

Esperanto as a tool in classroom foreign language learning in England

What this research was about and why it is important

Children in English primary schools generally receive less than one hour's foreign language teaching each week. In this paper, the authors reviewed their own research which considered whether learning a regular language with obvious grammar such as Esperanto could be used as a starter language to help children improve their metalinguistic (language) awareness faster and better than the study of other languages. They looked at classroom research which compared the effects of learning Esperanto with the effects of learning other languages. Esperanto was found to be easier to learn than French for the learners in the study, and appeared to have had a levelling effect which compensated for individual differences between children. It did not compensate for low language learning aptitude, however, and did not result in a greater development of language awareness, nor did it contribute to greater success for children when they learned another language afterwards.

What the researchers did

They reviewed three studies which compared children learning Esperanto with children learning other foreign languages.

- Study 1 looked at a class of 28 children aged 8 to 9 years who had learned either Esperanto or French for 45 minutes a week over the school year. Children were tested for language learning aptitude, language awareness, and how well they did learning their respective languages.
- In Study 2, 225 children aged 11 to 12 years who had learned different languages (Esperanto, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Spanish) when they were aged between 7 and 11 were tested for language awareness.
- Study 3 looked at whether learning Esperanto aided the development of language awareness and thus improved children's ability to learn a foreign language. 178 children aged 8 to 9 years followed one of four language programmes (German, Italian, Esperanto, and Esperanto with focus on grammar) for 20 hours over 16 weeks. All children then followed the same French programme (with focus on grammar) for 20 hours over another 16 weeks. Children were tested for language awareness and aptitude twice, and three times for French proficiency.

What the researchers found

- In Study 1, all the children progressed in their respective languages. The Esperanto group made a 45% gain compared to the 14% gain in language proficiency made by the French group. Both groups improved their language awareness, although the effect sizes were larger in the Esperanto group. There were fewer differences between the Esperanto children at the end of the study than there were between the French children.
- In Study 2, no differences were found between any of the language groups of children, which suggests that no one language conveyed greater (long-term) benefits in developing language awareness. It should be noted, though, that the children who had learned Esperanto had learned it aged 7 to 9 and had learned another language aged 9 to 11 which may have masked any facilitating role that Esperanto might have played. This is possible, given that the Esperanto group did better than all other groups on one of the eleven tasks of language awareness, and that this group – like the Esperanto group in Study 1 – were more equal in their performance than the children who had learned other languages.
- In Study 3, all groups progressed in learning French, but there were no differences between the groups. The children in the two Esperanto groups were less differentiated in their French test results than the other children. The Esperanto group with focus on grammar did better in the test of language awareness. This suggests that children aged 8 to 9 can and do learn when grammar is explained to them.

Things to consider

- The studies point to the easy learnability of Esperanto, and suggest that learning Esperanto can have a levelling effect.
- Learning Esperanto in these studies did not lead to greater language awareness in children compared to learning other languages, but no study lasted longer than a year and the amount of teaching time was limited.
- The researchers found that attention to grammar during language teaching led to improved results with children as young as 8 to 9. This point is worth exploring further.

Materials are available from <https://www.iris-database.org/>

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