

# Promoting an Open Language for Intercultural and Linguistic Education.

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## Introduction: current trends in linguistic education.

The trends in linguistic education policies in the last years have been mostly directed towards multilingual education and linguistic education at an early age. Other targets in this field are education in another language of a certain number of given subjects and education interlinguistic communication.

In Europe, most of these policies are aimed by Governments at solving the problem of non linguistic communication between European citizens, coming from a political reality, such as the European Union, where almost half a billion of people speak over 20 different national mother tongues and hundreds of minority, regional or local languages. It is therefore fundamental to guarantee in Europe interlinguistic communication and equal access to such a communication for all the speakers of all the European languages.

At the international level, such as in the UNESCO meetings, the very same policies are instead oriented at saving the enormous diversity of languages and cultures of the world, that are “[currently threatened] by the globalization of communication and the tendency to use a single language, at the risk of marginalizing the other major languages of the world, or even of causing the lesser-used languages, including regional languages, to disappear” (UNESCO Resolution on multilingualism education, adopted by the 30<sup>th</sup> General Conference). According to the major world linguists, indeed, languages are disappearing at a rate in between to 50 and 90% of the whole world languages. But most likely closer to the latter than to the first. In Europe, according to the UNESCO Atlas on Endangered Languages, almost 60% of the spoken languages are to disappear.

We are not to discuss here the efficacy of each of these policies with regard to their declared objective, but we can say that if, at least in Europe, the variety of languages thought at school is very deceiving, the European interlinguistic communication is guaranteed only because the vast majority of students are all taught English as de facto second mother tongue. For instance, in 1999 the Council of Europe published a report, called *the diversity of languages in the educational systems of the Member states*, to monitor the actual situation in 37 member states: according to it “in almost 4 countries out of 5 one language is learned by a number of students greater than the total number of students that are learning all the other languages”, while “in 1 country out of 5 the concentration on one language is so strong that the total number of students learning all the other languages is less than one third of the number of students learning the hegemonic one”.

Moreover, the popularity of language learning is, apparently for the very same reason, not much higher in the continent: if those who already speak English as mother tongue – british and irish – seem absolutely uninterested in learning any foreign language, the percentage of European who declared to be willing of studying a foreign language other than English are still very low. In particular, according to a survey, called Eurobarometer,

recently published by the European Union, while 72% of the Europeans consider useful to know a foreign languages, 75% of them think it has to be just english. And in fact 74% of the European citizens do not know any second foreign language. While, according to that same survey, in UK and Ireland less than 20% of citizens claim to know a first foreign language at all.

Are we going to face a trend in linguistic education which will take us to pass from the “teaching foreign languages” scheme to the more realistic “teaching a foreign language”, namely English? And from that to the “teaching English as second national language for all”? What will it be, in that perspective, of the multicultural and intercultural education?

We believe that if those subjects – education to foreign languages, to multiculturalism, interculturalism, interlinguistic communication and so on – face such a deep crisis we need to rethink most of them, answering to the popular demand that lay behind it and experimenting on a large scale different solutions capable to avoid the major risks hidden inside the nursery foreign language teaching policy.

## 1. Linguistic Orientation with the Paderborn method.

For instance, in the last century several experiments have proved the effectiveness of linguistic orientation, both for linguistic acquisition and for intercultural dialogue and education to a culture of peace. In particular an impressive number of experiences have proved that linguistic orientation by means of the International Language, also called Esperanto, has amazing potentialities in all these fields.

The language teaching quality of the international language turns out to be quite interesting: working as a "linguistic model," a "unit of measure" of languages - to be clear - learned prior to any other foreign language, it facilitates, saving time, the later study of other languages. The idea of losing a little time to gain a lot more down the road has been exploited above all in teaching science: before the object itself is studied in all its complexity, a model of it is presented, pedagogically adequate.

The Linguistic Orientation instruction differs both *from* the normal, presently common precocious foreign language instruction and *from* Esperanto instruction (in any case rarely proposed as an alternative).

The instruction dealt with here reaches the objectives of both these methods, without running into the objections raised against them. It can be considered a synthesis of them. In contrast to precocious foreign language instruction - that which usually imposes English (or, in Anglophone areas, French) at the first year of elementary school - LO instruction does not require the student to start studying a foreign language in elementary school (and not as would be the rule that of the lower middle school), with all its complications (understandable only through its linguistic history: essential understanding for exact reading comprehension). LO instruction aims rather at preparing the student during the period of elementary school (in Europe, preferably, in the third and fourth elementary year) for later foreign language instruction in such a way that the student will later be able to learn one or more important ethnic languages with greater ease.

In contrast to Esperanto instruction, Linguistic Orientation does not start from the premise that Zamenhof's language is already the required or predicted common auxiliary language in Europe if not the world (and, consequently, material which should be taught right away in the elementary schools). It takes advantage of the simplicity, the regularity, the absence of exceptions and the clarity (modularity) which Esperanto, an agglutinative planned language, offers, to stimulate, thanks to this "linguistic model" (which need not be completely acquired to satisfy this aim) the comprehension of linguistic structures, interest in foreign languages, and, through this, the capacity and an increased predisposition to learn them. In LO, as realized in the Paderborn experiments, elementary school students, for two hours a week, for one or two years, practice a selected part (500 words) of the (roughly 2000 non-specific) basic Esperanto words. On the one hand, this is enough for childhood communication. On the other, and especially, it is enough to make children understand, in an almost complete way, the structure of this planned language and to initiate a reflection on the diversity of linguistic structures compared to the native language. LO must thus be understood as a *propedeutic* for the study of foreign languages. Those who do not understand the meaning of a propedeutic usually ask, "why this longer route? Why not start immediately with a 'real' foreign language? Why not teach English [outside the Anglophone breast] right away?"

Before answering, or rather than answering, based on the so-called "cybernetic transfer theory" let's draw our attention to the best known examples taken from natural science instruction. For example, teaching biology doesn't start immediately with "real" human dentures, but uses an idealised model. In such a way, using the propedeutic aims of such a model, one can better and more quickly make the essential understood, when often the human and natural model present various irregularities and particularities which interfere with comprehension.

But - the objection is often heard - afterwards, when the student has to succeed in understanding a "real" language, that is, an ethnic language, he will still have to manage all those aspects, irregularities and difficulties, which make English, French, and the other ethnic languages so attractive and so difficult.

This is true, but "knowing how to manage" turns out to be much more rapid, and time is saved, a lot of time, more than is lost with Linguistic Orientation.

This claim can on one hand be demonstrated thanks to the above cited "cybernetic transfer theory" in teaching and, on the other hand, confirmed by the Paderborn experiment and later by further analyses and experiments conducted in Italy.

In Hungary, at the University of Science in Budapest a group of native Hungarian speakers, after having studied Esperanto for two years in the third and fourth grade of elementary school, were divided to study their learning of Russian, German, English, and French. According to the results, preliminary Esperanto study led to a 25% improvement in acquiring Russian, 30% for German, 40% for English, and even 50% for French. In other terms, children who had received preparatory teaching obtained notably better results than their peers who had not had an analogous introduction to the study of foreign languages.

This system of preparatory instruction was put into practice in Germany, with a greater number of students, but with the sole aim of finding a way of facilitating the learning of English. The results showed that after two years of linguistic orientation using the *International* language, the advantage was about 30%.

The experiments conducted and repeated many times at Paderborn went much further: Students were divided into two competing groups. One started English instruction in third grade (A), the other, instead, followed preparatory teaching through Esperanto and started English only at the fifth grade (B).

The Esperanto programme required 160 hours in all, which can seem like a great loss of time, but, according to the final results, in seventh grade group B reached group A's level of English learning and in eighth grade they exceeded it. In other words, those who benefitted from the preparatory teaching gained more time than they had lost in preparation.

This experiment, which we called "linguistic orientation instruction" began in September 1993 in various Italian, Russian, Uzbek, Ukrainian and Kazakh schools as part of the regular curriculum.

A parallel scientific evaluation of the above teaching was conducted by our Institute along with the International Academy of Sciences of San Marino. Experimental classes in Slovenia, Austria and Hungary, starting in 1994, also are included in this evaluation while

analogous future experiments are expected in Germany, Romania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

For native German-speaking students, those who usually have English as the first foreign language in middle schools, the Paderborn experiment produced three principal results.

1) Students who did not participate in Linguistic Orientation instruction need about 35% more time to reach the average level achieved by students who benefitted from two years of LO instruction and require about 20% more than the students who participated for just one year in LO. Thus instruction like the one cited, of the above duration, gives German students help in learning English, thanks to so-called "latent transfer," and this help is 35% or 20%, so that the factor of transfer  $k$  can be considered to be 1.35 or 1.2, respectively. In other words: 160 hours of LO determine, for later English study, a learning-time savings of about 26%, while 80 hours of LO grant savings of 17% (figure 1).

2) In reference to the hours of English lessons required by the Ministerial programme for lower middle school, the maximum advantage for LO is at about 100 hours of study, keeping in mind that:

- a) this assessment does not attribute any value to the ability acquired in Esperanto and
- b) the ease of learning (*transfer*) exclusively concerns the first foreign language learned.

*Transfer* was however also measured in relationship to native language instruction, while the study of the planned language Esperanto also stimulates a greater interest in European languages, the communities in which they are spoken, and their nations. This has a positive effect on study of geography.

3) the cited percentages for time saved, empirically calculated, constitute valid average values for elementary school students. For middle and high school students the transfer effect is lower. It turns out to be, instead, much higher in the case of elementary school students who show difficulty in learning languages (the "b" course). As a pedagogic indicator, Linguistic Orientation thus helps students with learning difficulties.

The advice of those who study cybernetics applied to pedagogy and foreign language instruction is the following:

1. That language study begin with elementary school, starting at 8 years of age and with two years of Esperanto.
2. After the introduction of the foreign language, Esperanto is used in teaching a determined subject, such as geography, as an interscholastic means of communication (correspondence).
3. There are efforts to coordinate the steps necessary in all European Community countries to ensure a simpler linguistic communication between citizens.

## 2. Esperanto as a foreign language

According to these studies, Esperanto based Linguistic Orientation, would be very useful both to intercultural educational and to avoid the early hegemony of a unique foreign language in Education. In fact if precocious language education is useful to a better knowledge of the studied language, putting in competition a “powerful” language, such as English, to the native language appears to be very risky. For instance in indigenious community, according to many linguists working for the revitalisation of their languages, the imposition since an early age of the colonial language, together with the feeling of social power (you need it to find a job or improve your working condition), appears to be one of the major factors in the abandoning of the native language.

According to the specialists of languages, and in particular to the Action Plan adopted by the UNESCO Meeting of Experts on Endangered Languages, languages are facing extinction when only few people care if the heritage language is lost and many prefer to learn and use the dominant language or when the governments encourage people to do so. Among the other factors explaining the lost of languages, the world linguists quote the diglossia coming from a private use of the heritage language in opposition to the official or public use of the dominant one and the number and proportion of intergenerational use of the heritage language.

This is the reason for which an important linguist like Claude Hagège suggest to forbid the teaching of English as a first foreign language!

Of course, this appears to be a provocation, which will not solve in any case the problem of answering to the demand of simplification in the world linguistic communication, that is a direct effect of globalization. For this we suggest to introduce, in as many countries as possible, the teaching of Esperanto as one of the possible foreign languages that can be chosen, as it is the case, with great success in Hungary.

Indeed, if we want the multiplication of linguistic offer fashionable, an open alternative, a sort of linguistic linux, to the demand of English as global language has to be proposed: the concept of transnational communication needs to be separated from the cultural dimension of any language:

- a. the concept of international language is connected to the idea of a language that can be used to guarantee everyone without any form of discrimination in the international communication. Which means that any candidate to play the role of international language should be fully learnable by the children during the compulsory school as well as by those who finished school since long time, and in particular by the elderly. It has to be both a language of public service (in opposition to language of private use) and a language of social communication, a language which does not belong to any private system (it cannot be the language of the french, the british or any other people) nor gives any privilege to any social class
- b. the concept of foreign language has to turn back to the humanistic idea of instrument of knowledge and understanding of the cultures and traditions of other people: today anybody needs to learn english to find a job or participate to the world trade, in future anybody should be free to learn a given language to satisfy the personal curiosity of knowing something more of a given culture

In 1995 the Italian Ministry of Education published in a circular letter the Report of the special commission on International Language (better known as Esperanto), in particular these are the conclusions of the Commission included in the Report:

*“There are, then, good reasons to call attention to the International Language: good reasons ignored up until now, or even hidden by deliberate misinformation. This state of things has provoked the great, and probably serious, delay in understanding the cultural, social and political opportunity of putting ‘into play’ a non ethnic and authentically international language alongside the others in our schools. The International Language is at the base of a more appropriate conception of plurilingualism in the European Union and allows the elaboration of a new, more realistic language policy. In fact:*

- *it educates for the construction of peace, making concrete the conception of belonging to a single human family and a ‘world environment’, rather than one geographically determined and circumscribed. In a moment of resurgent nationalism, sometimes in aggravated forms, spreading a means of international comprehension which finds in the equal dignity of peoples and their linguistic expression one of its strong points, aims at overcoming narrow national viewpoints which remain tied to the concept of nation even when there is aperture to other countries languages;*
- *it contributes, in fact, to safeguard European and global linguistic and cultural diversity;*
- *it allows transnational cultural and commercial relations in a common language, without discrimination, which can be fully acquired within the time spent in mandatory education;*
- *it facilitates, thought as linguistic orientation, the study and learning of national foreign languages;*
- *it avoids predominance of one or two ‘major’ languages in the teaching of possible foreign languages;*
- *it enriches metalinguistic reflection even in the native language;*
- *it allows notable savings of time and money, both in teacher training and in student work, with additional advantages for other subjects such as learning ethnic foreign languages. (A useful study would be one which examined the necessary cost, in time and money, for teaching and learning an ethnic foreign language compared to the International Language).“*

Indeed, Esperanto is the better candidate to play the role of language of public service and social communication because:

- i) It is easier to learn than any other language: to acquire a knowledge of the International Language equivalent to the Cambridge first certificate of English 50 to 100 hours of study are sufficient, while to learn a foreign language like English thousands of hours of study are necessary
- ii) It is neutral, which means that no ethnic group speaks it as a native language and therefore all the languages would be guaranteed through its use from any form of linguistic hegemony or colonialism
- iii) It is spoken by millions of people of all the countries since over one century and still now it is one of the most diffused languages of the world by number of countries where it is spoken
- iv) It allows, when learned as a model of language before any foreign language, to learn more foreign languages.

## **Conclusions: Esperanto and e-learning, economical advantages of Esperanto teaching.**

Finally another field in which the introduction of Esperanto in the scholastic curriculum appears useful is its possible use in the learning technologies for distance and on-line education.

Last year, in the framework of the UNESCO [B@bel](#) initiative, and within the second edition of the Master in Open and Distance Learning of the University of Udine and Pordenone, the “Esperanto” Radical Association produced the first esquisse of a web site for the training of foreign languages teachers to the method of Paderborn.

It was just the beginning of the work that can be done melting the potentiality of on-line education to the Open language. To better understand what could be the future development of such a combination, we can say that Esperanto could be used as a bridge language in producing multimedia for the teaching of foreign languages or to lead international tutorship as well as international collaborative learning through Esperanto based web forum.

Coming to the intercultural education, in 1995, at the very early stage of the internet, the “Esperanto” Radikala Asocio carried out a UNESCO Project called “Fundapax”, that allowed intercultural education for the pupils of 150 schools in 29 countries.

We can say, in conclusion, that investigating the possible uses of Esperanto in linguistic and intercultural education is not only necessary for practical reasons or because it is fair, as said by Newsweek, because “it puts everyone on the same field”, but also because it is economically advantageous.

In 1997 the Nobel Prize for Economics, Reinhard Selten, in the introduction of the project book “The costs of European linguistic (non) communication”, published by the “Esperanto” Radikala Asocio with the support of the European Union, stated that “the best solution is to introduce Esperanto in the European scholastic curricula”.

In the same book, Professor Claude Piron analysed four different systems of linguistic communication: the UN, the EU, the multinational (i.e. only English) and the Esperantist Organisations. The analysis was carried out according several parameters: duration of preliminary learning, public preliminary investments, institutional investments, disparity and discrimination, linguistic costs of a single meeting, cost of production of documents, time necessary to obtain a document, lost and distortion of information, linguistic handicap in discussions, linguistic handicaps in reading, restrictions and difficulties, probable increase of costs in the next years. According to that study the UN system (six working languages) has the highest number of inconvenient, followed by the EU system and by the multinational one. While the Esperantist model is from far the most advantageous.

More recently, to a similar conclusion came François Grin, Professor of linguistic economics at the Geneva University in his Report “Teaching living foreign languages as a public policy” presented at the french Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de l'école (HCEE). According to Professor Grin teaching Esperanto on a large scale would allow in the long term the European Union to save 25 billions € per year.