

What Esperanto Offers Language Teachers

A. Giridhar Rao

What is Esperanto?

Esperanto is the most widely spoken constructed international auxiliary language in the world. Initiated by Ludwik Lazarz Zamenhof (1859-1917), it was designed as a universal second language that is easy to learn, and is not the cultural property of any linguistic or ethnic community. In 1887, Zamenhof published (in Russian) his *International Language: Foreword and Complete Textbook* (Zamenhof, 2006) under the pseudonym "Doktoro Esperanto" (Doctor One-who-hopes), from which the name of the language derives.

Esperanto as a Foundation Course

As early as 1908, the Polish Esperantist Antoni Grabowski wrote a paper entitled "Esperanto as a preparation for the learning of languages". Since then, many studies have demonstrated the value of Esperanto as a foundation course (For brief descriptions, see "Propaedeutic value of Esperanto" in the English Wikipedia). More specifically, the large-scale studies conducted by Helmar Frank (Corsetti, 2005), from the 1970s, and the more recent studies by Zlatko Tišljär (1996) demonstrate the impact of Esperanto on the learning of the target language. According to the studies, there is a thirty per cent gain in standardized tests in the target language, for children who have done a foundation course in Esperanto, and then learnt the target language, compared to those who did not do the foundation course.

As language learning research shows, language awareness is an important predictor of third

language acquisition (Jessner, 1999). Also, metalinguistic awareness, in fact, feeds back into mother-tongue competence as well (Pinto and Corsetti, 2001). In several studies, Esperanto learners have shown greater language awareness as compared to learners of other foreign languages (Corsetti, 2005).

Monash University in Australia ran a project called EKPAROLI between 1994 and 1997. Interestingly, the name of the project is an Esperanto acronym for 'Esperanto as a preparatory method for speeding up Asian language learning and teaching'; in Esperanto, the word *ekparoli* also means 'to begin to speak'. This primary school project compared several 'Languages Other Than English' (LOTEs), and found that Esperanto was a better LOTE than the other LOTEs in the project-German, Indonesian, or Japanese-on several counts. Project coordinator Alan Bishop concluded:

Thus one should be choosing a first LOTE

- in which the children will gain early success
- which they will enjoy learning
- which will show them how important LOTE study is
- which will prepare them successfully for later LOTE study

According to the research in the EKPAROLI project, Esperanto meets all these criteria better than the other languages in the study (Bishop, 1997).

As part of the on-going project *Springboard to Languages*, Esperanto is taught as a 'starter language' in several primary schools in the UK.

Giving an analogy, their website says:

Many schools used to teach children the recorder, not to produce a nation of recorder players, but as a preparation for learning other instruments. Springboard uses Esperanto, not to produce a nation of Esperanto-speakers, but as a preparation for learning other languages.

According to a five-year case study of the project:

The children participating in the programme:

- showed, on average, considerable facility when confronted with metalinguistic tasks requiring them to access unknown languages or to transfer knowledge between languages;
- often performed as well as-and on occasion even outperformed-peers who were older, had more experience of learning languages, or had been exposed to a language-taster programme;
- generally developed a positive attitude towards speakers of other languages;
- reported enjoyment of their language lessons, thought that learning a language was fun, and looked forward to learning other languages;

and that staff participating in the programme, including non-specialist language teachers felt that:

- overall... the programme was fulfilling its aims;
- the regularity of Esperanto helped with the development of children's literacy and even numeracy skills;
- lower-ability children in particular might benefit from the learning of a regular language such as Esperanto (Tellier, 2013, p. 35).

Indeed, many of these studies have emphasized the benefits of Esperanto for the linguistically

non-gifted student. Summarizing the extensive studies in an essay, "The Rationale of the Springboard Project" Renato Corsetti declares, "The only question remaining today is how easy Esperanto is to learn relative to the various mother tongues of different students" (Nagata and Corsetti, 2005). All these studies lead us to believe that there is a good case to be made out for Esperanto as a valuable resource in promoting language learning and multilingualism.

What Makes Esperanto Easy?

So what is special about Esperanto? Detlev Blanke (2009), lists seven "Causes of the relative success of Esperanto". These are:

1. Lexical sources are easily recognisable for many
2. Esperanto has an easily grasped phonology
3. Phonological alphabet and simple orthography
4. Lacks morphemic variants
5. Allows for easy combinability of morphemes through productive word formation
6. Open to the assimilation of new international lexical elements
7. Esperanto is characterised by unambiguous marking of the principal classes of words and grammatical categories

Let us see points 5 and 7 in action:

In Esperanto, all nouns end in -o, and all adjectives in -a. Take *ĉevalo*, for example -the word for 'horse'. Look at the following series:

ĉevalo = a horse or stallion

ĉevalino = female-horse, a mare

ĉevalido = horse-offspring, a foal or colt

ĉevalidino = female-offspring of horse (combining the two affixes *-id-* and *-in-*); a filly

ĉevalejo = a stable (place where a horse is kept)

ĉevala = equine or horse-like (since all adjectives end in *-a*)

Notice how economical the word formation is. With just one root, 'ĉeval-' we have produced six words: *ĉevalo*, *ĉevalino*, *ĉevalido*, *ĉevalidino*, *ĉevalejo* and *ĉevala*. In contrast, in English, to understand all the derivatives of the word 'horse', is to know the whole word family of horses: horse, stallion, mare, foal, colt, filly, stable, and equine-eight words with different spellings and etymologies. Moreover, this is not unique to English. As we know, all languages demand a huge investment of time and effort in memorizing words. The Esperanto word-making strategy, in contrast, cuts down the learning time to a fraction of the time needed for other languages.

Take another series of affixes in Esperanto, this time with the infinitive *skribi* (to write):

skribi = to write + *-aĵ* = something concrete, something tangible; *skirbaĵo* = some writing, something written

-il = a tool; *skribilo* = a pen + *-ar* = a group of things; *skribilaro* = stationery, a bunch of things you need to write with-pens, papers, erasers, etc.

-ej = a place (remember *ĉevalejo*); *skribejo* = a room where one sits and writes; *skribilejo* = a room where you keep pens

-ist = a professional; *skribisto* = a professional writer, a scribe; *skribilisto* = someone who professionally makes or sells pens; *skribilaristo* = a stationery producer or seller

Interestingly enough, these Esperanto affixes can become words in themselves. Thus we have:

ino (female), *ido* (child), *aro* (set), *ilo* (tool), *ejo* (place), *isto* (professional)-these are lexical affixes. The creativity does not end there; the affixes themselves form compounds: *inismo* (feminism), *ilaro* (toolkit). Esperanto thus has a highly productive derivational morphology which is intensively agglutinating.

One result of this productivity can be seen in John Wells' bi-directional *English Esperanto English Dictionary* (2010). There are 22300 entries in the English section of the dictionary; the Esperanto section has a mere 10315.

Another outcome of the derivational morphology in Esperanto is in the reduced time needed to learn the basics. The Alliance Française of Madras (2013) offers an A1 level proficiency course in French which lasts 160 class-hours; the Goethe-Institut (2013) says its A1 course in German requires between 80 and 200 class-hours. In contrast, the experiences of Esperanto teachers worldwide (Tišljár, 1996), indicate that we need no more than 40 class-hours to achieve an A1 level proficiency in Esperanto. In fact according to Hungarian Katalin Kováts-a very experienced Esperanto teacher-even 20 class-hours are sufficient for A1 level proficiency in Esperanto (Personal communication).

Esperanto as a Starter Language in India

As we have explored elsewhere, India's linguistic diversity is under threat and our "linguistic commons" are rapidly eroding (Rao, 2011). Language learning in both rural and urban India is in a state of crisis. Although English-medium education is expanding, the challenges are severe (Rao, 2013). Further, for citizenship in an increasingly 'glocal' world, we need a mother-tongue-based, high level multilingual education that includes English.

Esperanto's goal of being a universal second language means that it has a profound commitment to the mother languages, to

defending linguistic human rights, and to maintaining linguistic diversity (UEA, 2009). Given the foregoing remarks on its ease and efficacy, Esperanto needs to be explored as a resource for second and third language learning in our education system.

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A. Giridhar Rao is Senior Lecturer at IIT Hyderabad, where he teaches languages and literatures. His research interests include language policy, linguistic human rights, and science fiction studies. He is also the Secretary of the Indian Esperanto Federation, and a Corresponding Member of the Academy of Esperanto.

agiridhar.rao@gmail.com