

The Rationale of the *Springboard* Project

The propaedeutic effect

Numerous studies since the 1920s have consistently confirmed that learning Esperanto increases a learner's motivation through a sense of early achievement, leading to a subsequent improvement when learning additional languages. Such a 'propaedeutic effect' (facilitating further study) is well known in educational psychology and is regularly exploited in a range of disciplines from music to mathematics.

The usual experimental model involves two parallel, matched groups of children studying for typically two or three years. One group learns a foreign language – say, French or German – for the whole period; the other studies Esperanto for one year (or longer in some cases), followed by the foreign language for the remaining time. At the end of the experimental period, both groups are given a standardised test in the foreign language. Consistently, the group who studied Esperanto before the foreign language performs markedly better than the control group.

For example, in Budapest in the 1960s, Professor István Szerdahelyi found the following propaedeutic effects on Hungarian children: in learning Russian, a gain of 25%; in German, 30%; in English, 40%; and in French, 50%.

A similar study in Germany in the 1970s used a larger sample and concentrated on learning English; it found a gain of 30% in standardised tests. In terms of a five-year course, this is equivalent to gaining a year and a half.

Language awareness

Bilingual children possess greater 'cognitive flexibility' than their monolingual peers. This idea was first proposed by Peal & Lambert (1962), and the literature of recent years has increasingly confirmed it. Cognitive flexibility reveals itself in a variety of forms of thinking, from spatial perception through logical-mathematical reasoning to various aspects of language processing, particularly those involving metalinguistic behaviour. (For a review of the literature, see Reynolds 1991. See also Baker & Prys-Jones 1998, and Pinto 2002.)

Monolingual and bilingual children therefore differ in their 'language awareness': their awareness of certain patterns – parts of speech, word order, endings, inflexion, agreement, and number – and of how these vary between one's mother tongue and other languages. Good language awareness makes language learning significantly easier. It is precisely for this reason that monolingual British children gain so much from learning a second language.

One can draw upon the heightened language awareness associated with bilingualism to increase competence in English itself, and in any other language subsequently learned. As Byalystok (1988) has noted, important effects of this metalinguistic awareness are that it can facilitate the earlier acquisition of reading, and that it may relate to higher levels of attainment in a variety of curriculum areas. Several studies demonstrate just such an effect on mother-tongue competence in children who learn Esperanto, even if only for one hour a week over a period of one year (Pinto & Corsetti 2001).

Language awareness is an important predictor of third-language acquisition (Jessner 1999), where the connections between two languages already known act as a stepping stone to the third. To quote Safant Jordà (2005) directly: ‘Considering current research, we are able to assume that bilingual learners will acquire an additional language faster and more efficiently.’

Studies on third-language acquisition are now on the increase, mainly in Europe, where to the learner’s regional language is often added the national language, and later a language for wider communication, such as English (Broeder & Extra 1999). But three-language situations can be found in other continents too (Rubagumya 1994, Tickoo 1996, Dutcher 1998).

These studies demonstrate that knowledge of a second language always assists the learning of a third.

The nature of Esperanto

Esperanto is, relatively, a very easy language. Its lexicon is borrowed from national languages, but its distinctive grammatical character places it centrally among inflected, agglutinative, and isolating languages. There are in fact elements of all these types of language in Esperanto (Gledhill 1998).

- The lexicon derives mainly from languages of the Romance (Latin) and Germanic groups, although there is significant input from other groups too.
- The language’s grammar is, however, unique. As well as the lexical morphemes, there is a range of grammatical morphemes that specify each word’s role within a sentence. Wells (1989) summarised the character of Esperanto as a) highly agglutinative, b) not particularly synthetic, c) having regular morphemes, and d) having only one declension and one conjugation.

Many experiments have been conducted to discover how easily Esperanto can be learned, beginning with the pioneering work of Thorndike (1933). Without exception, the conclusions have been positive. The only question remaining today is how easy Esperanto is to learn relative to the various mother tongues of different students (Nagata & Corsetti 2005).

Esperanto’s regular structure and grammatical transparency lead the learner to reflect on how languages operate. By contrast, the general absence of function indicators on the words of an English sentence – a lack that English compensates for with a fixed word order – means that a monolingual speaker of English cannot begin to imagine how other languages, with richer morphological systems, work.

The fact that Esperanto is easy to learn allows children to start genuinely *using* it earlier; this gives them a sense of success, which in turn motivates them to further language learning. Such observations of the propaedeutic effect are to be found throughout the literature on the teaching of Esperanto.

Linguistic distance

Another important factor in the acquisition of a third language is ‘linguistic distance’. It is likely that a learner will find it easier to master a third language that is typologically close to their second.

Linguistic distance can only be defined in relative terms: some language pairs are mutually closer or more distant than others.

It must also be analysed at various linguistic levels: phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic. For example, English is typologically a Germanic language, but historical events have produced a large number of loan-words from Latin and the Romance languages.

Similarly, Esperanto has a linguistic structure that contains elements of all language groups (Wells 1989) and a lexicon drawn mainly from Romance and Germanic.

For an English-speaking child, the propaedeutic effect derived from Esperanto therefore applies (at least at the morphological level) to all Indo-European languages that are more conservative than English – that is: to all such languages with the possible exception of Persian. It can even assist the learning of languages as distant as the Slavic languages, or Urdu or Hindi. On the other hand, at the lexical level, help with learning Romance or Germanic languages is more apparent.

For studies on the propaedeutic effect of Esperanto on the learning of subsequent languages by English-speaking children, see for example Halloran (1959).

Field studies

The first documented field study was made at the Girls’ County School, Bishop Auckland, UK, from 1918–21, under the supervision of HM Inspectors of Schools. Since then, major studies have included:

1920	Green Lane School, Eccles, UK
1922	League of Nations Official Enquiry, Geneva, Switzerland
1922–24	Bishop’s Elementary School, Auckland, New Zealand
1924	Wellesley College, Ohio, USA
1925–31	Columbia University, New York, USA (Prof. E. Thorndike)
1934–35	Public High School, New York, USA
1947–51	County Grammar School, Sheffield, UK (University of Sheffield)
1948–61	Egerton Park School, Manchester, UK
1950–63	Somero, Finland (Ministry of Education)
1962–63	Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary (Prof. I. Szerdahelyi)
1971–74	22 classes from Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Bulgaria
1972–73	Scuola Elementare Dante, Forlì, Italy (Ministry of Education)
1975–77	300 pupils from Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands
1977–83	University of Paderborn, Germany (Prof. H. Frank)
1983–88	Scuola Media, San Salvatore di Cogorno, Italy
1993	Official Report: Ministry of Education, Italy
1994–97	Monash University, Victoria, Australia (Prof. A. Bishop)

Of all these studies, perhaps the most thorough were those by Professor Helmar Frank of the University of Paderborn, Germany, in the 1970s and 1980s. It was these large-scale studies that led to the concept of language awareness.

It has been observed that language awareness is most easily developed through a relatively simple, regular, phonetic, and recognisable language such as Esperanto. Professor Alan Bishop of the Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia, summed up the research evidence in the final report of his own field study (2000):

'It was clear from experiments ... that Esperanto helped learners make a good, quick start in learning their second ... language.'

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November 2005

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