their ideas. They should persuade each other that they are right).

Worksheet 3

Timing: 90'

Materials: The text, Murder that is a threat to survival

Reading a text and thinking about it



First, read the text individually and then, answer the questions:

1. What have you learnt from the article?
2. Were you surprised? Why (not)?
3. Did you change your opinion about the correlation between *diversities* after reading the text? What is it now?
4. Find some proposals how to stop linguistic genocide?
5. What can you do at your school?
6. How would you introduce your way of thinking to others without making them feel intolerant of other minorities?
7. How could you persuade the minorities to »keep« their languages alive?
8. What can we do about the languages that are »dying« out if the whole nation is on the edge of extinction?

(Students go to their original groups and discuss their answers. They make a poster where they explain the importance of linguistic diversity and biodiversity or they try to come up with a slogan, a videospot, an advertisement ... to make people realise the importance of both diversities).

Murder that is a threat to survival

Biodiversity cannot be protected unless language genocide is halted, argues Tove Skutnabb-Kangas

Habitat destruction through logging, the spread of agriculture and use of pesticides, and the economic and political vulnerability of the people who live in the world's most diverse ecoregions are recognised as the main causes of the disappearance of biodiversity. What is less widely understood is the link between diminishing global biodiversity and the disappearance of languages. While new trees can be planted and habitats restored, it is much more difficult to restore languages once they have been murdered. And languages are being murdered today faster than ever before in human history. Even the most optimistic prognoses claim that only half of today's 6,000-7,000 spoken languages will exist by 2100. The media and educational systems are the most important direct agents in language murder today.

Most of the world's languages are spoken by relatively few people; the median number of speakers of a language is probably 5,000-6,000. There are fewer than 300 languages with more than 1m native users; half of all languages have fewer than 10,000 users, and a quarter of the world's spoken languages and most of the sign languages have fewer than 1,000 users. More than 80% of the world's languages exist in one country only.

A simple comparison, based on numbers and extinction rates, shows that linguistic diversity (LD) is disappearing relatively much faster than biodiversity (BD). Optimistic estimates claim that 2% of biological species but 50% of languages may be dead or moribund ? no longer learned by children ? in 100 years' time. According to pessimistic but realistic estimates, 20% of biological species but 90% of languages may be dead or moribund in 100 years. People might say: so what? It might be better for world peace if we all speak a few big languages and understand each other. But language diversity is decisive for the future of the planet. LD and BD are correlated: where one type is high, the other one is too, and vice versa, even if there are exceptions. David Harmon of Terralingua, an international non-profit organisation devoted to preserving the world's linguistic diversity, has compared the 25 countries that have the most endemic languages with the 25 that have the most higher vertebrates. Sixteen countries (64%) are on both lists. According to Harmon, "it is very unlikely that this would only be accidental". He gets the same results with flowering plants and languages, butterflies and languages ? a high correlation between countries with biological and linguistic megadiversity.

New research shows mounting evidence that the relationship may also be causal: the two types of diversities seem to enforce and support each other. According to a recent United Nations environmental programme report, threatened languages store the knowledge about how to maintain and use sustainably some of the most vulnerable and most biologically diverse environments in the world. It has taken centuries for people to learn about their environments and to name the complex ecological relationships that are decisive for maintenance of biodiversity. When indigenous peoples lose their languages, much of this knowledge also disappears: the dominant languages do not have the ethno-biological and ethno-medical vocabulary, and the stories will not be translated.

If the long-lasting co-evolution that people have had with their environments is suddenly disrupted, without nature (and people) having enough time to adjust and adapt, we can expect a catastrophe. If during the next 100 years we murder up to 90% of the linguistic (and thereby mostly also the cultural) diversity that is our treasury of this historically developed ecological knowledge, we are also seriously undermining our chances of life on Earth.

Like the loss of BD, the loss of LD is dangerous reductionism. As we see in increasingly dramatic ways, such as the spread of species that are more resistant to antibiotics and herbicides, monocultures are vulnerable. The potential for the new lateral thinking that might save us from ourselves in time lies in having as many and as diverse languages and cultures as possible. We do not know which ones have the right medicine. For this, multilingualism is necessary. Indigenous and minority people need to have a chance to maintain their own languages and learn dominant languages.

But instead of fostering and supporting multilingualism through the education system, schools participate in linguistic genocide, as it has been defined in the United Nations Genocide Convention (Articles IIb and IIe and its Final Draft Article IIII). Pirjo Janulf shows in a recent study that of those Finnish immigrant minority members in Sweden who had had Swedish-medium education, not one spoke any Finnish to his or her own children. Even if these adults might not have forgotten their Finnish completely, their children were forcibly transferred to the majority group, at least linguistically.

This is what happens to millions of speakers of threatened languages all over the world. There are no schools or classes teaching through the medium of the threatened indigenous or minority languages. The transfer to the majority language group is not voluntary: alternatives do not exist, and parents do not have enough reliable information about the long-term

consequences of the various choices. There is also a wealth of research and statistics about the mental harm that forced assimilation causes in education and other areas.

To stop linguistic genocide, linguistic human rights in education need to be respected. The most important linguistic human right for maintenance of LD is the right to mother-tongue medium education. But the existing and draft human rights instruments are completely insufficient in protecting linguistic human rights in education. When speakers of small languages learn other, necessary, languages in addition to their native languages, they become multilingual, and the maintenance of LD, necessary for the planet, is supported. When dominant languages such as English are learned subtractively, at the cost of the mother tongues, they become killer languages. The task for users of English is to stop it being a killer language and change it to an additive asset.

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Worksheet 4

Timing: 60'

Materials: *The Word Thief* text

Reading a text and thinking about it

A teacher makes groups according to the number of students (3-4 per one group) by giving them numbers - 1, 2, 3... So that all numbers 1 make one group, all numbers 2 make another group,...

Students are given the following instructions:



In groups talk about the story (Did you like it? How do you feel about it? Did something surprise you?...). Prepare to share your thoughts within the group.



Students try to find connections between both texts. They discuss it with the members of other groups..



Each group try to find a way to use the story with children. They prepare an activity related to it and present it to others.

The story of *The Word Thief*¹

Once upon a time, there was a word thief that each time he heard a word, that he liked, he took it and hid it where nobody could find it. When the thief stole a word, nobody else could say it. The word disappeared from the people's minds, from dictionaries and from all the books where the word had been written.

In the beginning people didn't take notice of it because the words that the thief stole were actually not essential. One day he heard a boy asking for an emerald green ball. Emerald, emerald... the thief liked that word so much that he decided to keep it. From then on, the boy simply kept asking for a green ball. Another day, the thief heard people saying that nightingales were singing. Nightingale, nightingale ... that was a fantastic word for his collection. He put the word nightingale in his sack and, from then on, people used to talk just about birds singing. Some days later, he stole the word firefly. The peasants then didn't know how to call this insect, so they started to call it light-bug. But one day the thief stole the word bug and the word light, and suddenly the peasants could not say for example "bad bug" when they were angry, nor did they have a word to name little animals they didn't know. Besides, without the word light they couldn't tell lightness from darkness, night from day.

The situation started to become worrisome because people came to forget how to name tulips, craters or the moon. People had lost so many words that sometimes they didn't dare to talk because they couldn't find the words or because they were afraid of losing them and not being able to use them any more. That place became a very sad place, for people were not able to say any more what and how they felt. Anyway, one day they decided to look for a solution. They all met together in the main square but nobody could start to talk because they couldn't ask if they may say a word. The thief stole the word word.

Elvira, who was a determined woman, started to talk without asking for permission, and she proposed inventing new names for the things each time that a word was missing.

-If we lose the word "guitar", we may call it "tarimba", who will be interested in stealing a word like that?.

-I do not agree, Ernesto said. Who will say how each thing should be named? Who will decide how to call them? My proposal is to look for new words, substituting the ones we lost, to name the same things.

Jordi had another proposal:

-You may borrow the names we use in my town. To name that green gem stone for example we say "maragda". The bird that sings so beautifully is named "rossinyol". To distinguish between day and night, we say "llum" and "foscor"; to name the little glowing insect we say "cuca de llum" and like this "cuca" could also name all the other little insects that also lost their names.

-All what you said is OK, Jaime said, but if we always do like that we will lose the names of all things and then we will also lose our language. If something like this happens to your people, who will give us back the words that we are losing? How are we going to name the things that we are not yet able to say? How could we help you if something like this happens to you?

People thought a lot about what Jaime said. It was true that if they always borrowed words to other people, maybe one day there would not be words for everything and perhaps the things without words to name them might be lost as well. If they could not name the small details, people would not be able to see them or tell them apart. How could they distinguish between a small bag and a big bag if the words big and small were lost? Suddenly, among the silence and people's fear of speaking because they thought they could lose the words, somebody said:

¹ Original title *El lladre de paraules* by Carme Junyent (1999). In Junyent, M. C.; Unamuno, V. (2003) *La diversitat lingüística: Guia didàctica i recorregut de les llengües del món*. Barcelona: Octaedro, p. 21-27. Translated by Mercè Bernaus and edited by Lilian Nygren Junkin.

- *May I speak?*

Miguel had a proposal:

-I suggest we look for words all around our land, through the valleys and the mountains, near the rivers and near the sea, in towns, villages and farms. People should tell us how they call the little glowing insects, craters and tulips. This way, when a word disappears, we may always use another that means the same and that belongs to us. When the word “path” was stolen, we still had the word “track”. Why couldn’t we continue like that?

Everybody approved of Miguel’s proposal, and people decided to look for all the words of their language. Nonetheless, Maria was thinking about that until she found another solution. In the evening she went to visit Miguel and she said:

- Miguel, you are right, your idea is good and it may be useful. We might go together to the place where there are many words to name things...

OK, Miguel said, tell me where that place is and I’ll come with you.

-The place is not very far from here, Maria said. Come along with me so that you stop stealing more of our words but instead give us back all the words you stole from us before.

When Miguel realised that Maria had found out that he was the thief, Miguel turned pale and decided to give back the words. He opened a drawer and the words that people had forgotten started to leave from the drawer; then he opened more drawers, a cupboard and a small brass box where he kept the smallest words. As soon as the words were free to leave, people remembered them and started to use them again. The white pages of the dictionaries were filling up. Everything had its name now and nobody got confused any more. People were so happy that they even dared to say things that they had never said before because, being afraid to lose the words, they were afraid to say what they had in their hearts. Nevertheless, now people know that sometimes the things that we don’t say or we don’t name, they don’t exist.

(We are very grateful to M. C. Junyent and the Grup d’Estudi de Llengües Amençades – GELA- for giving us permission to reproduce this story).



Assessment

After the activities are done, some time is left for discussion. The discussion could be carried out in different ways and the topics for discussion could be the following:

1. How did you like the activities? Why?
2. Did you learn something new? Do you think that you may put them into practice? If the answer is yes, how and when?
3. Did these activities help you to relate motivation and attitudes to teachers’ and students’ plurilingual and pluricultural awareness? In what way?
4. Can these activities be useful for your training events?

Bibliography

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