1997-2017: Twenty Years of Innovation and Research about Awakening to Languages-Evlang Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The project Developing the Language Awareness Approach in the Nordic and Baltic Countries (DELA-NOBA) is inscribed within the development of research about ‘Awakening to languages’ (AtL). Twenty years have elapsed between the founding Evlang program and DELA-NOBA results. The aim of this article is to cast light on those years. In this paper, the authors analyse the historical development of research projects which led to the present implementation of ‘pluralistic approaches’ within European educational systems. The contribution will also refer to the dissemination and integration of AtL into curricula and content-based teaching in various European contexts.

KEYWORDS

European Centre for Modern Languages, Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures, Janua Linguarum, Languages Sensitive Curriculum, School Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The “Awakening to languages” (AtL) approach refers to the implementation of comparative activities between several languages in class. Those languages include the language(s) of schooling, the “foreign”, local or minority language(s) taught in the target context but also languages that are NOT intended to be taught, which may or may not be the mother tongues of some pupils (Candelier, 2003a). The aim of the approach is to develop attitudes and knowledge in keeping with a crucial issue in today’s societies: openness to other languages, cultures and speakers.

The first part of this contribution will recall the institutional context, didactic options and main issues of the Evlang project, which can be considered as the founding project within the field and compare them to those developed in the most recent project DELA-NOBA, developed by Nordplus Horizontal from July 2013 et July 2016 (see Daryai-Hansen, Layne & Tonello in this special issue). The second part will focus on the educational issues which have allowed each of these two programs to emerge. It will identify significant trends which have developed within the last twenty years, including the burgeoning of the concept of ‘pluralistic approaches’ and the designing and dissemination of the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches (FREPA-http://carap.ecml.at). Finally, the authors will point to the various modes of integration of the approach within teaching procedures, curricula and language policies in Europe.

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EVLANG: A FOUNDING PROJECT

Evlang (Éveil aux langues à l’école primaire) is a European program supported by the European Commission (Lingua action D, 1997-2001). Despite their wish to stress the continuity between this movement and their own work, the promoters of the Evlang project did not choose “Language awareness” or “Awareness of language” as the English equivalent of “Éveil aux langues”, but “Awakening to languages”. They wanted to delimit a specific area within the domain of Language awareness research, which has also been generating studies that are more psycho-linguistic than pedagogical and does not necessarily involve confronting the learner with a number of languages. It included thirty researchers and teacher-trainers and a large network of primary-school teachers from five countries (Austria, Spain, Italy, France and Switzerland). AtL was seen as a possible way to go a step forward from the developments of the Awareness of Language movement in the UK (Hawkins, 1984; Donmall, 1985). The Evlang partners felt the need to know whether the approach could be applied on a broader scale and was realistic with regard to the means to be implemented. They wanted to investigate scientifically (with a research design including the elaboration of hypothesis and the use of quantitative qualitative and qualitative methods) whether it could lead to the anticipated results when applied in regular classes in different contexts. Some of the participants were specialists in foreign languages teaching (especially at primary school which was a fairly new field of investigation at the time). Others were working on the teaching of French as the language of schooling and wanted to test the effects of multilingual activities on performance in French. The project also involved researchers interested in the inclusion of migrant children in society and more specifically in class. The Evlang project research activities were developed in three directions: the creation of didactic materials for children at upper primary level (9-11 years old); the design of a training course for teachers who are likely to implement these courses in their usual classes; a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of these courses.

Concerning teaching material, thirty didactic units – developed in cooperation with teachers – were produced and implemented in class. Here is a list of these domains as planned at the beginning of the Evlang project:

1. The links between languages and cultures
2. The links between languages: history and evolution of languages, loans
3. We don’t speak as we write, and we don’t write as we speak.
4. Verbal and non-verbal communication
5. Writing systems, sound and written form
6. Regularities in the language (morphosyntax, lexik, text…)
7. Language variation
8. Phonological systems
9. Languages in space: the pupil and languages, the environment, Europe, the world…
11. The status of languages
12. The appropriation of languages: acquisition and learning.

Evlang materials mainly focused on the 2nd domain (the links between languages: history and evolution of languages, loans), the 5th (writing systems: sound and written form) and the 9th (languages in space: the child and the languages, the environment, Europe, the world…).

The teaching materials produced or adapted within he DELA-NOBA project are organized around those same twelve domains, borrowed from Evlang. The materials adapted or produced for the Nordic and Baltic countries mostly concern the 1st (languages and culture), 2nd (history of languages) and 6th (regularities in language) domains. The 3rd (spoken and written language) and the 2d (loans and
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