



Pedagogical Guide

Theoretical framework, pedagogical approach and development of project methodology

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Abstract:	The handbook describes the theoretical framework upon which all materials are based. Furthermore, it defines key terms, outlines some pedagogical principles that we drew upon and explains the process of creating the materials.
Purpose:	This handbook is designed by the project coordinator country to both inform other researchers and professionals about the process of creating the pedagogical materials and explain how to use the materials.
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1. AGENTIVE: Early language learning across six countries

Languages and multilingualism play an important role in children's everyday lives as many children grow up speaking several languages at home and in their setting of Early Childhood Education (ECE). Language skills beyond the family language(s) count as key qualifications in Europe. The early childhood phase is particularly important for multilingual language learning as children appear to develop skills in additional language(s) effortlessly, provided they have child-friendly and stimulating conditions in ECE. ECE professionals play a key role: they have to provide a high-quality language offer, appealing content, rich materials and meaningful interactions. Pictures books, pictures, songs, rhymes, and games are ideal tools to promote early language learning because they offer multimedia and multimodal access to topics directly related to children's lives.

The project AGENTIVE aims to promote early language learning in Europe. The six project partners are the University of Luxembourg (Luxembourg), the Free University of Bolzano (Italy), the University of Primorska (Slovenia), the University of Teacher Education in the Grisons (Switzerland), the University of Muenster (Germany) and Web2Learn (Greece). The first four make up the "pedagogical team". The participating researchers have been working in Teacher Education and have investigated language teaching for many years. They will create eight pedagogical materials based on stories. The University of Muenster and Web2Learn specialize in Information Systems and digital learning and professional training services, respectively. They will design the digital platform where professionals and parents can download our educational resources. They will also encourage the wide use of the materials and ensure that the school-university-business-synergy flourishes.

The objectives of our eight sets of pedagogical materials for early language learning range from developing plurilingual competence and raising language and cultural awareness to developing early literacy skills. This difference in learning objectives is determined by the range of more monolingual or multilingual contexts of the six participating countries. Luxembourg has three official languages (Luxembourgish, French, German) and the Swiss canton of the Grisons is renowned for its three official languages of German, Italian and Romansh. German, Italian and Ladin are the main languages in South Tyrol. In Slovenia, people speak mainly Slovenian, but in the Primorska region, many also speak Italian. The region has two official languages, Slovenian and Italian. Like all other participating countries, Germany and Greece have a range of official minority languages including, depending on the country, Sorbian, Danish, Romansh, Frisian or Albanian. The roles these languages play in the education system depend on the region. The specific language curricula are influenced both by the countries' linguistic landscapes as well as the European Council that pushes its member states to introduce programmes for learning languages other than the majority ones from an early age. Luxembourg and Greece responded to this call with regulations on language learning in ECE. Since 2017, Luxembourg has a compulsory multilingual education



programme in the formal and non-formal education sectors. While the teachers and educators in “early education” and the teachers in “preschool” are required to develop children’s skills in Luxembourgish, they also need to familiarize them with French for several hours a week and raise children’s language awareness. For example, the curriculum foresees that children recognize and reproduce sounds and/or words from other languages, sing songs in different languages, compare words and phrases, discover the same book in different languages and discover different writing systems (e.g., Latin alphabet, Chinese ideograms, hieroglyphics). A similar focus on multilingual education can be observed in the RA-RA kindergarten in Primorska. The programme has three pillars: Slovenian, Italian and English. Thus, similarly to Luxembourg, an official language is taught and a second language (one that is dominant in society) is added. The countries differ in the choice of their third language(s): home languages are emphasized in Luxembourg while English is taught in Slovenia. A similar combination of local and global can be found in the autonomous province of South Tyrol, where parents have a choice of enrolling children in Italian, German or Ladin preschools. Teachers in the Italian-speaking preschools focus on the teaching of German (the second official language) and English (foreign language) and offer language and literacy activities in both. In Switzerland, particularly in the Canton of the Grisons, three languages can be found in preschools depending on the location. ECE education is either held in German, Italian or Romansh. In Germany, preschools typically run in German and do not offer additional languages. However, activities for language awareness are integrated into the curriculum of specific preschools. They would typically be English, Dutch or French in locations near the border. In Greece, English had been introduced to preschool children aged 4 to 6 since 2021-22 following an update of the ECE curriculum. Teachers of English language collaborate with the preschool teachers to implement the EAN programme. English language learning takes place in playful activities through specially designed educational scenarios and creative activities. Multiliteracy as well as multilingual and intercultural awareness are important aspects of the curriculum and instruction design.

While ECE professionals (e.g., teachers, educators) are encouraged to offer language activities, researchers largely agree that some practitioners lack the confidence to teach languages other than the institutional one(s), that specific training opportunities for teachers are scarce and that effective multilingual materials are rare (Bergeron-Morin et al. 2023; Vom Brocke 2021). Therefore, the project AGENTIVE aims, firstly, to develop eight pedagogical sets (e.g., stories, games) that can be adapted to fit the various needs of children and teachers, and secondly to design and implement a digital platform for the dissemination of these educational resources. Some stories are created together with participating preschool teachers in Luxembourg and Primorska, ensuring that children can contribute with their own cultural and linguistic experiences. The children’s stories are further developed and didactically prepared by the pedagogical teams and a visual editor. Furthermore, some partners of the AGENTIVE project will provide professional development training to teachers and student teachers to help them use the materials productively and effectively. In addition, some partners will discuss the materials with student teachers in Teacher Education. Finally, all partners will network with institutions (e.g., Education Ministry) to promote the use of the online materials and offer workshops



on multiple language learning through literacy activities to ECE teachers.

2. Theoretical framework

Children's living conditions in today's Europe are markedly multilingual and multicultural. Owing to globalization and migration, linguistic and cultural diversity has steadily increased in modern societies and multilingualism has become the norm (Bergeron-Morin et al. 2023; Gövert et al. 2022; Tracy 2014). As a result, multilingualism also shapes the language policy of the European Union with its 24 official languages. In this section, we will define the concepts of multilingualism/ plurilingualism, language, multiculturalism/ pluriculturalism and culture as they frame this handbook. We will also outline Europe's plurilingual approaches.

2.1 Plurilingualism and Language

Multilingualism refers both to "the languages used in a specific society" and to a person's "ability to communicate in two or more languages" (Cenoz 2013, p.2). Scharff Rethfeldt (2013) defined multilingualism as "a process that is characterized by various interactions between the individual and environmental conditions" (p.27). The Council of Europe prefers the term plurilingualism to refer to an individual user's ability to use language, language varieties and registers. A bilingual individual is thereby not understood as the sum of two monolinguals (Grosjean 1982) but as somebody who is able to use and expand their multilingual repertoire in line with their social and cultural experiences (Baker & Wright 2017; Council of Europe 2018, 2020). Note that language is understood as a multimodal tool and a resource that enables meaning-making and social interaction rather than a rigid linguistic system bounded to specific countries or regions (Cenoz & Gorter 2015).

As explained in Section 1, some European countries and regions have two or more official languages while others appear to be more monolingual. Nevertheless, in all countries, many children grow up at home with one or more home languages that differ from the official language(s) and, in ECE settings, encounter the majority language(s) and other so-called "second" or "foreign" languages. These children experience early on that features of different languages and registers are used for different purposes and in different social spaces. They access their entire language repertoire flexibly, dynamically and functionally (Busch 2021, García 2009) to communicate effectively. To them, the words "mother tongue", "second language" or "foreign language" make little sense. Such categorisations must be critically reflected in relation to both the linguistic and cultural diversity of the learning groups in ECE and children's complex and individual language biographies.

ECE settings have a responsibility when working with children growing up bilingually or multilingually. While professionals in many countries are required to promote the learning of additional languages from an early age, they should also value home languages. Children's home languages shape their social, cognitive, linguistic and emotional development, influence their identity formation, affect their learning of further languages and impact their academic achievements. The acquisition of a first or



additional languages at home or outside home is a profoundly social and cultural process. The way in which the home languages are included in the everyday life in ECE and are drawn upon in the context of learning additional languages is of crucial importance for the child's language and personality development (Morys 2014). Do professionals see multilingualism as a societal problem or a special opportunity for learning and living together? Do they draw on children's entire linguistic repertoire when promoting early language learning?

Educators and teachers must have a sound knowledge of the development of multiple languages and critically reflect on their own attitudes and language experiences to support children's language learning in the best possible ways. They need to understand that children draw on their entire semiotic repertoire when communicating, making meaning and learning (García 2023, García & Wei 2014, Wei 2018). This is the very definition of translanguaging. While more and more professionals have come to accept translanguaging as a normal phenomenon in class and began to leverage children's multilingual and multimodal resources for learning languages and content (García et al., 2017), not all professionals draw on children's funds of knowledge to assist them in formal learning situations. García and Otheguy (2020) emphasize that the translanguaging pedagogy extends beyond using scaffolding techniques to acquire a second or foreign language. Instead, it challenges monolingual ideologies and power structures that assign languages hierarchical status in society. Translanguaging highlights how bilingual individuals navigate and express their bilingualism, thereby fostering a bilingual or multilingual identity. This is different from understanding bilingualism as the addition of languages (Wei 2018, García & Wei 2014)

2.2 Pluriculturalism and Culture

We understand culture as both influenced by a specific context but also as something dynamic and changeable through the interactions of a community. Tylor defined culture as "the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society" (1871, p. 1; cited in Logan, 2013). Culture is shared through meanings, symbols and systems (e.g., language, religion, arts) that, in turn, are interpreted in specific ways according to the cultural context (Geertz 1973). The constant creation of meanings to understand oneself and one's environment implies that we are not only shaped by cultural processes, but also influence them (Geertz 1973, Leenen 2019). Because culture is an integral part of our daily experiences, we are often unaware of the beliefs, knowledge, customs, values and norms that shape our lives. By contrast, if we meet somebody from a different culture, we may notice similarities and differences.

Children learn the routine actions, values and beliefs that characterize the culture(s) of their group through interactions with parents, teachers and children (Borke et al. 2011). The cultural patterns and their constant negotiations thereby influence both the parents' educational aims and, at school, the learning objectives, pedagogical practices, and teacher-child interactions. Based on the dominant norms as well as their values and experiences, teachers set particular learning goals (Borke et al., 2011). For example, some education systems prioritize children's autonomy and encourage young children to



choose activities based on several options. Other countries value plurilingual competence and ensure children encounter several languages from an early age. As seen previously, early language learning is strongly valued by the European Council; children are to develop communicative competence in multiple languages as well as the ability to understand and appreciate different cultures (Candelier et al. 2012). According to Chen and Starosta (1998), cultural awareness involves understanding and identifying cultural differences and similarities. It refers to the knowledge and recognition of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices of different cultures. Over the last years, several pedagogical approaches addressed the development of cultural awareness and intercultural understanding. While multiculturalism emphasizes the diversity and coexistence of different cultures, transculturality centres on the transition from one culture to another. Interculturality focuses on direct encounters with a particular interest in exchange and understanding (Scherer & Vach 2019, Röscher 2020). These approaches are by no means mutually exclusive; rather, they complement and enrich each other in their own way.

2.3 Plurilingual education in Europe

Over the past 30 years teaching approaches have evolved and new pedagogies have emerged in ECE to address children's dynamic language practices and needs in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world (Kirsch & Duarte 2020). The Council of Europe promotes plurilingual education to develop communicative competence in multiple languages while also fostering the ability to understand diverse cultures.

Countries pursue these goals in various ways. In Luxembourg, Greece, the German-speaking community of Belgium, Poland, Cyprus and Malta, children learn their first additional language (second or foreign language) before the age of 6 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2023). This tends to be English with the exception of Luxembourg where children learn French as a second language. Other countries have chosen models of bilingual education. For example, in Wales, preschool teachers teach through the medium of Welsh to help Welsh-native speakers and English-native speakers develop skills in this language before they enter primary school. Other countries in Europe have sought to promote linguistic diversity, collectively known as "pluralistic approaches to language teaching". These programmes are based on the principle that every child has a right to use their entire linguistic repertoire and develop a plurilingual repertoire. The Council of Europe defines plurilingual competence as "the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency in varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures" (Beacco & Bryam 2007, p. 8).

To help implement plurilingual education, the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA) (Candelier et al. 2012) provides tools and descriptors to develop plurilingual and intercultural competence. It also suggests four approaches: intercultural approaches, awakening to languages, intercomprehension, and integrated didactic approaches. They share a belief that individuals learn languages when they dynamically and flexibly build on their entire linguistic and cultural repertoire. This view is based on current views of bilingualism as well as research into didactic



approaches of multilingualism which have moved away from the idea of native speaker or mastery of all languages. They take a functional and resource-oriented view of multilingualism and consider all of children's language resources for learning.

In ECE, models of “language awakening” are the most prominent. These child-oriented approach also known as “*éveil aux langues*”, “*evlang*”, “*encounter with languages*” or “*éducation et ouverture aux langues*” aims to foster an appreciation for linguistic diversity within the classroom and to sensitize children to the diversity of languages in their larger environment (Candelier & Kervran 2018, Darquennes 2017, Finkbeiner & White 2017). Children are to recognize and value the linguistic diversity in their personal lives and society at large.

3. Learning objectives of AGENTIVE

In line with the pluralistic approaches to language learning in Europe and the specific learning goals of the six partner countries participating in the European Erasmus+ project AGENTIVE, we will develop eight pedagogical sets that help teachers pursue the following objectives:

- develop plurilingual competence
- develop language awareness
- develop intercultural awareness and understanding
- develop early literacy skills

3.1 Plurilingual competence

This first objective is important to all six AGENTIVE partners. Children have to develop skills in a particular language, in this case French in Luxembourg; English in Switzerland, Greece and Germany; Italian in Slovenia and German in South Tyrol. They are to acquire first expressions and grammatical structures in an additional language and use them to understand stories, sing songs or engage in short conversations. Reading to and with children has been hailed as a key method to develop children's language and literacy skills. Sénéchal et al. (2017) demonstrated that frequent and high-quality reading promoted children's language and early literacy skills. Fewer studies exist when it comes to reading in two languages but there is supporting evidence from Farver et al. (2013) and Pico and Woods (2023). Today, it is widely agreed that reading furthers the learning of one or more languages, encourages early literacy skills (e.g. Näger 2016, Skibbe et al. 2011).

Furthermore, reading contributes to the other AGENTIVE objects outlined above. Reading fosters early literacy skills and predicts children's later literacy skills (e.g. Skibbe et al. 2011, Zucker al. 2013). These, in turn, influence their academic achievement the early introduction to written language in one or more languages can open young children's eyes and ears to the linguistic and cultural richness of our world. Developing early language and literacy skills by using both a familiar and an unfamiliar language allows children to open up socially, linguistically and culturally, and develop language and cultural awareness.

AGENTIVE will develop children's plurilingual competence through the use of our eight stories and follow-up activities. Children can actively engage in listening to and talking



about the content of the stories (in multiple languages), learning some key expressions, replaying stories in different ways, inventing new stories or different endings or singing new songs.

3.2 Language awareness

Following the inclusive perspective emphasized in the FREPA, a key feature of language awakening is its inclusivity—it encompasses not only the languages taught at school but also all other languages children encounter, such as home languages, dialects, and sign languages. By promoting linguistic diversity, pluralistic approaches aim to develop positive attitudes towards different language varieties and contribute to the development of language awareness (Sayers & Láncoš 2017). The latter plays a significant role in the development of multilingualism and plurilingual competence (Finkbeiner & White 2017, Svalberg 2007).

In a typical language awakening programme, children engage in activities that help expand their linguistic abilities. These activities may include comparing and contrasting different languages, experimenting with sounds from various languages, or analysing language as a structured system. Exposure to linguistic diversity also encourages children to reflect on cultural diversity. In a study investigating the use of a language awakening approach in preschool settings, Coelho, Andrade, and Portugal (2018) found that children are highly motivated to learn about different languages and cultures and are eager to participate in discussions about diversity.

Few studies have focused on young or very young learners' language awareness and attitudes towards language learning (Muñoz 2014). Developing learners' language awareness from an early age has many benefits, including facilitating young learners' metalinguistic awareness and fostering their cultural understanding (Hawkins 1996, Muñoz 2014). Wagner (2020) reports that four-to-five-year-olds show awareness of their own languages, are able to express their language preferences and even demonstrate emerging metalinguistic awareness. As Roehr-Brackin (2018) maintains, children aged 6 to 7 begin to develop metalinguistic awareness by realising that words fundamentally serve as labels for objects or actions, and are, therefore, able to understand synonymy and grasp the idea that different languages use different words. In another study on language awareness, in which Kurvers et al. (2006) compared illiterate adults to preschool children and literate adults, it was shown that children demonstrate a considerable level of phonological awareness; they are able to identify and produce rhymes, as well as segment words into syllables. Furthermore, they show semantic awareness by being able to identify content words. However, they have more difficulties in other aspects of language, such as sentence segmentation and textual awareness.

3.3 Intercultural awareness and understanding

Language awakening programmes aim to develop children's awareness of languages and cultures and their intercultural competence, defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardorff 2006, p. 248). Byram (1997) conceptualised intercultural competence as a set of "savoirs": *savoir être (attitudes)*; *savoir (knowledge)*;



savoir apprendre (skills) and savoir faire (the ability to use the other three ‘savoirs’ in authentic interactions with people of other languages and cultures).

For children to develop cultural awareness and learn about cultures, they need, firstly, opportunities to encounter individuals, communities and artefacts with “different value orientations, systems of meaning and bodies of knowledge” (Scherer & Vach 2019, p.21) and, secondly, interactions with individuals and tools that enable them to think about and develop values and test their ideas.

Children’s literature and stories are excellent cultural tools to promote intercultural understanding and competence. The true-to-life themes and expressive images as well as the role of the main character, an explorer or bridge-builder, open up spaces that allow children to get to know and try out new perspectives and immerse themselves in new worlds. On the one hand, stories allow children to learn about and appreciate different ways of life and cultures, and on the other hand, they show various possibilities of how to deal both with this diversity and the tension between “me/us” and “the others”.

Traditions and rituals such as typical festivities, are another way frequently used in classrooms to develop children’s “savoir”. However, it is important to go beyond discovering culture with a capital “C” as this can quickly lead to essentialism and stereotypes. It is not useful to talk about “the German culture”, “the Luxembourgish food” or “the Italian festivals” as this kind of reduction assigns fixed characteristics to the members of that group and presupposes a certain homogeneity. Not only does this unity within a group or society not exist (Leenen 2019, Scherer & Vach 2019), but in addition, such schematic thinking promotes and/or (re)constructs stereotypes and othering processes (Rösch 2020). One possible way to help young children develop “savoir faire” is to reflect on greetings. Polite formulas such as “good morning”, “thank you” or “excuse me” are not only verbal expressions, often accompanied by specific gestures, but also acts showing us how to treat each other. Children’s backgrounds and experiences, influence their understanding and handling of such formulas. Teachers can create specific situations to make them more aware of familiar and unfamiliar rituals and bring this diversity closer to the children. Apart from developing “savoir” and “savoir faire”, carefully chosen activities strengthen children’s identity and call for collaboration with parents. In line with the previous reflections, we defined the following broad learning objectives: Children

- Get to know and reflect on different traditions and rituals
- Respect different ways of life and understand that differences can be enriching
- Learn to recognize stereotypes
- Learn to deal with the tensions between “me/ us” and “they/ the others”
- Learn to recognize and distinguish between different cultural symbols, that is language systems

3.4 Early literacy

Early literacy refers to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that children develop about reading and writing before they acquire conventional literacy skills. It encompasses activities such as recognizing letters, understanding that print carries meaning, and



engaging with books through shared reading. These foundational experiences often occur in informal, everyday contexts, laying the groundwork for later success in reading and writing. Research emphasizes the role of a rich literacy environment, where children are exposed to diverse language interactions. Parents, caregivers, and educators play a crucial role in supporting this developmental phase by providing opportunities for meaningful interactions with language and print (Morrow 2008, Dickinson & Tabors 2001). In doing so, they establish contexts that facilitate experiences with books, storytelling, rhyme, and writing culture (Ulich 2005). These early experiences have long-term implications, as strong early literacy skills are predictive of later academic achievement (Lonigan et al. 2000).

Early literacy is closely tied to oral language development, as vocabulary acquisition, phonological awareness, and narrative skills are integral components of early literacy learning (Whitehurst & Lonigan 1998). The National Reading Panel has developed a list of basic reading skills based on meta-analyses of quantitative data and identified measures to develop these: phonics instruction to further phonemic awareness; vocabulary instruction to develop lexis and reading instruction to foster reading fluency and reading comprehension. Hannon & Nutbrown (1997) and Nutbrown et al. (2005) identified four literacy strands which are helpful for planning language and literacy learning in ECE:

- Environmental print – children learn to recognize and understand print in the environment, such as signs, logos, and packaging
- Books and stories – children engage with books and stories and in this way, learn to understand narrative structures and develop a love of reading
- Early writing – children have early writing experiences, including scribbles, intentional letter and word formation
- Oral language – children develop language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and communicative skills, which are closely linked to literacy development.

AGENTIVE addresses the strands “books” and “oral language” through the creation of multilingual children’s books and pedagogical materials and “early writing” through Literacy centres that are ideal to further children’s experiences with writing and promote early literacy skills (see 4.6.)

4. Pedagogical approaches

4.1 Child development and language learning

According to developmental psychologists and psychologists who work with socio-cultural theories, the first years in a child’s life are of key importance. In the first four years, children develop “at a breathtaking pace” (Largo 2016, p.15) in terms of their ability to build relationships, motor skills, language development as well as their play, sleeping and eating behaviours. These fundamental processes, which significantly influence children’s cognitive, language, emotional and social development, take place when children have a person of reference within or outside the family. A secure bond with the parents or caregivers gives the child emotional security and the confidence to explore



the world and make new experiences. The adults serve as social role models and have a lasting influence on children's social behaviour and language and cognitive development. They guide and support children and enable them to develop the necessary autonomy and self-confidence to face new challenges.

In general, a child's development is shaped by the dynamic interaction between disposition (genetic make-up) and environment (family, society, culture) (Largo 2017). How a child's potential unfolds depends crucially on the environmental conditions, for example on the affection of parents and caregivers, on a stimulating environment conducive to learning and on cultural values, norms and behaviours that children perceive in their environment. At the same time, all children are "endowed with an irrepressible curiosity and a genuine willingness to learn" (Largo 2017, p.25). They want to explore the world to make sense of it and became autonomous actors.

A child's language development, whether it is a first or an additional language, is closely linked to the development of their social, emotional and cognitive skills. Language is not just a means of communication, but an important tool for structuring thought, interacting with the environment and enabling social and cultural learning. To acquire new sounds or words, or develop understanding of grammar, children must be cognitively, socially, and emotionally engaged and supported by others who model language use and guide them (Swain et al. 2010). The development of their plurilingual repertoire is, therefore, favourably influenced by a language-conducive environment which includes a positive emotional atmosphere, early and regular social interaction, a reflective approach to media, and individual support. The more parents or ECE professionals bond with children, interact verbally, listen to them and respond, sing songs, share picture books or tell stories together, the faster can children develop their language skills.

4.2 Socio-constructivist and holistic didactic approaches with stories

Seen from the perspective of socio-constructivist theories, language didactics opens a constructive space where children build their own world. While language learning can be stimulated from the outside as seen in Section 3.1, the actual learning process requires that children actively engage with their outside world. Books that help children encounter multilingual texts and a variety of socio-cultural contexts act as knowledge mediators and effective learning environments. Owing to the scaffold of the adults and the pedagogical materials, children actively negotiate and socially expand their experiences of languages and cultures and reconstruct their own reality time and again.

To make learning a holistic experience and embed aspects of a new language in a meaningful context, it is ideal to work with stories. Multilingual books mediate between cultures and different ways of living and enable children to orientate themselves and find their way outside their family and familiar world. Children engage intensively with new, diverse and multiple languages and perspectives of the world. They encounter new experiences and learn to solve new issues with different strategies. They thereby build on their previous knowledge which they re-learn or un-learn. Thus, children's acquisition of knowledge is not pre-determined, but directed and can be self-organized. For children to learn in this way, it is important that teachers design an inclusive environment, pay



attention to children's emotional state and allow for holistic experiences. Owing to the wide variety of books and topics, the recurring practice of telling stories in various ways, the child-centred approaches and the careful scaffolding of the interactions, teachers manage to develop children's competences and skills.

In particular, ECE professionals present and tell stories in a way such that children experience them in a playful manner and co-construct new knowledge and skills dynamically. Learning is more likely to happen when the teachers work in a project-based and interdisciplinary way. They can support their own and children's monolingual or multilingual storytelling through multimedia tools, sound recordings and hand puppets. Dialogic reading, as described later, is one effective type of shared reading where adults encourage children to talk about pictured materials and become the storyteller while also giving them feedback on their utterances (Kirsch et al. 2023, Kirsch 2024). Meaningful language practices in one or multiple languages following the readings can include re-arranging of the pictures of a story, retelling or enacting (parts of) the story, recording the story in a different way on an app, singing songs that are related to the topic or engaging in meaningful early literacy activities. Further examples are outlined in Section 5.

4.3 The power of stories

High-quality stories address many different topics and provide young children with rich opportunities to explore the world and develop knowledge in a holistic and interdisciplinary manner. From a language development perspective, stories offer a natural context for learners to experience rich and authentic input. They expose children to new sounds, words, expressions, sentence structures, and more complex academic language that differs from everyday language use. Children can appropriate, transform, and begin to use these new expressions and structures, especially if adults encourage interaction and model language use during shared reading (Barnes et al. 2017, Wasik et al. 2016). This exposure helps young children build vocabulary and internalize language patterns while also gaining awareness of the language's rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation. The predictable structures and repetitive elements of stories enable children to actively participate in storytelling or recreate parts of the narrative. From a socio-affective perspective, stories are highly effective in early language learning contexts because children generally enjoy them. As they engage with stories, they connect with the characters, which helps them understand the narrative and stimulates their creativity and imagination. Furthermore, stories enhance cognitive development by encouraging children to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words, predict outcomes, and anticipate events. These activities promote critical learning strategies and higher-order thinking skills. Additionally, the comparison between the same stories in different languages or bilingual stories provide opportunities for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons (Bratož et al. 2023, Brewster et al. 2002; Mourão 2009).

Bilingual and multilingual books invite children to compare and think about similarities and differences, both in relation to the languages and the socio-cultural experiences of the character. They become aware of subtle nuances between languages and cultures. Similar representations but also different appearances of the environment and different habits of people (e.g., postures, colours, clothes, jewellery) tempt them to listen and have



a deeper look. Children may notice that the everyday situations outlined in the story are reminiscent of their own, even when these come from different social and cultural contexts. They experience different worlds and words, negotiate meanings, restructure, maintain or reject ideas, reflect on their own and new experiences, and are carried away into new worlds.

It is important that teachers adopt participatory and inclusive methods that allow all children to communicate in their own language and the new language. Children will explore new situations, find solutions to issues, and connect their new experiences to their prior knowledge. In this way, they will be prepared to discover new ways of communication and invest in their learning.

4.4 The AGENTIVE materials

In line with the principles of Early Childhood Education, and based on our theoretical understanding, the AGENTIVE pedagogical sets will comprise multilingual stories and materials for follow-up activities. They stories can be downloaded from our platform with or without pictures, with written text in one or more languages and in one or more oral versions.

While reading picture books during the preparation of the materials, we noticed that many books are underpinned by an additive approach to multilingualism, that is, the text is translated and children see the same text in several languages. The languages in these bilingual books tend to be high-status languages (e.g., the majority languages, English), rather than also include local, regional or minority languages. Furthermore, few children's books depict multilingual characters and their multilingual worlds. Children tend to be portrayed as monolinguals. In addition, the ways the main characters are portrayed and their experiences tend to reflect the lives of the majorities of a particular society, rather than also those of the minorities. Our stories as well as the ideas for follow-up activities are underpinned by a dynamic view of multilingualism and multiculturalism. The pedagogical materials are child-centred and multimodal, encourage play, and enable professionals (or parents) to offer authentic and inclusive learning opportunities that engage children in meaningful interactions with peers and adults.

5. Methods and strategies to develop multilingual and multicultural awareness and competences

While the last section has outlined the four objectives of the AGENTIVE pedagogical sets (e.g., language skills, language awareness, intercultural awareness, early literacy skills), this section presents effective methods to do so.

5.1 Multisensory activities and children's participation

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. A model which stresses the aspect of participation in developing plurilingual practices and plurilingual awareness was developed by Bratož and Sila (2022). The DivCon model (“Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context”) 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’s participation. The 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 build an awareness of diversity. As children travel to different countries in an imaginary train, they experience the languages and cultures they meet through multisensory perceptions, such as movement, singing, tasting or artistic expression. The train journey is made more realistic with the children actually moving 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.

All activities are designed to foster children’s participation and interaction with the teacher. For example, the teachers are encouraged to discover and discuss new train destinations 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. To further develop children’s intercultural competence, teachers may also encourage children to greet each other in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways and reflect on similarities and differences. Multisensory activities could also consist of engaging in games or events that encourage children to try out new things or perspectives. For example, children could play games that are widely played in other countries or try unfamiliar food.

According to Sousa (2019), teachers can create spaces where children use home languages in the preschool group even when the teachers do not speak them. They can respond in other ways, such as through visual support or body language. They may also use the web that offers a number of useful sources and tools, to bring the languages and cultures into the group and help them communicate with children. What is more, they can establish important connections with the family members whom they may invite to the preschool to take part in the learning process by sharing nursery rhymes, singing songs or telling stories in their home languages (Kirsch 2024). 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. The teachers’ role is extended to that of “co-participant” in the classroom activities and they experience opportunities to both give and gain feedback from children and, thus, enhance the learning process (de Sousa 2019).



5.2 Dialogic reading

Dialogic reading is an interactive way of reading where adults and children view stories and illustrated materials together and talk about them (Whitehurst et al. 1988). The method offers a fantastic opportunity to infuse more than one language into the story. The story may be bilingual/ multilingual in that it includes the institutional language, a home language or a new language to be learned, or the storytelling itself may be transglossic. For example, the adult (teacher or parent) may read in one language and allow for communication about the story in several languages. When a story is repetitive and when the adult accompanies text with specific playful activities and props, children are likely to successfully engage in the storytelling experience.

While reading, adults constantly involve children. They engage them in a meaning-making process about the story and the pictures, and promote interactions both between themselves and the children and between the children. They need to encourage and monitor children's involvement, for example by asking for their opinions, encouraging them to anticipate the unfolding of the story, and letting them comment on actions or emotions. By using the new language in this way, the adults ensure that children are emotionally involved, construct their own understanding of the story, and develop their understanding of the topic. When they notice misunderstandings and mistakes in the utterances, they re-engage children in the meaning-making process and rephrase expressions to give constructive feedback.

In sum, the adults' roles consist of active listening; encouraging interactions by prompting and asking questions; evaluating children's verbalizations; praising them, and providing feedback, thereby expanding the range and complexity of their utterances. These strategies, designed by Whitehurst et al. (1988) to promote dialogic reading, have been named PEER sequence and CROWD questions. PEER stands for prompt (questions), evaluation, expansion and repetition. Evaluations refer to feedback that reinforces the children's active and passive vocabulary. The adult can give feedback to confirm correct answers. In this way, children understand that the adult actively listens and takes their verbalizations seriously, which, in turn, may affect their self-esteem and confidence and encourage their participation. The adult can also offer implicit or explicit corrective feedback where answers are incorrect, for example by recasting the sentence (Wasik et al. 2006). Expanding means rephrasing children's utterances using a richer vocabulary and a more complex syntax, or adding greater detail. Thus, children hear a sentence that is slightly beyond what they can express on their own. Repeating happens when adults ask children to repeat a prompt to ensure children verbalize and remember it.

CROWD questions refer to completion prompts, recall prompts, open-ended prompts, "wh-" prompts, and distancing prompts (Whitehurst et al. 1999). Teachers in ECE tend to ask open-ended prompts and "wh-" prompts. Completion prompts (fill-the-gap questions that children can answer by pointing to an illustration or by adding the missing word) tend to be asked to younger children (six- to twelve-months) whereas recall prompts and distancing prompts require more language and tend to be asked to children aged four to five. Recall prompts ask children to think about elements of a story, recall the information and verbalize it. Distancing prompts encourage them to relate the



content of the book to their own experiences or general knowledge and interpret texts, thereby using decontextualised language. The different questions are adapted to children's age and language development. Questions addressed to older children require more thinking and speaking and, thus, more developed cognitive and language abilities. Examples of more complex prompts are recall questions, distancing questions, or "why" questions that require children to think about the whole text. They demand analytical and critical thinking skills as well as the ability to use longer and more complex sentences.

Dialogic reading has been tested in many countries and studies and meta-analyses continue to show a positive effect on children's vocabulary (e.g., Dowdall et al. 2020, Pillinger & Vardy 2022), language comprehension (Mol et al. 2008), narrative skills (Zevenbergen et al. 2003) and early literacy skills (e.g., Lonigan & Whitehurst 1998, Pillinger & Vardy 2022, Wood et al., 2018). Furthermore, dialogic reading can support the development of grammatical aspects of language (Baldaeus et al. 2021, Schütz 2021) and foster reading motivation.

5.3 Songs and rhymes to develop language awareness and multilingual competence

Songs and rhymes are highly effective for developing multilingual competence with very young learners as they combine linguistic, cognitive, and socio-affective benefits. Their repetitive and rhythmic nature supports the internalization of vocabulary, phonological awareness, and language patterns while aiding memory retention (Brewster et al. 2002). By engaging multiple senses, they enhance comprehension and promote pattern recognition, crucial for decoding language structures. Perhaps the greatest benefit to using songs in the classroom is their entertainment value. Songs can add interest to the classroom routine and potentially improve student motivation (Millington 2011). Songs and rhymes are also enjoyable and culturally rich, fostering a love for language learning, but also encouraging curiosity about linguistic diversity.

5.4 Literacy centres to develop children's literacy skills

The multilingual books created in AGENTIVE, as well as the intended dialogic reading situations can complement thematically appropriate Literacy Centres (Morrow 2002; Sörensen 2009, Geyer 2023, Nickel 2025 in print). Literacy centres could represent role-playing scenarios, where children immerse themselves in real-world situations through themed play, such as shopkeepers, doctors or hairdressers. These environments are enriched with authentic literacy materials, including print and writing tools to support both language and literacy development. They address the strands "environmental print", "writing" and "oral language and communication" (see Section 3.4).

The concept of Literacy Centres is closely linked to the principles of early literacy. Here, children begin to explore aspects of literacy even before they formally learn to read and write. Through role-playing, they adopt linguistic patterns that are less common in their everyday speech. These include specific vocabulary or phrases that they hear in stories or interactions with adults and re-enact with peers or adults in a safe setting. Since the Literacy Centres will also be designed bilingually/ multilingually, children develop an understanding of language as a tool for communication in more than one language. Comparing linguistic patterns provides opportunities for early language

comparisons and promotes children's language awareness. At the same time, Literacy Centres offer numerous opportunities for early reading and writing. Children can become familiar with the function of print and gain their first experiences with the writing system.

The AGENTIVE material provides material to implement one literacy centre (e.g., “at the post office”, “at the hairdresser”, “at the vet” or similar). This includes word cards and picture cards, letters, lists of relevant chunks and phrases. Materials also include possible writing prompts, e.g., a library card in which children enter their own name, a shopping list for the grocery shop that can be filled with word and picture cards or a recipe template. We also provide a bilingual phonetic chart so that the children can work independently with the material and discover the spelling themselves. As this is challenging for many preschool children, there are also word and picture cards that the children can cut out or copy. Specific instructions are provided in the other seven pedagogical sets to help teachers adapt the literacy centre to the specific topic.



Example of literacy centre designed for and by a primary school in South Tyrol, Italy.



6. Example

This section presents some activities that teachers can do with their class to develop plurilingual competence, language awareness, intercultural awareness and early literacy skills. Depending on the region, the teachers may prioritize one set of objectives over the others.

The examples are related to Story 7 “**Celebrating Olivia’s birthday**” where Bobba, a monster-alien, is invited to his friend’s fifth birthday party. He is astonished by what he witnesses: a celebration with many people, a birthday cake, candles, balloons, presents, a card with a number and games. Where he is coming from, birthdays are celebrated differently: the cakes taste different, the games are different, the presents include..... The character experiences something new, does not know what to do with the candles and eats too much birthday cake. Funny things happen and he shares his experiences of birthday celebrations with his new friends, including Olivia and Ben.

Below, we present some activities that we designed for this story in relation to our four areas of learning.



Area	Name/Objective	Activity	Resources
Plurilingual Competence	<p>YOUR LAST BIRTHDAY</p> <p>Objectives/ aims of activity (children will be able to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow the story Narrate about a past event 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Children narrate, record and illustrate their last birthday celebration. Children listen to each other's experiences (whether recorded or not) and compare them to others. The teacher engages children in a discussion about aspects related to celebrations that are culturally relevant or such as games, food, or the habit of giving presents. They can make connections to previous activities related to food, greetings, or games. The teacher will help children document their birthday celebration (e.g., a portfolio). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources for recording: children can use a phone or an app (e.g., iTEO, Book creator) Examples showing how children narrated their birthday experiences which they then recorded and illustrated or which the teacher wrote down for them (e.g., QR code, little booklet)
Language awareness	<p>GUESS THE LANGUAGE</p> <p>Objectives/ aims of activity (children will be able to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distinguish between different languages 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher plays the <i>Happy birthday</i> song in a foreign language (that he/she knows the children will probably not understand) and asks which song this is. How do they know? The teacher plays the same song in other languages. What do they think, which language is it? Why do they think that? How does this language sound? Is it round, melodic, sharp, etc.? What does it remind them of? Do they recognise any words? The teacher and the children sing the <i>Happy birthday</i> song in the teaching language used in the kindergarten. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Happy birthday song in different languages (check: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRYqx4yR6Oc)



Intercultural awareness and understanding	<p>LET'S SING TOGETHER: BIRTHDAY SONGS FROM HOME</p> <p>Objectives/ aims of activity (children will be able to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand that people in different countries can share the same tradition and adapt it 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sing "Happy Birthday" in different languages (e.g., home languages of the children in the class) and speak about the meaning of the songs which can vary according to the language. 2. Create new birthday songs with children's home languages (and showing the scripts). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A few birthday songs Video: 70 people singing and comparing different happy birthday songs around the w
Early Literacy Skills	<p>BIRTHDAY PARTY GAME: FISHING FOR LETTERS</p> <p>Objectives/ aims of activity (children will be able to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose and match letters 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outside in a little paddling pool there are many plastic balls with big capital letters written on them. 2. The children look for the letters "B O B B A". They are each allowed to fish for one letter with a little fishing net. 3. The letters "BOBBA" are put in correct order next to the paddling pool. 4. The game can be repeated with other names (with paying attention to having all corresponding letters available in the pool, which might not be the case for all the names of the children for example). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paddling pool Plastic balls with big capital letters written on them 1 little fishing net

Needless to say that singing "Happy Birthday" in different languages engages children in language learning and can be used to develop children's awareness of subtle differences in the languages and songs. Similarly, when children compare different writing systems and learn to recognize numbers, they could design birthday cards and write a number or name to develop their literacy skills.

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