

Robert L. Read and Steven D. Brewer explain how Esperanto acts as a springboard for the acquisition of other languages

## Who Knows Where Esperanto Might Lead?

### In 1887, an obscure eye doctor in

Poland self-published a little book in Russian. Over the next several years *Lingvo Internacia*<sup>1</sup> appeared in English, French, German, Hebrew, and Polish. This book, written under the pen name Doctor Esperanto, laid the foundation for a new language that would achieve what no other language project had ever done: establish a living community that would go on to survive the death of its creator. Even conservative estimates place the number of active speakers in the tens of thousands, with the number who have learned Esperanto at some time in their lives into the millions.

Esperanto speakers have long claimed it offers many benefits, such as being easy to learn. Among the most provocative claims is that studying Esperanto has a strong propaedeutic effect; that is, monolingual students who learn Esperanto as their second language can go on to learn other languages with less effort than they would otherwise have to expend. Some educators believe that field studies support the claim that time spent learning Esperanto up to some basic level of competency is quickly repaid when the next language is studied.

Many students of Esperanto experience a dramatic success that transforms their perspective on language learning. They common-

ly attain a competency that eluded them in learning an ethnic language or report that they reached a given level of competency in a fraction of the time required by a national language. Early success creates a virtuous cycle which encourages more study and often leads to genuine fluency. Achievement yields positive effects on student self-confidence, insight into the nature of languages in general, and the structure of their native language in particular.

Barry Farber writes in his book *How to Learn Any Language*:<sup>2</sup> "It's said that once you master one foreign language, all others come much more easily. That's not a myth. Your first foreign language, in a major way, is the first olive dislodged from the bottle. The rest flow obligingly forth." Farber is asserting that learning any language at all will make learning the next language easier. If this is true, then Esperanto, like other languages, might convey this benefit, but with less effort than other languages. A refinement of the implication of Farber's metaphor was explained more formally by S.P. Corder:<sup>3</sup> "Where the mother tongue is formally similar to the target language, the learner will pass more rapidly along the developmental continuum (or some parts of it) than where it differs."<sup>4</sup>

Informally, Corder's Hypothesis predicts it will be easier to learn a language that is similar to one that you already know. Studying

Esperanto, or any language, provides a propaedeutic effect in learning a next language which is similar.

Several factors may contribute to the Corder effect, including similarities in vocabulary, grammatical structure, and word order. Similarity of vocabulary has been shown to be an effective metric for predicting how much knowing one language will help with learning another.<sup>5</sup> Since Esperanto was designed to have a widely recognized vocabulary and grammatical features broadly shared across language families, it takes advantage of Corder's Hypothesis in two ways; it is easy to learn because it is similar to a language you know, and it is useful to study because it is probably similar to a language you want to learn.

The creator of Esperanto, Ludwig Zamenhof, designed its initial vocabulary to be familiar to educated Europeans of his day. Approximately 70 percent of the basic vocabulary has a Latin cognate, 20 percent is derived from Germanic languages, with the remaining roots from Slavic languages, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Anyone who has been exposed to a European language will find many familiar words when they study Esperanto. English, which has both a Romance and a Germanic heritage — and often has synonymous terms from both —



has a vast number of cognates with Esperanto.

In addition to a familiar vocabulary, a remarkably simple and regular grammar makes Esperanto easy to learn. This regularity allowed it to be specified in the first small book on Esperanto published in 1887 with sufficient precision and clarity to build momentum behind the language. Although quite regular, the grammar of Esperanto has two major features that are unfamiliar to the English monoglot, but common in other languages.

Esperanto possesses an agglutinative structure that is a feature of some non-Indo-European languages. Complex words are regularly constructed from a set of unchanging morphemes or word elements. This property is shared by many languages across the globe, including Blackfoot and Quechua from the Americas, Finnish, Hungarian, and Turkish from Europe, and Japanese and Korean from Asia. It exists to some extent in English, as the famous word *anti-dis-establish-ment-arian-ism* demonstrates, but in agglutinative languages this is an essential feature.

Furthermore, Esperanto marks the lexical category of every word unambiguously by its ending, which is a great boon to the beginner. Specifically, like literary Arabic, German, Icelandic, Latin, and Russian, it marks the direct object of the verb, or the accusative

case. This allows meaning to be largely independent of word order. Esperanto speakers from different language groups can form completely clear and correct statements with the word order most common in their native language. In fact, some people have joked that all of the “rules” of Esperanto are “permissions” that let speakers say things the way they want.

If Corder’s Hypothesis is true,<sup>6</sup> it seems logical that studying Esperanto, which gently introduces features of many language families, provides a propaedeutic effect for language learning in general. Esperanto speakers, who tend to study many languages, provide anecdotal evidence that it does, whether because of the Corder effect, or simply because it is the first olive from Farber’s bottle. Moreover, the propaedeutic benefit of studying Esperanto is also supported by published scientific studies beginning in 1921.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, a most impressive, controlled field study of the value of learning Esperanto as a language other than English (LOTE), the EKPAROLI project,<sup>8</sup> was carried out in Australia between 1994 and 1997.

Approximately 240 5th and 6th graders were taught one of German, Japanese, Javanese, and Esperanto. The attainment level and motivation of the Esperanto speakers was favorable to the other languages

taught, even though the teachers themselves had little training in Esperanto.

Teaching students about language in general via the propaedeutic effect of Esperanto is the purpose of a pilot program called Springboard to Languages<sup>9</sup> occurring now in four schools in the U.K. In the words of the program, “Springboard uses Esperanto not to produce a nation of Esperanto-speakers, but as a preparation for learning other languages.” The paper “The Rationale of the Springboard Project”<sup>10</sup> presents a brief survey of the field studies that support the assertion that studying Esperanto has a strong propaedeutic effect. In the words of one educator associated with the program: “Numerous studies since the 1920s have confirmed that learning Esperanto improves the motivation of learners (because of their relatively rapid progress in the language) and improves subsequent learning of other languages. The first documented experiment was in England — Bishop Auckland, 1918-21; later studies, each concentrating on different aspects of the question, but coming to broadly similar conclusions, have been conducted in New Zealand (1924), New York (1931), Manchester (1948-’65), Sheffield (1951), Finland (1963), Hungary (1970), Germany (1980), 5 European countries (1990), Italy (1993) and Australia (2000). The 1931 work was by a team led by the

eminent educational psychologist, Edward Thorndike of Columbia University. The plain facts are that young people enjoy learning Esperanto; they learn it up to 5 times more quickly than other languages and the skills learned are readily transferable," said David Kelso — a former HM Chief Inspector of Schools, Trustee and Director for Education of Esperanto-UK

As English-speaking Americans who have studied Spanish, we can attest that Esperanto was for us many times easier to acquire than Spanish. However, since we studied Spanish first, some reinforced familiarity with words derived from Latin that occur in Esperanto probably made Esperanto easier for us. Far from being a disadvantage, we consider this an advantage of Esperanto. We have experienced the propaedeutic effect firsthand, although in the Spanish-to-Esperanto direction. Obtaining the propaedeutic effect in the Esperanto-to-your-next-language direction would be of equal or greater value. Since Esperanto is easy to learn and makes learning the next language easier, studying it may be a beneficial use of the student's time, even if they do not value knowing Esperanto inherently.

To give this benefit, a language must be practical to study. The availability of learning materials and the opportunity to practice it makes or breaks an effort to learn a language. For Esperanto, a wide variety of inexpensive high-quality textbooks, websites, podcasts, radio programs, music, and other audio and video material and courses are available. Eight hours of high-production value video instruction are freely accessible on YouTube.<sup>11</sup> Free email-based correspondence courses taught by real people are widely utilized. Over four thousand books can be purchased,<sup>12</sup> and Esperanto USA<sup>13</sup> has an online bookstore with English-language descriptions of one thousand of these books on diverse subjects. Project Gutenberg, the multilingual free electronic library, has 55 books in Esperanto that can be read completely free of charge,<sup>14</sup> including original works and translations of beloved classics from English, Norwegian, German, Czech, Danish, Hebrew, Finnish, and Bulgarian.

Modern pedagogy emphasizes speaking and aural comprehension as the key to language learning, a fact often stated in this magazine. One might wonder if Esperanto

has a large body of excellent literature, but a limited opportunity for speaking. Perhaps surprisingly, in addition to electronic speaking and listening opportunities, Esperanto speakers frequently organize conventions at regional, national, and international levels, where one can easily immerse oneself in Esperanto. Esperanto speakers are even willing to host other Esperantists in their homes in almost every nation across the globe which makes traveling inexpensive and authentic for the Esperanto speaker. Speakers typically join an international community of people who share not only a language, but generally an interest in international dialog and a common set of experiences learning Esperanto.

The authors can recount amazing stories about their own experiences with Esperanto. One of our most satisfying experiences as an Esperanto speaker from the English-centric U.S. occurred at a conference in Lithuania: "I dined with people from Japan, Denmark, Germany, France, and the Netherlands, discussing public transportation policy in different nations. I suspect that only two of the eight of us could have conversed fluently in English; but since we were speaking fluently in Esperanto, we had no need to investigate the issue!"

At the same time, the magic and excitement of Esperanto is sometimes difficult for others to see. When one of the authors attended a scientific conference in Slovakia, with faculty from 26 different European countries, there was intense excitement among the participants to converse freely in their shared language. A visitor from the local town, however, couldn't see what was exciting at all: it just looked like a bunch of foreigners speaking a foreign language to him.

Robert Phillipson, a linguist and professor of English in Denmark wrote about his first experience seeing Esperanto in action in his book *English Only Europe*:<sup>15</sup> "In the summer of 1996, I attended two international conferences, a Language Rights conference in Hong Kong, and a language policy symposium as part of the Universal Esperanto Association 81st World Congress. At the Hong Kong conference, English was virtually the sole means of communication. In the question time of one of the plenary sessions, a South African participant expressed surprise at why those whose competence in English

was less than ideal, particularly Asians who had great difficulty in expressing themselves in English, accepted the unequal communication rights imposed on them by the conference organizers. The answer was that the organizers, mainly British, had not given the matter any thought, and the non-native speakers, from all over Asia, were too polite to protest. A couple of weeks later, at the Esperanto symposium, it was amazing to experience participants from all over the world communicating confidently in a shared international language, among them a number of Asians who were manifestly at no disadvantage. As this even was my first experience of Esperanto in action (with interpretation provided for us non-Esperantists), it was a vivid and memorable way of seeing at first hand that Esperanto is not merely utopian, but a reality for those who have chosen to make it part of their lives [...]" (pg 169)

Learning any language is a big investment with an even bigger potential reward. If choosing which of the many languages to study makes you feel like a kid in a candy store — daunted by the variety — consider Esperanto an inexpensive way to get a taste. If you are not sure in which language it is best to invest your energies, or which is best for you to study next in a life-long commitment to language learning, Esperanto may be a good use of your time. In addition to providing the intrinsic rewards of the language itself, your time studying Esperanto may pay itself back in the ease with which you acquire the next language that you choose to study. ❧

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