

Exercise File: Linguistic Diversity in the World

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Objective

Learn some basic data about the linguistic richness of the world and sensitise students about the rapid loss of linguistic and cultural diversity.
Clarify some myths concerning languages and present an ecological perspective that keeps students away from ethnocentric positions and behaviours.

Areas of Knowledge

Language, foreign languages, social sciences.

Methodology

1. The teacher introduces the topic asking the pupils some general questions about language learning such as what languages they know, what languages they are learning or have learnt and why, etc. Then, the questionnaire is distributed among the students. They can either answer the questions individually or work in small groups.
2. If the pupils work individually, once the questionnaire is done, they can compare their own answers with those of their peers. The bibliography and web sites provided at the end of this activity will be useful to find out the information needed. It might also be interesting to have the pupils answer the questionnaire without support materials to get an idea of their previous knowledge.
3. The last step of this exercise will be the sharing of results: correction of questions and discussion of results with the teacher.
4. Other complementary activities that can be done by the students are the following:

- ?? Production of maps of different European countries (or the whole continent) on which languages are shown in different colours.
- ?? A quiz (that can also be done in groups or individually) consisting of collecting examples of how to count from 1 to 10, or how to say hello in different languages. The teacher will find the replies on the website: Jennifer's Language Page [<http://www.elite.net/~runner/jennifers/>] that offers short sentences, common expressions and words in hundreds of different languages as well as links to similar sites. The winner is the group or student who collects the largest number of languages.
- ?? If the group is linguistically diverse, the students can do some research on the linguistic diversity in the students' countries of origin and/or the countries of their parents. Some of the data they could collect are: how many languages are spoken in those countries, how many people speak each language, what is the writing system of those languages, if any, what languages are used in the school or in the media, what languages have an official status, etc. A world map that reflects the results of the students' work can be drawn and used later to decorate the class.

5. Discovery Channel vignettes activity

6. Text: Linguistic genocide

Evaluation

Pupils should be asked about their feelings after learning that so many languages are in danger of disappearing; they should also be asked if they think that linguistic diversity is as important as biological diversity, if they think that the loss of diversity only affects far-off countries and exotic cultures, or what proposals they would make to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity.

Materials

Test

- How many languages approximately are now spoken in the world?
 - Between 5,000 and 6,000
 - Around 2,000
 - Around 1,000
 - Around 400
- According to some estimates, how many languages can disappear during the 21st century?
 - 90 %
 - 75 %
 - 50 %
 - 10 %
- In which of the following countries are there more languages?
 - In the USA
 - In China
 - In Russia
 - In Indonesia
- Which of the following languages has more speakers?
 - Bengali
 - Italian
 - Russian
 - Japanese
- What percentage of the world's languages has less than 1 million of native speakers?
 - 10 %
 - 30 %
 - 70 %
 - 95 %
- What percentage of the world's languages is spoken in Europe?
 - 15 %
 - 25 %
 - 3 %
 - 10 %

7. In which of the following European countries only one language is spoken?
- A. Germany B. Iceland C. Greece D. Poland
8. In which of the following European countries more languages are spoken?
- A. In Spain B. In Italy C. In Sweden D. In the UK
9. What do the following languages have in common? Sami, Frisian, Breton, Irish.
- A. They are Germanic languages
B. They are languages in danger of disappearing
C. They are official languages in several European countries
D. They are languages with more than 1 million speakers each
10. Which of the following languages does not belong to the Indo-European family?
- A. Catalan B. English C. Czech D. Hungarian

~~Answers~~

- 1. A.** Experts usually agree on the existence of approximately 5,000-6,000 languages in the world, although it is very difficult to determine their exact number because of political reasons (what is a language or a dialect depends sometimes on political grounds) and because languages often form a linguistic continuum in which it is very difficult to establish borders. Furthermore, there is still very little information about the linguistic diversity of some regions of the world and research is needed to document a great number of languages.
- 2. A.** According to some estimates, up to 90 % of the now extant languages might disappear before 2100 if the current trend is not inverted. Other more optimistic estimates say that 'only' 50 % will be lost.
- 3. D.** In Indonesia about 670 languages are spoken and, after Papua-New Guinea (850 languages), is the second most linguistically diverse country in the world.
- 4. A.** Bengali has around 190 million speakers and it is the main language of Bangladesh. It is also spoken in India and it was the language of the Nobel Prize in literature Rabindranath Tagore. Around 170 million people speak Russian, 125 million Japanese and 55 million Italian. The most spoken language in the world is Mandarin Chinese with around 850 million speakers.
- 5. D.** Languages with millions of speakers are not frequent. Only very few languages —generally as a consequence of an imperialistic expansion— are spoken by a high number of speakers. About 80 languages have more than 10 million speakers. The average number of speakers of a language is between 5,000 and 6,000 people.
- 6. C.** Europe is a very poor continent as regards linguistic diversity. The percentage of languages spoken in other continents is the following: 15 % in the Americas, 30 % in Africa, 32 % in Asia and 20 % in the Pacific region.
- 7. B.** Iceland is an exceptional case of monolingual state. Most countries in the world are multilingual. This is a logical consequence of the relation between the number of states (less than 200) and the number of languages in the world (around 6,000). In Germany, apart from German, the following languages are spoken: Danish, Frisian, Luxemburgish, Polish, Romani, Sorab and Yiddish. In Greece, apart from Greek, the following languages are spoken: Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Romani, Macedonian and Turkish. In Poland, apart from

Polish, these languages are spoken: German, Belorussian, Kashubian, Romani, Ukrainian.

8. B. In Italy 16 languages are spoken: Albanian, Catalan, Corsican, Occitan, French, Friulan, **Italian**, German, Greek, Ladin, Ligur, Romani, Sardinian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, Venetian. In Spain: **Spanish**, Galician, Basque, Catalan, Aragonese, Asturian, Romani, Aranese. In Sweden: **Swedish**, Romani, Sami and Finnish. In the United Kingdom: **English**, French, Irish, Scots Gaelic, Romani and Welsh.

Languages in bold letters are official in the whole state. Besides all these autochthonous languages, many non-European languages also form part of the linguistic diversity of many European countries due to immigration. Some of these languages are: Chinese, Arabic, Amazigh (Berber), Kurdish, Punjabi, Wolof, Yoruba, Igbo, Quechua, etc.

9. B. Apart from these languages, many other European languages have an uncertain future or are clearly in danger of disappearing. Some examples are: Corsican, Occitan, Ladin, Scottish Gaelic, Aragonese, Mirandese, etc.

10. D. Hungarian belongs to the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic family. Finnish, Karelian —in danger of disappearing— and Estonian also belong to that branch. Romance, Germanic, Slavic and Celtic languages all belong to the Indo-European family. Basque is an isolated language of unknown origin.

Discovery Channel Endangered Languages Vignettes

a. Introduction to the languages showed in the vignettes

Scots Gaelic

It is spoken in Scotland and still has around 55.000 speakers. It is primarily used on the West coast of Scotland and the Islands of Hebrides and Skye and is threatened by the expansion of English.

Sami

About 15.000 people speak this language in Northern Sweden, Finland and Norway. It is also known as Lappish, although this name is pejorative. Even though today only a small proportion of the Sami people are nomadic reindeer-herders, this part of traditional Sami life remains very important to the Sami cultural practice.

Haida

It is spoken by only 165 people that live on the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia in Canada. Traditional Haida society was organized into many single matrilineal villages composed of one to several house groups. Shamans were important members in the Haida community. Typical of the Haida art are the numerous splendid carved totem poles.

Kadazandusun

This language community is the largest of the Sabah Island in Malaysia with a population of approximately 300.000 inhabitants that speak 13 varieties of the Kadazandusun language. They are traditionally farmers that occupy the fertile plains of the west coast and the interior.

Ainu

The Ainu mainly live in the Island of Hokkaido and the Kuril Islands. Most of the Ainu population have assimilated to Japanese or Russian culture and only 150 people speak the Ainu language. Scholars have advocated various theories about the origin of the Ainu people and their language although no definitive agreement has been reached.

Sharda

It is a writing system used in Kashmir, a region of India. Almost all the ancient Sanskrit literature of Kashmir is written in this script.

Idu Mishmi

The Mishmis occupy the northeastern tip of the central Arunachal Pradesh region of India with a population of around 8.500 people. The Mishmis' main occupation is agriculture and the religion is Hindu.

Cucapá

Cucapá is an endangered language spoken by about 500 speakers in México and the USA. There are around 178 speakers in the Baja California region and the rest in the USA. The Cucapá have traditionally been hunter-gatherers, fishermen and agriculturalists, cultivating maize.

Tobas

The Toba language is spoken in three countries: Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina. In Argentina the Toba population is about 36.000 people. The Tobas constitute rural or urban communities with their traditional leaders or local commissions whose members are elected by the community. The Toba have lived in political and economic dependency of the dominant society. In spite of this, with time, they recovered the sense of being 'Indian' and the will to fight for their rights.

b. Activities to work with the vignettes

1.

The students can write down a list of the answers the speakers of endangered language in the clips give to the question: Why is it important for them to speak their own language?

Some possible answers:

- ~~✎~~ Because language is the most significant and characteristic part of culture.
- ~~✎~~ Because the literary tradition, the songs and the music are expressed through their languages.
- ~~✎~~ Because they are proud to speak the language of their ancestors and it is important to transmit it to their children.
- ~~✎~~ Because the traditional knowledge is expressed through their own language.
- ~~✎~~ Because they have a strong sense of identity that is built through their language.
- ~~✎~~ Because their language connects them with nature...

2.

The class is divided into eight groups. Each of them will work on one of the languages of the vignettes. With the help of encyclopaedias, reference books, Internet, the pupils draft a short report on the people and their language. They may search information about the linguistic family the language belongs to or the number of languages spoken in the referred country, i.e. the United Kingdom, Sweden, Canada, Malaysia, Japan, India, Mexico and Argentina. For further information about the characters in the vignettes, go to the website: <http://www.un.org/works/index.html> (available in English, French and Spanish). Two other interesting websites on the languages of the world are that of the Laval University on language planning worldwide: <http://www.tlfg.ulaval.ca/axl/index.shtml> and the world-famous *Ethnologue*: <http://www.ethnologue.com>

TEXT

Linguistic genocide

In 1788 aboriginal peoples constituted more or less 100 % of Australia's population. The pre-colonial population may have been up to one and a half million. In 1861 they were about 13 % of the population. When the colonizers came, they hunted down and killed Aboriginal peoples like animals. These were by some researchers considered to be the missing link between apes and human beings. The first 'white' formal education was provided by missionaries, of course children had had informal education for millennia. Many children were taken away from their parents to be educated on mission stations. Both then and later, many lost contact with their parents completely and needed to find them again as grown-ups. Many also lost their languages. Even in situations where the missionaries reduced their languages to writing and translated the Bible into their languages, the Aboriginal culture was condemned and the missionaries tried to eradicate it as barbaric and pagan. On the reserves, the level of education considered appropriate for Aborigines was up to fourth grade of primary school. In the towns, Aboriginal children were not free to enter ordinary state schools in New South Wales until 1949. In 1986 the 227.645 Aborigines formed 1.44 % of the population. Of the original 200-250 languages, at least 50 are now extinct while another 100 or so face imminent death. In the mid-1980s, only 50 languages had more than 100 speakers, 28 of them more than 250 speakers and only 9 of them more than one thousand speakers. According to the 1976 census, there were only 25.572 people above the age of five in Australia who regularly used one of the Aboriginal languages. No aboriginal languages are official languages in Australia.

Adapted from 'Aboriginal Peoples in Australia', pp. 54-55, in Linguistic Rights in Education or Worldwide Linguistic Diversity? Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000).

Some questions on the text :

What language has expanded all over Australia at the expense of aboriginal languages? Do you know any other continent that went through a similar process? Could you name any Australian aboriginal language? Is Australia nowadays a country where only English is spoken? What do you know about the linguistic situation in the neighbouring country New Zealand?

Answers

English has been the colonizing language to which most Australian Aborigines have assimilated. America has had a similar history in terms of colonization and of the physical and cultural genocide of their original populations. On this web site <http://www.dnathan.com/VL/austLang.htm> a lot of information on Australian languages can be found. Today, Australia is a multicultural and multilingual country and, apart from English and some autochthonous languages, many other languages are spoken as a consequence of immigration. The most spoken immigrant languages are: Chinese, Italian, Greek, Arabic and Vietnamese. In New Zealand, Maori, the autochthonous language of the islands, is along with English an official language; it can be learned at schools and has experimented a process of revitalization in the last years.

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