

"Do Languages die?" Promoting Awareness of Language and Linguistic Diversity in Preschool

Mónica Lourenço and Ana Isabel Andrade

University of Aveiro (Portugal), CIDTFF

#### Author Note

Mónica Lourenço is a PhD student, developing a thesis on plurilingual education in preschool at the Department of Education of the University of Aveiro, Portugal. She is supervised by Ana Isabel Andrade, who is an Associate Professor at the same Department. They are both researchers for the Research Centre for Didactics and Technology in Teacher Education (CIDTFF).

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Correspondence concerning this chapter should be addressed to Mónica Lourenço, Departamento de Educação, Universidade de Aveiro, Campus de Santiago, 3810-193 Aveiro (Portugal). Email: monicalourenco@ua.pt.

### Abstract

This chapter presents the results of an awakening to languages workshop entitled *Do languages die?*, carried out with a group of 21 Portuguese preschool children. In the workshop children listened to songs in endangered languages, created an invented writing system, and performed syllabic and phonemic suppression tasks. We gathered data through video and audio recordings of the workshop and phonological awareness tests, applied to the children and to a control group. After the implementation of the workshop, the experimental group increased their phonological awareness significantly. In contrast, the phonological abilities of the control group remained substantially unaltered. These findings suggest that early contact with linguistic diversity may develop children's awareness of language both at micro and macro levels.

*Keywords:* linguistic diversity, awakening to languages, plurilingual phonological awareness,

preschool children

## **1. Linguistic diversity in a globalized world**

Never before have the words "diversity", "plurality" and "multiculturalism" resonate in the minds of so many people at the same time. Collective campaigns and individual initiatives are constantly being disseminated by the media, aimed at making people more aware of the need to value and respect diversity at all levels. It seems as if we have woken up from a lethargic dream to become aware of the polychromatic nature of the world and its inhabitants.

This sudden awakening comes at a time of increasing economic, social and cultural interactions, of unprecedented technological evolution in the areas of transportation and the media, of massive migration waves, which represent the visible face of a phenomenon known as "globalization" (Wolton, 2003; Giddens, 2005).

Although not an entirely new phenomenon, due to the complexity of its nature, globalization has become a central topic in the past three decades. On the one hand, the processes of globalization have brought us closer to each other, encouraging a certain uniformity of behaviour, tastes and ambitions, a type of "global mental culture" composed by figures, ideas and images devoid of local or national references, but shared by individuals from different corners of the world. On the other hand, this global phenomenon has rendered diversity more visible, in the things we hear, see and experience on a daily basis and in the people we contact with, making us more aware of our differences and inequalities, thus amplifying the dangers of confrontation and of a "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1993; Sousa Santos, 2001).

The Portuguese society is no exception to this changing global situation. In the last decade, there has been an increment in immigration, particularly coming from Eastern Europe, which has not only given the country a more multilingual and multicultural hue, but also

contributed to the display of feelings of anguish, tension and revolt towards the Others, in a vain attempt to protect our beliefs and worldviews (Araújo, 2008).

These feelings towards diversity and otherness are mirrored inside the Portuguese classrooms, particularly during the first school years, when the turnout of immigrant children is higher (Fischer, 2008; SEF, 2011). This poses a major challenge for education today: to deal with diversity on a daily basis, so as to guarantee equity, promote the full development of children's abilities, and foster the development of attitudes of respect and validation.

On a different note, one can never forget that, despite the seemingly increasing linguistic and cultural diversification of our societies and schools, the world's language diversity is at risk. From the 10,000 languages that are estimated to have existed a long time ago, about 7,000 are spoken today (Lewis, 2009), as a result of natural calamities, epidemics, but mainly power relations, formal education and the role of the media. According to optimistic estimates, half of the world's languages of today will be extinct within 100 years, which makes for a great loss of human knowledge and experience (Hagège, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002).

When a language dies we lose more than just words; we lose stories, cultural frameworks, and utopias. Languages play a key role in most aspects of human life; they create, define and construct our ecosocial world, including our individual and group identities, status and worldview (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). In this sense, linguistic and cultural diversity is as essential for humankind as biological diversity is for nature, because it provides basic elements for adaptation, survival and progress. Indeed, only if different cultures share their knowledge and techniques, can they contribute in a decisive manner to the sustainability of the planet (Sá, 2007).

In the light of this context, it becomes necessary to make our children aware of the need to respect and preserve diversity as one of humanity's most precious assets. In order to answer this challenge, it becomes evident that new curricular practices are needed, which, in a clear

opposition to a former logic of homogeneity, recognize diversity as a richness that must be preserved and prepare children to live in a multilingual and multicultural world (Andrade, Lourenço, & Sá, 2010; Formosinho, 2000; Roldão, 2009).

## **2. Possibilities of the awakening to languages approach**

The so-called "pluralistic approaches", defined by Candelier et al. as "didactic approaches which use teaching/learning activities involving several (i.e., more than one) varieties of languages or cultures" (2007: 3), can provide an important contribution to overcoming the current challenges facing education, as they aim to make all children, irrespective of social, cultural or linguistic origin, aware of the diversities present within society, within the classroom, and within each individual.

One of these approaches, the awakening to languages ("*éveil aux langues*" in French), seems to be the most appropriate for the first school years. Partially inspired by the 1980's Language Awareness movement started by Eric Hawkins in the United Kingdom (Hawkins, 1987), this approach provides opportunities for children to contact with a large variety of languages the school is not aimed to teach, in order to make them experience new cultures, listen to new sounds, and understand new outlooks on the world.

According to Candelier et al., this approach is conceived as

"a way of welcoming schoolchildren into the idea of linguistic diversity (and the diversity of their own languages) at the beginning of school education, as a vector of fuller recognition of the languages brought by children with more than one

language available to them and, in this way, as a kind of preparatory course developed for primary schools [and preschools], but it can also be promoted as a support to language learning throughout the learners' school career" (2007: 4).

In short, the goals of the awakening to languages are not to teach a certain language or languages, but to make children aware of the existence of multi- and plurilingualism, by fostering contact with other languages, promoting a deeper analysis of the linguistic phenomena, comparing words, sounds and graphemes, and discovering similarities and differences, thus helping children regard languages as objects that belong to the communities and to the individuals who constitute these communities and who must be respected in all their diversity (Andrade et al., 2010).

In this sense, this approach allows children to develop a plurilingual and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 1997) that will make them more "willing to accept, embrace [and participate in] other linguistic and cultural experiences" (Lourenço & Andrade, 2010b: 352), and will prepare them for a lifelong learning of languages.

In the spirit of these propositions, several projects of awakening to languages have been implemented in European schools with very positive results in what concerns the valorisation and the capitalisation of the plurilingual repertoires of children from migrant backgrounds, the development of attitudes of openness to diversity and otherness, and an increased motivation for future language learning (Candelier, 1999; Candelier et al., 2004; De Goumoën, 1994).

Moreover, these projects have also played an important role in fostering children's language awareness, by encouraging them to reflect upon inter- and intra-linguistic phenomena, to observe and reason, to transfer knowledge, competences and strategies from one language to

another, ultimately developing their (meta)linguistic, (meta)cognitive, (meta)communicative and intercomprehension abilities (Armand, 2005).

These results seem to be in agreement with recent research in psycholinguistics which suggests that bilingual and plurilingual children are particularly skilled in their metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness, more willing to transfer literacy skills across languages, and to engage in intercultural communication (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Bialystok, 2009; Cummins, 2005; Le Pichon Vortsman, De Swart, Ceginskas, & Van den Bergh, 2009).

### **3. "Do languages die?" An experimental study with young children**

#### *3.1. Aims and hypotheses*

Bearing this theoretical context in mind, the current study aims to evaluate and understand the results of an awakening to languages workshop entitled *Do languages die?* both in the development of preschool children's metalinguistic abilities, particularly at the phonological level, and in the promotion of positive attitudes towards language diversity. We hypothesise that through awakening to languages activities, such as listening to songs in endangered languages and playing syllabic and phonological games in these languages, children may not only develop what we have termed a "plurilingual phonological awareness" (i.e., a strategic and transferable capacity that allows its user to identify, manipulate and compare sounds in different languages), but also be more aware of the need to preserve, respect and embrace linguistic and cultural diversity.

### 3.2. *Participants*

Our sample consisted of 21 children (8 boys and 13 girls), aged between three and six years old ( $M_{\text{age}} = 4.9$  years,  $SD = .77$ ), at the time of first testing. All the children attended the same state preschool in the central area of Aveiro, Portugal, and were part of the same heterogeneous group. In terms of parental background, more than 80 percent of the children had at least one parent with high qualifications, working in professional and managerial occupations (doctors, business managers, secondary school teachers and university teachers). Seven children had migrant parents who were born and lived for more than twenty years in Belgium, Brazil, England, Germany, or Venezuela. From this group, one child was bilingual in Portuguese and in English, while the other six could only understand some basic words in their parents' native languages.

A control group, paired up in terms of number, age ( $M_{\text{age}} = 4.9$  years,  $SD = .68$ ) and social background, was also selected from a nearby private preschool, so that the evolution of children's phonological abilities could be more accurately measured. This group was not present in the awakening to languages activities and was only submitted to the two sets of phonological awareness tests, as described below.

Parents from both the experimental and the control groups signed a written consent form, allowing their children to be submitted to the tests, audio recorded, filmed, and photographed.

### 3.3. *Materials and Methods*

*3.3.1. Phonological Awareness Tests.* In order to assess the children's phonological abilities, a battery of phonological awareness tests (Silva, 2002), was used. The battery,

previously validated for Portuguese preschool children, consisted of six different tasks: *identification of the first syllable, identification of the first phoneme, deletion of the first syllable, deletion of the first phoneme, syllable segmentation, and phoneme segmentation*. Apart from the phoneme deletion test, which included 24 items, the tests comprised 14 items each, preceded by two training items. All stimuli consisted of one- to three-syllable Portuguese words familiar to preschool children and supported by illustrations, so as to diminish performance difficulties caused by mnesic factors.

*3.3.2. Awakening to languages workshop.* The workshop *Do languages die?* was designed to raise awareness of language death, to promote attitudes of respect towards speakers, their languages and cultures, and to foster plurilingual phonological awareness, both at syllabic and phonemic levels. In order to meet those goals, the children performed a series of awakening to languages activities, namely listening to a story on linguistic diversity and language death; listening to traditional songs in Kunama (an African language spoken by a small community in Eritrea), Inuktitut (the language spoken by the Inuit in the Arctic) and Cherokee (a seemingly revitalized language of an American Indian tribe); learning the names for some endangered animals in the aforementioned languages; performing syllabic and phonemic suppression tasks with the animal names; watching a UNESCO documentary on the life of the Khomani San, and creating an invented writing system for the N|u language.<sup>1</sup>

#### *3.4. Procedure*

The implementation of the project occurred during the 2008-2009 school year. During the first three months (September to November 2008), the researcher observed some classes at

both preschools, with the objective of characterising the schools and the groups, getting to know the children, and determining the type of activities they were involved in. The information gathered was particularly useful in designing awakening to languages workshops that would meet the children's needs and interests, and in creating a favourable climate to apply the tests and put the plurilingual activities into practice.

From December 2008 to February 2009, the two groups of children were submitted to a first set of phonological awareness tests. Each child was tested individually in a quiet area of the school for two sessions lasting up to 30 minutes. For some of the younger children, it was necessary to add an extra session and, in some cases, reduce session time to 15 minutes. The tests were administered in order of difficulty, as if it were a game, following the instruction manual of the *Bateria de Provas Fonológicas*. Before each test, the examiner made sure the children knew the Portuguese words the illustrations represented, by requesting them to say the words aloud. In the identification tests, the children were shown visual prompts of four words, two of which began with the same syllable or the same phoneme, and were asked to identify them (e.g., in the words *bolo* [bolu] (*cake*), *nariz* [nɛriʃ] (*nose*), *navio* [nɛviu] (*ship*), *moinho* [mɔiɲu] (*windmill*), *nariz* and *navio* share the same first syllable, *na*). In the deletion tests, the children had to delete the first syllable or phoneme of a visually-presented word, and then say the resulting Portuguese nonword aloud (e.g., *fava* [favɐ] (*fava bean*) without the /f/ is *ava*). In the segmentation tests, the children were asked to pronounce in isolation each of the syllables or phones of the presented words (e.g., *chapéu* [ʃɛ.pɛw] (*hat*)). The examiner registered the children's performance in an answer sheet, giving one point for each correct answer (maximum score = 94 points). All tests were digitally recorded to a computer for answer reliability and later analysis of the error patterns. The test results were treated statistically.

During March and April 2009 the experimental group attended a total of seven weekly sessions of awakening to languages, aimed at promoting children's contact with linguistic diversity, raising their language awareness and developing their plurilingual phonological awareness. The sessions lasted approximately one hour and a half, and took place either in the children's regular classroom or in the extra-curricular activities' room.

The workshop *Do languages die?* was the sixth of these sessions and started with a PowerPoint presentation depicting endangered animals and the last speakers of some endangered languages. While they were watching the pictures, the children listened to a story about language diversity and language death told by the researcher, and established a comparison with what they already knew about biological diversity and endangered species. Afterwards, they listened to three traditional songs (*Morning Song* in Cherokee, *Inuit Wedding* in Inuktitut, and *Abina Terde* in Kunama), and related the songs' rhythm and sounds to the places/continents where those languages were spoken. The researcher told the children some cultural facts connected with the people who spoke those threatened languages, their traditions and living habits.

Looking again at the PowerPoint presentation and its pictures, the children reflected upon ways of preserving endangered languages, such as recording them, writing books about them, or learning them in schools. Following these suggestions, children were eager to learn the names of some endangered animals in the target languages. With the help of animal pictures and cards with the animal names, children learned that *yuhsoo* is the word for *bison* in Cherokee, *nanuk* means *polar bear* in Inuktitut, and *kharteet* is *rhino* in Kunama. After learning those words, the children played a game where they had to segment the animal names into syllables or phonemes by clapping their hands, and, then, suppress the first syllable or phoneme of those words (e.g., *nanuk* without the first syllable is *nuk*).

In a final activity, the children listened to a UNESCO documentary on the life of the Khomani San of South Africa. Although the documentary was in English, the children were not expected to understand the words; they only had to listen to the sounds of people speaking N|u, and create an invented writing system for this language. Besides making children aware of the need to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity, this activity was aimed at providing the researcher with a further insight into the children's phonological abilities.

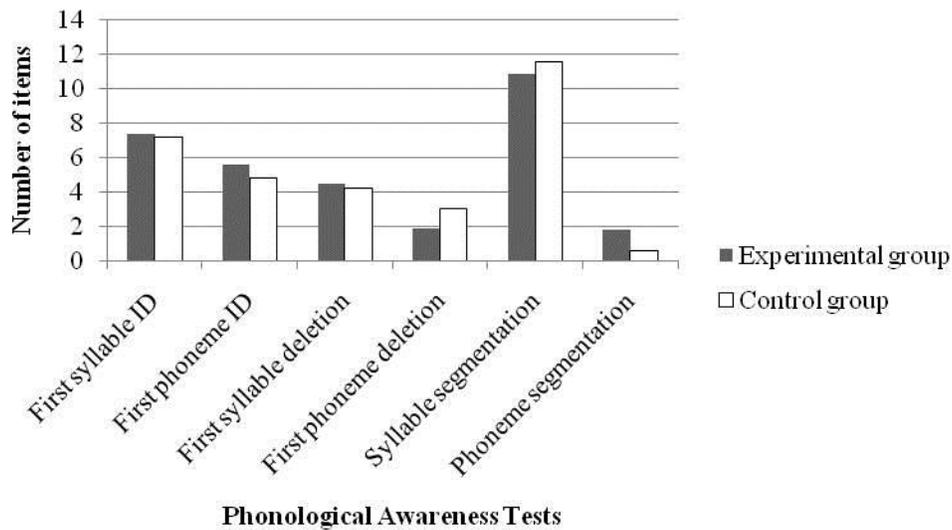
In the workshop qualitative data were collected in the form of notes taken on-site, written documents of the children's work in the activities, and audio and video recordings of classroom interactions, which were transcribed and subjected to content analysis.

The last phase of the project occurred between May and July 2009, when both groups of children were once again submitted to the same battery of phonological awareness tests. The procedure was similar to the one used for the first set of tests. Comparative statistical analysis was conducted.

### *3.5. Results*

Figure 1 depicts the results for the first set of phonological awareness tests, carried out with both the experimental and the control groups. The experimental group achieved a mean score of 31.8 items ( $SD = 16.3$ ) in the battery of phonological tests, showing lower levels of performance in the *phoneme deletion* ( $M = 1.86$ ) and *phoneme segmentation* ( $M = 1.76$ ) tasks. The control group achieved a mean score of 30.9 ( $SD = 18.7$ ) in the tests, performing better in the syllabic than in the phonemic tasks. A *Student's t-test*, carried out to assess the differences between the groups, revealed that these were not statistically significant ( $t(40) = .16, p = .437$ ,

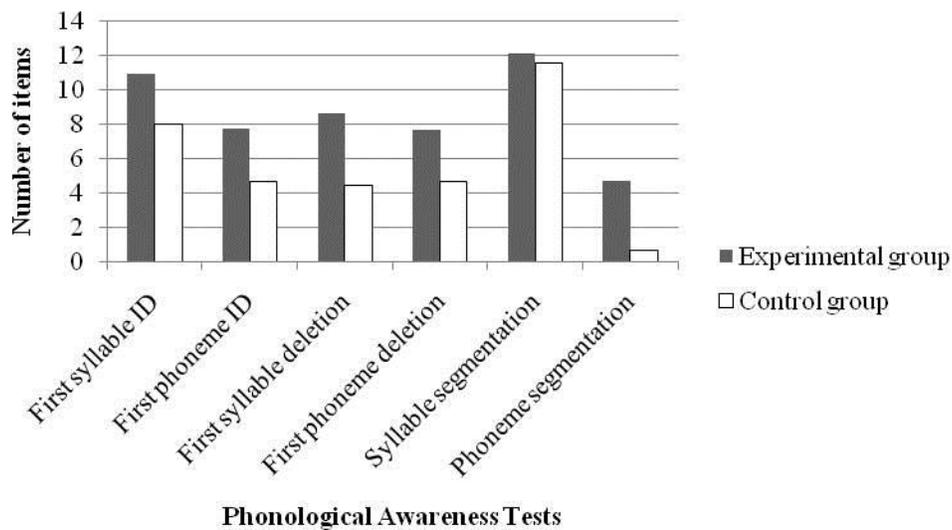
*Cohen's d* = .05). These results suggest that, at the beginning of our study, both groups had similar levels of phonological awareness.



**Figure 1-** Results of the experimental and the control groups in the first set of phonological awareness tests.

Figure 2 presents the results for the second set of phonological awareness tests, applied to the two groups of children after the implementation of the plurilingual workshops. The experimental group obtained a mean score of 51.5 items ( $SD = 25.6$ ), increasing its level of performance in all tasks, particularly in *phoneme deletion* ( $M = 7.67$ ,  $SD = 8.89$ ) and *phoneme segmentation* ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 5.98$ ). All differences, except for *syllable segmentation*, were shown to be statistically significant when a *t-test* comparing the results in the first and in the second tests was carried out ( $t(40) = -2.98$ ,  $p = .002$ , *Cohen's d* = .94). The control group, on the other hand, presented minimal performance changes in the second set of tests, achieving a mean score of 33.9 items ( $SD = 19.5$ ). Statistical analysis revealed that the differences between the first and second tests were non-significant for this group ( $t(40) = -0.50$ ,  $p = .307$ , *Cohen's d* = .16).

A comparison of the results obtained by the two groups of children in the second set of phonological tests was also carried out using the same instrument. Contrary to what had occurred in the first battery of tests, the differences between the two groups were shown to be statistically significant ( $t(40) = 2.50, p = .008, \text{Cohen's } d = .79$ ). These results suggest that an external factor (i.e., non-related with maturational development) might have enhanced the experimental group's ability to identify and manipulate sounds in their native language.



**Figure 2 – Results of the experimental and the control groups in the second set of phonological awareness tests.**

Following these results, we examined the video transcriptions of the children's interactions during the awakening to languages workshop in order to find out if the type of activities carried out with the experimental group might have played a part in their heightened phonological abilities. Content analysis brought forward several moments when the children were seen identifying and manipulating sounds in unknown languages and reflecting upon the similarities and differences between these and their own native language. In the transcription

written down below the researcher is reviewing the names for some endangered animals with the children, so as to prepare them for the syllable deletion game.<sup>1</sup>

Researcher (R) – Let's look at the rhino [the researcher shows the animal picture]. In Kunama they say *kharteet* [the researcher shows the card with the animal name].

Paulo – <INT> Those two letters don't exist in Portuguese.

R – Which two letters?

Paulo – The <k> and the <h>.<sup>2</sup>

R – The <h> doesn't exist?

Luísa – Yes it does. I have a friend called Hugo.

R – Yes. Hugo starts with an <h>.

Paulo – Oh/ that's right.

R – So *kharteet* is rhino in Kunama and if I take the first syllable out of this word/ what do I get?

All – Teet.

R – Very good. [...] Look/ Fernando wants to play a new game by mixing the bits of words.

Fernando – If I take the first bit out of *kharteet* and the second bit out of *nanuk* what do I get?

A – *Kharnuk* [the children laugh].

Children's interactions reveal a predisposition to play with language, no matter if the words and sounds are initially unknown to them. Language is regarded as a fun object to be manipulated in its larger and smaller units: they link sounds with graphemes, delete syllables and

phonemes, invent new words, and search their mental lexicons in order to find words that begin with a given sound. Ultimately, they reflect upon the rules of languages, revealing that they possess and are developing their (meta)linguistic skills and plurilingual phonological awareness.

Also visible in the transcriptions of this workshop was children's newly acquired understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity. Initially, the children were unaware of the number of world languages and of the possibility of language death. However, they soon realized from the videos, pictures and documentaries they saw that, like animals, languages can disappear. They also developed positive attitudes towards diversity as they empathized with the speakers of endangered languages and recognized that it is important to preserve all languages, because they represent an important part of human knowledge that would, otherwise, be missing. The transcription below is clear in this respect.

R – Look at this man over here [the researcher shows the children a picture of a Cherokee man in full costume]./ Have you checked his clothes?

Paulo – It looks like birds' fur.

R – Can you do those costumes?

All – No.

Luísa – If he dies// let's imagine there is only this man// if he dies no one else will be able to do this./ Only he can do these costumes.

Paulo – And those three over there [the child points at a picture of three Inuit children]// they can make those warm coats and igloos and if they die no one will be able to do that again/ because no one speaks their language.

R – That's true. No one else will be able to do this kind of clothes and houses because only they can./ So when languages disappear people's knowledge of things is also lost.

Altogether these results suggest that contact with linguistic diversity through awakening to languages activities might have influenced both the children's phonological abilities – by making them more willing to analyse language at a micro level – and their attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset worth preserving.

### *3.6. Discussion*

As outlined in the first two sections of this chapter, and basing on previous research, we hypothesized that awakening to languages activities could develop preschool children's plurilingual phonological awareness and foster positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity. In order to test this hypothesis, we constructed a plurilingual workshop which promoted children's contact with endangered languages, both at syllabic and phonological levels, and at a broader level of an understanding of the phenomenon of language diversity. We implemented this workshop with a group of Portuguese preschool children who, together with a control group, were also submitted to phonological awareness tests, taking place before and after the workshop.

Test results and content analysis of the transcriptions of the workshop lend some support to our hypotheses. In the first set of phonological awareness tests both groups presented similar performance levels, suggesting that there were no significant differences between them in what concerned phonological abilities. However, in the second set of tests, applied after the plurilingual workshop, the experimental group showed significantly better results than the control group. Considering that the control group did not participate in the workshop, these findings suggest that the awakening to languages activities might have played an important role in the experimental group's ability to identify and manipulate sounds in their native language.

Content analysis of the workshop seems to provide evidence for this claim. In fact, during the plurilingual session the children established comparisons between known and unknown languages, discovered similarities and differences, linked graphemes to phonemes, and manipulated larger and smaller units with equal ease and eagerness. These abilities are manifestations of their plurilingual phonological awareness and suggest that attentive listening to linguistic resources in different languages and comparison activities can help children regard language and units of speech as objects they can observe, think about and act upon, as well as promote reflection-based skills in relation to languages.

The analysis of the plurilingual workshop also revealed that the experimental group had become aware of language at a broader level, considering linguistic diversity not only as an important feature of societies today, but as a richness that must be preserved and cherished.

These findings are in agreement with research in psycholinguistics and didactics which suggests that awakening to languages activities can perform a major role in the development of children's awareness of language both at micro and macro levels, i.e., as an object of study to be analysed and manipulated in its larger and smaller units, and as a vulnerable part of humanity's cultural heritage to be preserved.

Although further work with larger and more heterogeneous groups of preschool children is required to validate our results, this study reveals that young children are true "linguistic explorers", who are curious and willing to experiment with language and to discover the diverse world around them. In this sense, we believe that, from the first school years onwards, curricular guidelines must include awakening to languages activities that promote contact with linguistic and cultural diversity at a broader level of attitudes and at a more specific level of competence development.

Such guidelines are important to raise children's awareness of the inequalities surrounding languages and the speakers of those languages, thus preparing them to take their place as active and engaged citizens in fairer, peaceful and more humane societies. Furthermore, a curriculum that is both diverse and for diversity can help children in lifelong learning of languages, including their mother tongue (Lourenço & Andrade, 2010a). In fact, many studies have shown that metalinguistic skills, specifically phonology and syntax, are linked to successful reading, writing and vocabulary learning in both native and foreign languages and are, therefore, determining factors in educational and professional success (Bialystok, 2001; De Jong, Sevek, & Van Veen, 2000; Lourenço, 2008; Metsala, 1999).

Therefore, contrary to common belief, diversity should not be regarded as a problem of today's societies and classrooms, but as an opportunity to encourage children from a very young age onwards to contact with different languages, cultures and worldviews, thus developing competences, skills and a sense of understanding towards Others that are essential to communicate and live together in this World.

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*Footnotes*

<sup>1</sup> The N|u language is a Khoisan language spoken by fewer than 10 elderly people whose traditional lands are located in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park in South Africa. The Khoisan languages are remarkable for having click sounds – the | symbol is pronounced like the English interjection tsk! tsk! used to express pity or shame.

<sup>2</sup> We have used the following transcription conventions: R (researcher), <INT> (interruption), / (short pause), // (long pause), [...] (non-transcribed utterances), [ ] (nonverbal behaviour), *word* (foreign word in italics).

<sup>3</sup> The letter *k* is seldom used in Portuguese outside loan words and abbreviations (such as *kart*, *karaoke*, *karate*, *kg* or *KLM*). This explains why the children have signalled the letter *k* in the Kunama word *kharteet* and classified it non-existent in Portuguese. It is worth mentioning, though, that under the *New Orthographic Agreement of the Portuguese Language* effective since 2010, the letters *k*, *w* and *y* have been incorporated into the Portuguese alphabet.