

# Esperanto and language awareness

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Esperanto, designed as a neutral lingua franca (i.e. second language) for worldwide use, has been taught and learned for over a century, to such an extent that a flourishing oral and written culture is associated with the language. Although global linguistic hierarchies, in particular the hegemony of national languages within state borders and of a small subset of these languages in international communication, have ensured Esperanto's virtual exclusion from educational systems, a considerable number of Esperanto teachers and learners attest to exciting educational experiences in the language. Among the latter are a range of language awareness effects, including awareness of linguistic inequality, linguistic structure, and the sociocultural functions of language. Such experiences can transform students' perception of the world through the awakening of awareness and interest in other cultures, and lead to a reassessment of their own linguistic heritage together with the social practices and power relations in which it is enmeshed.

## Early Developments

The basis for Esperanto was published in 1887 by Dr. Lejzer (Ludovic) Zamenhof, a brilliant and idealistic Jewish ophthalmologist in Warsaw. The idea of a planned international language was not a new one, but Zamenhof contributed the crucial insight that it must develop through collective use; accordingly, he restricted his initial proposal to a minimalist grammatical sketch, a vocabulary of some 900 words, some samples of poetry and prose, and a persuasive introductory essay. He believed that people from any background could learn the language 'as if in play', thanks to a transparent morphology and syntax freed from most of the complexities and inconsistencies of European languages (for an accessible overview, see Janton 1993: 41-89). Linked to Zamenhof's linguistic work was a progressively developed and refined critique of the links between language and nationalism (Zamenhof 1929; Lieberman 1979).

Over the fifteen years following its launch, Esperanto's written norms slowly developed through its use in correspondence, periodicals and printed works by a small but growing community of users scattered throughout Europe and the European colonies. Its use in spoken communication was rare in this period, but grew rapidly following the first international congress in 1905. By the outbreak of the First World War, the language and its speech community were firmly established, and there were many instances in the war years of Esperanto speakers and organizations helping one another across national divides. After the war, there was a surge of interest in Esperanto among working-class and socialist movements both in Europe and elsewhere (e.g. China, Japan), and an inspirational teacher, Andreo Cseh, founded an adult education movement based on the direct instruction of Esperanto without the use of the learner's first language (Lapenna, Lins & Carlevaro 1974).

In 1922 the Rousseau Institute of Educational Science in Geneva organized the first International Conference on the Teaching of Esperanto in Schools, with the support of the League of Nations. The conference report drew attention to Esperanto's effectiveness in arousing interest in other peoples and cultures, as well as its use as an introduction to foreign language study (Lapenna,

Lins & Carlevaro 1974). Shortly afterwards, the noted educational psychologist E.L. Thorndike undertook the first of several studies at Columbia University on the acquisition of Esperanto (Thorndike et al. 1933). This research confirmed the relative ease with which Esperanto could be learned (an estimated one-fifth of the time required by 'an average college senior or graduate' to learn French, German, Italian or Spanish to the same level), and suggested that the prior study of Esperanto facilitated the learning of French, a so-called 'propaedeutic' effect. However, the experimental conditions were not adequate to allow strong conclusions to be drawn (Fantini & Reagan 1992).

### Major Contributions

The Second World War had dramatic consequences for the teaching and learning of Esperanto. Two of the most vigorous national movements, in Germany and the Soviet Union, had been persecuted to the brink of extinction; the onset of the Cold War divided the European movements; and the rise of the United States to superpower status enhanced the status of English throughout the democratic and colonized worlds. The tale of Esperanto's survival is a gripping one, although it cannot be recounted here. It is important to note, however, that global politics have marginalized the scholarly study of the language, including research into its use in education. There are no comprehensive studies available in Esperanto of its instruction in Central and Eastern Europe, or in China, although these countries have probably accounted for the majority of Esperanto learners and teachers over the last half century. The present review draws on reports of a small number of educational experiments, primarily in Western Europe, and a larger number of narrative accounts and essays.

The 'experiments' in question resemble the Columbia study mentioned above, in that they have usually set out to measure the effects of Esperanto instruction on the subsequent learning of other languages. The logic behind this approach is easy to understand. Esperanto's marginal position in the global language order has meant that teachers have often seen their strongest argument as presenting it as a 'modern Latin' for the beginning language learner. In justification it is argued that Esperanto's regularity and morphological transparency provide an ideal model for students to take the first tentative steps away from their mother tongue. In other words, learning Esperanto leads to an awareness of linguistic structure which can be built on in learning other languages.

The experimental data offer some support for this view. The headmaster of a secondary school near Manchester, England, found consistently over an 18-year period that pupils who learned Esperanto for a year acquired a level of fluency in the language equivalent to four years of French study, and subsequently achieved a higher level in French after three years of study than those pupils who learned only French for four years. These conclusions were based on tests of pupils' ability to translate phrases of equivalent meaning from Esperanto or French into English, since comparing the quality of their translations into French or Esperanto proved to be difficult. The same teacher also found a strong positive effect of Esperanto study on results in General English (Williams 1965). The effects were strongest for pupils who scored low on a range of intelligence tests, and extended to eight of 11 categories of language skills tested (Halloran 1952).

Similar results have since been reported for Finnish pupils learning Esperanto followed by German; German pupils learning Esperanto followed by English; Japanese pupils learning

Esperanto followed by English; and Italian pupils learning Esperanto followed by French (Maxwell 1988; Corsetti & La Torre 1995; and references therein). The finding that the learning of Esperanto positively influences students' awareness of their mother tongue has been reported independently in a number of contexts, most notably the Hawaii English Program, where several units in Esperanto were introduced in approximately one-third of all sixth grade classes in the early 1970s (Wood 1975; Piron 1986; Fantini & Reagan 1992).

On the negative side, all of these studies suffer from the usual limitations of educational research, and collectively they clearly represent only a fraction of the situations in which Esperanto has been or might be taught. Controls have frequently been inadequate, and in propaedeutic studies the 'target language' (L3) in all cases has been a Western European language lexically related to Esperanto. A strong argument can therefore be made that detailed conclusions about the propaedeutic value of Esperanto must await more sophisticated studies which would measure a range of linguistic skills for various combinations of L1 and L3 (Corsetti & La Torre 1995).

The translator and psychologist Claude Piron, in the course of a broader sociolinguistic study, has nonetheless developed a persuasive theoretical foundation for the propaedeutic hypothesis (Piron 1986; 1994). For second language learners in a non-immersion setting, according to Piron's analysis, language learning occurs through a lengthy process of cognitive and motor deconditioning and reconditioning, in which the student's urge to generalize from limited data is constantly frustrated. Esperanto, because of the extreme productiveness of a small number of rules and morphemes, allows students to freely employ both convergent and divergent forms of reasoning, and thereby stimulates linguistic confidence and linguistic creativity, with all that these may entail for language learning and language use in general. By contrast, other second languages involve 'propelling the student from one complex, rigid and arbitrary system to another equally complex, rigid and arbitrary system, with no attempt to facilitate the articulation between the systems in any concrete way' (Piron 1994: 322).

Interesting though propaedeutic effects are, they are not of central relevance to the broader goals of language awareness, particularly the critical variety advocated by Fairclough and his colleagues (Clark et al. 1990; Fairclough 1992). These aspects of Esperanto pedagogy have received little attention from researchers. Indeed, Esperanto's marginal status tends to make its defenders (and teachers, perhaps, more than others) play down any suggestions that it might lead students to question existing linguistic hierarchies. Yet this is precisely what Esperanto can do, in a variety of ways that provide a valuable complement to other language awareness strategies.

To begin at the least controversial level, the fact that learners rapidly acquire basic communicative skills distinguishes Esperanto from virtually any other approach to awareness of linguistic difference. Rather than simply learning about difference, students can be enabled to experience it for themselves. Important concepts that lack meaning and relevance to monolingual students, such as the constraints on translatability and the links between language and culture, are a natural part of Esperanto pedagogy (Lee 1993; Piron 1994). Although it is frequently asserted, or assumed, that Esperanto 'lacks a culture' (e.g. Mead & Modley 1967; Steiner 1974), from the start Esperanto has been viewed by its speakers as a cultural project as well as a linguistic one (Auld 1982a), dedicated both to cultivating an indigenous, non-national tradition (Dasgupta

1987; Richmond 1993) and to providing a forum for multicultural exchange (Auld 1982b; Cool 1993). A broader approach to language study at the post-secondary level, ending the traditional divide between the study of languages and the study of linguistics, would find Esperanto an ideal instrument for bridging the gap (Tonkin 1987).

This brings us to the claim that Esperanto can provide an important complement to the depth of study of a single foreign language and culture such as German or Russian. It avoids the danger of replacing a monocultural view merely with a bicultural one, and it can instead make a major contribution to helping students perceive the pluralistic nature of our new world (Sherwood 1982, 410).

Implicit here is a goal of multilingual awareness, a concept generally overlooked in the language awareness literature but which, along with awareness of linguistic inequality, forms an inseparable part of most textbooks and courses in Esperanto (e.g. Richardson 1988). This is easy to understand, since Esperanto's existence is premised on the multilingual nature of the world and the importance of the language of communication in establishing or reinforcing power relations between individuals and groups (Tonkin 1979). In this respect Esperanto provides a counterweight to received views of English as 'the' international language, an aspect of 'critical language awareness' familiar in the developing world but typically ignored in English-speaking countries (Lopes 1993).

In appropriate conditions, the access to reciprocal, egalitarian communication in a worldwide community can effect the type of transformative awareness that Freire (1972) referred to as 'consciencization'. For example, a young Chinese Malaysian woman learns Esperanto in her home country and in Poland. After a few weeks, she notes that 'one result isŠ that I now want to learn my mother tongue, Chinese. In Malaysia I never studied it, because there are few Chinese schools. Š Esperanto has made me regret my illiteracy in the language of my ancestors' (Piron 1994: 271). A young American is motivated by his experience of Esperanto to study linguistic discrimination among the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Asia; an African teacher discovers an international audience for his moving and humorous portrayals of village life; a Japanese journalist becomes involved with the restoration of daily life in Sarajevo (personal observations). Such odysseys of discovery are part of the accepted background to everyday communication in Esperanto, and point to the language's potential for enabling learners to reevaluate and transform their relationship with the world.

### Problems and Difficulties

Suggestive though the anecdotal evidence is, major obstacles remain to the effective deployment of Esperanto in the language awareness classroom. These obstacles are rooted both in external language hierarchies and in the discourse of the Esperanto community itself.

Since its inception, and particularly since the 1920s, Esperanto has been the object of many of the same kinds of prejudice as other non-national languages, for instance (in the U.S. context) Black English and American Sign Language (Reagan 1996). Esperanto can also be perceived as deeply threatening to monolinguals' sense of identity (Piron 1982). Educators, administrators and researchers are not immune to such influences, nor are they generally anxious to explore phenomena which the reigning discourse subjugates as 'marginal' or 'atypical'. As a result, most

worthwhile knowledge about Esperanto has been generated in the language itself, rendering it inaccessible to outside observers (Edwards 1993). Since knowledge which is not available in English or other national languages is frequently assumed not to exist, many scholars have felt entitled to make pronouncements about Esperanto which have little basis in reality, yet reinforce its marginal status (Auld 1982a; Piron 1994).

The lack of a broad social base has in turn directed much of the energy of the Esperanto community to fostering its internal cohesion rather than engaging in broader public debates about education, linguistic rights and related issues. Although awareness of linguistic diversity and discrimination is accepted as important by virtually all Esperanto speakers, it is not perceived as a truth that can or should be promoted on its own merits, since this might detract from the goal of recruiting new speakers to contribute to the community's survival and development. Indeed, a significant proportion of Esperanto speakers holds that a preoccupation with changing the world is actually a burden that the community would be better off without (Jordan 1987; Fettes 1996). Such discourses have made it difficult for the community to clearly articulate a rationale for the classroom use of Esperanto that is premised not on the learning of the language per se, but on the attainment of other educational goals (Fantini & Reagan 1992).

#### Future Directions

Clearly, the future development of Esperanto pedagogy depends crucially on how the obstacles identified in the previous section are resolved.

On the one hand, the dominant modernist discourse on language is being eroded in a variety of ways, ranging from post-structuralist critiques to the resurgence of small languages and a growing interest in multilingualism and linguistic rights (see my article on language planning in Volume 1). In the field of Esperanto studies, this has been accompanied by the involvement of a small but growing number of professional researchers, and the beginnings of a substantive dialogue with educational institutions at both the national and international levels. In the European Union, for instance, the effectiveness of Esperanto in mediating a balance of awareness between local linguistic identities and participation in an international community of nations fits well with contemporary rhetoric (Chiti-Batelli 1987). A proposal for an international experiment in teaching Esperanto as the first foreign language has been developed by group of Italian researchers (Corsetti & La Torre 1995), building on the recent establishment of a national training program for Esperanto teachers under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (La Torre, personal communication). Similarly, in the United States the feasibility of articulating a compelling rationale for Esperanto instruction in a language awareness framework, e.g. within English programs, courses in multicultural and global education, or as an introduction to foreign language study, is supported by preliminary research (Fantini & Reagan 1992).

Such initiatives can be viewed through the prism of postmodern sociology (Bauman 1992). One of the legacies of modernity is that countries throughout the world are now grappling with similar educational challenges. In the case of language awareness, these may be formulated as the need to educate about indigenous diversity, often in opposition to the hegemony of a single national language, and about global diversity, often in opposition to the hegemony of English. For Esperanto educators, these two sets of issues are intimately linked. An awareness of indigenous diversity that leaves English hegemony unchallenged is as partial a response as an

awareness of global diversity that takes only national languages into account. Recent developments within the Esperanto community suggest a growing readiness to engage in constructive debate on these issues (Fettes 1997).

Two general priorities can be identified. First, to integrate Esperanto studies, and interlinguistics more generally, within established research programs in the social sciences including education. Second, to develop high-quality teaching materials and courses for teachers which make full use of Esperanto's potential as it is currently understood. This article has reviewed evidence that both developments are amply justified and may lead to long-term benefits for language teaching and language awareness in general.

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