

## ENHANCING CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE LEARNING: ESPERANTO AS A TOOL

Karen Roehr-Brackin &  
Angela Tellier  
University of Essex

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### What is it all about?

- It is often believed that children are necessarily good language learners
- However, this is not necessarily true:
- In naturalistic or immersion settings that offer extensive and intensive exposure to a language, children do very well (Birdsong, 2006; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003)
- But in the foreign language classroom children are much less successful
- Older children, adolescents and adults do better than younger children if they are tested after the same amount of exposure (Cenoz, 2003; García Mayo, 2003; Harley & Hart, 1997; Larson-Hall, 2008; Muñoz, 2008, 2009, 2006)

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### Why are older learners more successful than younger learners in the classroom?

- At around age 14, individuals reach cognitive maturity
- The greater a person's cognitive maturity, the better they are able to learn explicitly
- Explicit learning involves conscious and deliberate attempts to master material or solve problems through analysis and reflection
- Explicit learning is potentially fast, but it requires effort and strategic expertise (Dörnyei, 2009)
- Explicit learning draws on our working memory capacity and our attentional resources
- These capacities are still maturing in children
- **So how can we help (younger) children?**

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### Ways out of the dilemma

- **(1) Recreating naturalistic learning conditions, so children can make use of their capacity for implicit learning:**
- Considerable increase in language teaching hours, e.g. at least one or two classes a day to achieve extensive and intensive exposure
- → This is not realistic...
- Mimic naturalistic learning conditions in the limited class time that is available
- → This may have little effect because implicit learning is slow and requires a lot of input (but see Dahl, 2013 for possible evidence to the contrary)
- **(2) Trying to kick-start children's developing capacity for explicit learning**
- (3) ???

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### Kick-starting children's explicit learning

- This might be achieved if children are exposed to **an easy language** prior to learning more difficult languages such as French, German or Spanish
- An easy language is:
- regular → there are few rules and no exceptions to these rules
- transparent in terms of form-meaning links → each morpheme has only one meaning, and each meaning is associated with only one morpheme (e.g. all adjectives end in *-a* and *-a* only means 'adjective')
- transparent in terms of sound-spelling links → certain letter combinations are always pronounced in the same way, and certain sounds are always spelled in the same way
- (Research on language learning difficulty: DeKeyser, 2005; R. Ellis, 2006; Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2009)

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### Esperanto as a tool

- Esperanto is a constructed language that meets the criteria of an easy language:
- Just 16 grammatical rules that apply without exception
- Morphological system is transparent
- Sound-spelling system is transparent
- Vocabulary draws heavily on the Romance languages

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## The historical perspective

- People have speculated on the potential of Esperanto as a language learning tool for a long time (Corsetti & LaTorre, 1995; Fantini & Reagan, 1992; Lodge, 2004/1905; Markarian, 1964; see also Masson, 2006; Symoens, 1989)
- However, there has been little research to put this idea to the test
- The early research that does exist (e.g. Fisher, 1921; Halloran, 1952, Williams, 1965a, 1965b) is reported in brief terms and thus does not pass today's quality standards

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## The current perspective

- Five-year case study (2006-2011) examining a curriculum initiative that used Esperanto as a tool for raising metalinguistic and cross-cultural awareness in primary-school children (Tellier, 2012):
- **Springboard to Languages** (<http://www.springboardlanguages.org/>)
- Questionnaires and interviews with children and teachers (Key Stage 2)
- Overall encouraging results:
  - Children showed considerable facility when confronted with meta-linguistic tasks requiring them to access unknown languages or transfer knowledge between languages
  - Children often performed as well as (and sometimes even outperformed) peers who were older and/or had more language learning experience
  - Teachers expressed generally positive views
- However, no controlled comparisons, so no conclusive evidence

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## Esperanto is easier than French (ages 8-9)

- Comparison of classroom-based learning of Esperanto and French in 8 to 9-year old children over one school year (Tellier & Roehr-Brackin, 2013):
- Esperanto was significantly easier to learn than French
- Esperanto group achieved larger gains in L2 proficiency than French group
- Esperanto group showed greater homogeneity (less variation) than French group
- At the end of the school year, proficiency in Esperanto (but not proficiency in French) was strongly correlated with metalinguistic awareness
- → Knowledge of Esperanto and metalinguistic awareness seem to mutually and positively influence one another

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## Esperanto as a leveller (ages 11-12)

- Comparison of 11 to 12-year-old children who had learned Esperanto and a European L2 with children who had learned various combinations of European and non-European L2s at primary school (Tellier & Roehr-Brackin, to appear)
- No significant differences in overall level of metalinguistic awareness
- However, the Esperanto group showed a more homogeneous performance (less variation) than the other groups of children
- → Learning Esperanto may have had a lasting levelling effect, reducing differences between children with varying metalinguistic abilities
- → Learning Esperanto may benefit lower-ability children in particular

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## Esperanto as a leveller (ages 8-9)

- Comparison of 8 to 9-year old children in terms of language learning aptitude, metalinguistic awareness and proficiency in French (Tellier, in prep.)
- Prior to learning French, children were exposed to different 'starter languages': German, Italian, Esperanto, Esperanto Plus (= Esperanto with additional metalinguistic awareness-raising activities)
- Starter language for the first half of a school year, followed by French for the second half of the school year
- Esperanto Plus group made significantly greater gains in terms of metalinguistic awareness than the German and Italian groups, though not the Esperanto group
- No significant differences between groups in terms of French proficiency gains
- Esperanto Plus group was more homogeneous on French proficiency measure than other groups

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## Open questions: Length of exposure and cognitive abilities

- So far, findings are promising, but not conclusive:
- We have evidence for positive effects on metalinguistic awareness, but no evidence (yet) that subsequent language learning is significantly enhanced
- Will longer-term exposure (beyond 20 hours or so) yield the hypothesised effect?
- At what age(s) can the best effects be obtained? (See proposed new curriculum for languages in Key Stage 2)
- What is the role of fundamental cognitive factors in the equation?
- Working memory? Executive control?

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## Open questions: Literacy

- What is the role of first language (L1) skills/literacy?
- Long-term cross-linguistic influence of L1 skills on L2 skills has been identified (Sparks et al., 2009, 2011)
- Literacy score in reading attained two years previously was the most powerful predictor of achievement in French in 8 to 9-year-old children, explaining 51% of the variance (Tellier, in prep.)
- Can cross-linguistic influence go the other way, with Esperanto enhancing literacy in the L1?

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## THANK YOU!

Karen Roehr-Brackin  
kroehr@essex.ac.uk

Angela Tellier  
atelli@essex.ac.uk

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