

Esperanto as a Springboard to Language Learning

Based on Tim Morley's talk "Learn Esperanto First", presented at TEDxGranta in Cambridge, United Kingdom, on 9 March 2012.

Thesis

Esperanto can function as a springboard: it develops language awareness, supports literacy and numeracy, gives children an early experience of successful language learning, and equips them with skills that can later be transferred to other languages.

Teaching foreign languages in primary school presents a particular problem. Many primary-school teachers are highly skilled at teaching young children but have little training in foreign languages, while specialist language teachers may be less accustomed to working with very young learners.

There is also a problem inherent in language learning itself. Before children can begin using French, Spanish or other languages creatively, they have to memorise vocabulary, conjugations, spelling, pronunciation, grammatical gender and numerous irregularities. They may therefore spend a long time learning the language before experiencing what it is like actually to use it.

Esperanto offers a different approach. Its purpose in primary education is not primarily to produce Esperanto speakers. Because it is simple and regular, it allows children to move quickly beyond memorisation towards understanding, applying, analysing and creatively using language.

From memorisation to language awareness

The central educational benefit of Esperanto is **language awareness**. Learning another language requires children to hold two linguistic systems in mind, switch between them, recognise patterns and discover correspondences between different ways of expressing the same idea.

Esperanto allows these skills to develop early because relatively little has to be memorised. This can be illustrated through **Bloom's taxonomy**:

Remembering → Understanding → Applying → Analysing → Evaluating → Creating

Primary-school language teaching can easily remain near the bottom of this hierarchy. Children learning French, Spanish or Mandarin may have to memorise a considerable amount before they can use the language independently.

Esperanto reduces this burden. Children can therefore move more rapidly towards the higher-order skills. Its simplicity is educationally important not merely because it makes learning easier, but because it changes **what children can do with a language at an early stage**.

This also creates a more inclusive experience. A larger proportion of a class can reach the point where they can actually use what they have learnt. Instead of concluding, “I am no good at languages,” children can experience themselves as successful language learners.

Literacy and numeracy

The benefits can extend beyond foreign-language learning.

Esperanto can strengthen children’s understanding of their **first language**. Young children struggling with reading may discover through Esperanto’s regular spelling that they are capable of decoding written language. Its transparent grammar can also make grammatical categories easier to recognise. An English-speaking child who has difficulty identifying an adjective in English may recognise it more easily after mentally translating the sentence into Esperanto, where adjectives are clearly marked.

Esperanto can even support **numeracy**. Its numbers reveal their mathematical structure: *dek unu* is literally “ten one”, *dudek* is “two tens”, and *dudek sep* is “two tens and seven”. For a child learning tens and units, the language itself makes the structure of the number visible.

Learning through patterns

The same principle applies to vocabulary.

Once a child knows *patro* and the suffix *-in-*, *patrino* follows systematically. From *hundo* and *-id-* come *hundido*, and the same rule produces *katido* and *kuniklido*. From *kontenta*, the prefix *mal-* produces *malkontenta*; from *granda*, *malgranda*.

This changes the nature of vocabulary learning. In many languages it is largely **additive**: each new word has to be learnt separately. In Esperanto it becomes **multiplicative**: each new root or word-building element combines with what the learner already knows and opens up a whole family of possible expressions.

Children therefore begin to discover and create words rather than simply memorise them. They can reach genuine creative language use surprisingly early.

Esperanto as the recorder of language learning

A musical analogy captures the idea.

If we want a seven-year-old eventually to play the bassoon, we do not normally begin by giving the child a bassoon. We start with a simpler instrument such as the recorder.

We do not teach the recorder because we expect every child to become a recorder player. Through a simple instrument, children learn rhythm, notation, keys, time signatures and harmony. That musical knowledge can later be transferred to more demanding instruments.

The same principle can be applied to languages.

French, Spanish or Chinese can resemble the bassoon: much has to be mastered before a young learner can use the instrument freely.

Esperanto is the recorder.

It gives children access to the fundamental experience of learning and using another language without first requiring them to overcome a large number of difficulties.

Do the skills transfer?

The crucial question is whether these skills can later be transferred to other languages.

An evaluation of the Springboard to Languages project by the University of Manchester's School of Education compared children who had studied Esperanto for about eighteen months but no French with children who had been learning French for two years.

When asked to decode an unfamiliar French sentence, the only children who successfully translated the entire sentence came from the Esperanto group. They used **metalinguistic decoding strategies** such as cognates, punctuation and context.

Overall, the French learners still performed somewhat better, but only marginally so. The Esperanto learners had almost caught up with them in a French test without having studied French.

What they had learnt, therefore, was not simply Esperanto. They had learnt **how to approach and decode a language**.

A practical advantage

Esperanto may also help solve a practical problem in primary schools. Because teachers themselves can learn it relatively quickly, ordinary class teachers can use it without first becoming specialist language teachers.

This can be particularly effective because the class teacher is present throughout the school day. Esperanto can appear in mathematics, English lessons and everyday classroom routines rather than remaining an isolated forty-five-minute language lesson.

It can also connect children with other cultures. British pupils have used Esperanto to communicate with classrooms in countries such as Slovenia, Hungary and Germany, experiencing another language as a genuine means of communication rather than simply a school subject.

Recap and Conclusion

The case for teaching Esperanto in primary schools does not depend on children using Esperanto throughout their adult lives. Its educational value lies in what they can learn **through** it.

Esperanto reduces the initial burden of memorisation and allows children to move more rapidly towards understanding, analysing and creating. It develops language awareness, can reinforce literacy and numeracy, and gives children an early experience of successful and creative language learning.

Most importantly, these skills are transferable. Children are not merely learning Esperanto words and rules; they are learning how languages work and how an unfamiliar language can be approached and decoded.

This brings us back to the recorder analogy. We do not teach children the recorder because we expect them all to become recorder players. A simple instrument gives them access to the deeper structures of music and prepares them for more demanding instruments.

Esperanto can perform the same function for language learning. It is not the final destination. It is the springboard.