Language Awareness with Esperanto

Paul Magnuson, Leysin American School, Switzerland
Bilge Kalkavan, Hellenic American University, Ph. D. Student, Greece

As applied linguists, the two of us share an interest in raising student awareness about language. We've connected through our research center, LASER (see Resources below), at Paul's boarding school, where we are experimenting with ways to explore language outside of traditional language courses.

Traditional language courses largely focus on developing communicative competence in a specific language (Savignon, 1971), often with a strong preference for maximizing input and production of the new language. Students modify their personal interlanguage (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972) toward more native-like approximations of the target language with the goal of being able to use the language in social, academic, and work contexts. This mindset has been with us for more than 50 years and is just fine for those students who study a language long enough to actually use it outside the classroom.

However, we've all heard adults declare that they had some French (Spanish, German, etc.) in high school but don't remember a thing. In other words, quite a few students do not reach beyond a relatively basic level, and it's not unreasonable to wonder what learning actually remains after vocabulary and basic grammar have been forgotten. Our conceptualization of foreign language curricula could perhaps be well-served by adding a curricular goal of language awareness - thinking *about* language - in addition to learning to communicate in one specific language.

Recently we experimented with a three-day unit that introduced Esperanto, which means *hope* in the constructed language by the same name, in the *hope* that we could get middle school students to reflect a bit about language. What follows is a description of that unit and a few reasons why the introduction of language awareness into the world language curriculum might be of interest to others.

For three one-hour class periods, eight students in a mixed grade 7 and 8 classroom received a brief introduction to Esperanto in a unit that intentionally allowed student conversations to develop and take their natural course. Students represented several countries and spoke, between them, Azeri, English, French, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, Thai, and Turkish. Most of the students are enrolled in a traditional French language course. This unit was taught in a

course that is part of what the school calls Academic Exploration, which affords students the chance to explore many different topics, ungraded, for short periods of time.

The first class

We began with two simple exercises from Total Physical Response (e.g. Asher, 1996) using German verbs (e.g. *gehen, springen, schlafen*; to walk, to jump, to sleep) and then Esperanto colors (e.g. *bruna, blua, blanka*; brown, blue, white). Students were able to demonstrate understanding of the colors by touching whichever color was called out.

Then we asked why they thought that someone, in the 1880s, made up a language in the first place. Since the actual reason was that the teenage Ludwig Zamenhof supposed an international language might help bring about world peace, we used Wikipedia to look at the long list of conflict and wars around the world in the 1880s. All students (unfortunately) could identify with some sort of conflict in their country, not only for that decade but those before and after. So trying to offer a remedy to all the conflict, even a linguistic one, made sense. But was Esperanto successful?

We discussed the number of Esperanto speakers, Esperanto publications, clubs, and international conventions, and the strange fact that there are native speakers of this constructed language. How can that be? We also listened to the introductory music to Final Fantasy XI (sung in Esperanto and worth listening to, if you have a moment). We should have shared a YouTube video of a real conversation, but didn't. Similarly, real examples of constructed languages mentioned below would have been fun to listen to. Perhaps after a few short listens a teacher could make an exercise in which students had to attempt to identify a language solely by its sound, sort of like you do with real languages when you overhear them.

We then discussed what makes a language a language. One student brought up how the Minions speak (not a language) and we brought up constructed languages for books (e.g. Elvish and others, The Fellowship of the Rings, J. R. R. Tolkien) and movies (e.g. Klingon (Star Trek), Na'vi (Avatar), High Valyrian and Dothraki (Game of Thrones)). Constructed languages for books and films are often made to be quite alien, so they tend to be difficult, while the goal of Esperanto was to make language quite easy. So we discussed what makes vocabulary and grammar easy and hard to learn. In the easy category students mentioned consistency, for example in letter-to-sound correspondence and in grammar rules, and difficult languages were those riddled with exceptions.

For a short time students experimented with High Valeryian on Duolingo. Indeed, you can learn both High Valyrian and Klingon with this application. (Please finish the article first - we know you are tempted to jump right in.) We made what was for us an interesting comparison between the Turing Test, which asks whether humans can tell if they are communicating with a machine or a

person, and natural and constructed languages on Duolingo. If you knew neither High Valyerian or Welsh, for example, would you be able to determine which was a constructed language, merely by learning it with Duolingo?

Each time we stumbled across a good question with no particular right answer, like the Turing test example above, we let the conversation take its course. Some conversations went longer than others, depending on student interest, motivation, and behavior (these were middle school students, after all). *Which* discussion about language was less important to us than *having* a discussion about language, leading with student interest and motivation. Therefore we followed their conversational lead.

We also discussed how different languages have tried to address perceived gender bias. For instance, in Turkish the term *iş insanı* (businessperson) is now used instead of *iş adamı* (businessman). We shared that the Swedes adopted a gender neutral pronoun, between *han* (he) and *hon* (she), called *hen*.

We then gave a few examples about how easy Mandarin is (not much in the way of tense, no verb conjugations, and a very regular pronoun system). Most students were surprised by the easy grammar rules, but felt that the characters and tones still made Mandarin very difficult. The deeper thought? What *do we really mean* when we say one language is hard and another easy? What factors are we actually considering?

The second class

On Day 2 we continued with the idea that a valid goal for constructed languages has been the opposite of those languages made for books and movies, namely, an effort to make the language easy to learn and to use. We used a few examples from Esperanto to make the point.

First, in Esperanto you can always know what part of speech a word is, because nouns end in -o, adjectives in -a, and adverbs in -e. Therefore, if you are going to guess the Esperanto word for your favorite animal, you better have it end in -o. A good guess for cat is cato, as would be birdo and dogo (*kato* and *birdo* are Esperanto, dogo is not - it's *hundo*).

Verb tenses and conjugations are likewise very regular. The verb "to drink" is *trinki* (infinitive), with a regular system of suffixes that, without exception, show tense: *trinkis* (past), *trinkas* (present), *trinkos* (future), and *trinku* (imperative and subjunctive). Since there is no conjugation, you now can correctly use the root of any Esperanto verb in many tenses. To write is *skribi*, so if you were asked to express "to drink" in future tense in the third person plural, well, you can. Try it.

We made up a few sentences together, pursued a few conversations that eventually took us off track, and dealt with classroom management.

The third class

We deemed Day 2 less successful than Day 1, largely because of discipline problems with a few talkative students who co-opted the agenda as best they could. We dealt with this by preparing a "test" for Day 3.

We asked the students to answer these questions, before reviewing their answers in a gamified manner.

- What makes learning vocabulary hard?
- What makes learning vocabulary easy?
- What makes learning grammar hard?
- What makes learning grammar easy?
- Why did Zamenhof make an international language in the first place?
- In what ways can you say Esperanto is successful?
- In what ways can you say Esperanto is not successful?
- Write down as many things you can about Esperanto (think about history, words, grammar … anything)

We also gave them a photocopy of a page from an Esperanto publication of recently published books in Esperanto. Each short paragraph started with a bold header, usually the name of the book. Students were asked to circle any words that they felt they understood (e.g. *Hamleto, reĝido de Danjuyo. Tragedio en kvin adktoj*). a student might figure out *Hamlet* and then from that context, a "tragedy in five acts."

We gamified our review of the test by assigning points. Sometimes we gave students points for having an answer that no one else had. Generally this led to students calling out answers or even "cheating" by thinking of an additional, more creative answer on the spot. (This was a type of cheating we were happy to allow; remember, there are no grades in this exploratory course. We were exploring and having fun). For some questions we gave points for any decent answer. The points made the game, but we never added points in the end - it was just a fun way to keep attention focused for awhile.

 We intended to give them more time on Duolingo to explore Esperanto, as they had during Day 2, but time was short. The "test" format had served its purpose, lowering the need for the level of classroom management during Day 2, but had taken longer than we planned.

Why again did we teach Esperanto?

A student actually asked us this question, too. Why are we learning stuff we are going to forget anyway? Why indeed, I answered him. I asked him how much math he remembered from last year, how much history from last semester, how much from any of his classes. School is maybe not so much about what we remember, but how learning shapes our thinking.

So how might our small foray into Esperanto have helped shape how we think?

Well, we challenged the myth that Chinese is hard. At least, not all parts of Chinese are hard. Some parts are wonderfully easy, because they are so simple, so regular or both. Perhaps the next time that someone tells these students that X language is the hardest they'll be able to finesse the conversation a bit more.

We think we got students thinking, maybe just a little, about why people get into conflicts and the role that being different (ie speaking a different language) plays. Could they imagine a world where everyone shared the same language? Would it change how we acted toward each other? These are decent topics for any IB Theory of Knowledge class.

Students reviewed a bit about what they knew of language. When we compared the lack of the world "the" in Mandarin and Russian to Romance and Germanic languages, native speaking students of Spanish had trouble identifying the word "the" in their language (*el, la, los, las*), suggesting articles (*un, una,* and *even unos* and *unas*) as articles. When we tried to make students aware during Day 2 about the accusative *-n* added to nouns in Esperanto (a point of contention among early Esperantists that led to the creation of another, simpler constructed language that most of us have never heard of), students explored the notion of subject and direct object, both in Esperanto and their native language.

In fact, that may be the biggest advantage of introducing a new, and simple, language to a student. We and they naturally used languages they were already familiar with - their native languages - to assist understanding. Talking about Esperanto helped them see their language from a new angle, and to perhaps begin thinking about language itself from a new angle.

A few more things about Esperanto - just for fun

Esperanto is successful, or unsuccessful, depending on how you look at it. There are a couple million speakers, there are native speakers, and there are more than 4,000 publications in the language. Many people have at least heard of it. And it's 150 years old. As a solution to international conflict, well, we have little success to report there.

There are only 16 grammar rules. This is a pretty nice example of how just a few rules can generate a language capable of expressing anything, or what Chomsky made famous as generative grammar. A fun fact is that if the grammar rules allow it, you can be quite creative with Esperanto and still be right. In English, on the contrary, you can be *uncouth*, but not *couth*; in Turkish you can say *önemli* (important) and *önemsiz* (unimportant), *rahat* (comfortable) and

rahatsız (uncomfortable) but the opposite of *kibar* (polite) does not follow the pattern, but is *kaba* (rude) instead.

One of our favorite creative grammatical examples in Esperanto.

La tablo brunas.
the table is browning or *the table browns.*
"The table is brown."

In English and Turkish you cannot express the notion of a brown table by suggesting that it *is browning* or *browns.*

Bu masa Kahverengi
this table brown
"This table is brown."

*Bu masa kahverengiyor.
*this table is browning.
"This table is brown."

But in Esperanto, since all present tense verbs end in -as, taking the adjective root *brun-* and dropping the adjective marker *-a* in favor of the verb marker *-as* gives you a new verb: "to brown." That's fun!

Why doesn't that work in English and Turkish?

Finally, there is a language teaching methodology called the Paderborner Method, with origins at the *Universität und Gesamthochschule Paderborn*, in Germany. It suggested that language students should first spend some time learning Esperanto, in order to easily understand the framework of language and language study, before diving into French, Spanish, and any other language they are studying. The thought was that they would make up for time lost to learning Esperanto and actually be more efficient learners in the long run.

Let us know what you do to raise student awareness of language. *Dankon!*

References

Asher, James (1996). *Learning Another Language Through Actions* (5th ed.). Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions.

Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *IRAL*, 5, 161–70.

Savignon, S. (1971.) A study in the effect of training in communicative skills as part of a beginning College French course on student attitude and achievement in linguistic and communicative competence. Dissertation, University of Illinois.

Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 10, 3, 219–31.

Resources

Duolingo. As the developers note, it's the most widely downloaded education app in history.

Esperanto. The magazine. *Revuo Esperanto, Universala Esperanto-Asocio, Nieuwe Binnenweg 176, 3015 BJ, Rotterdam, Nederlando.*

Final Fantasy XI. Esperanto text and really worth a listen. The music is something, even if the text isn't meant to be understood (by many).

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Paderborner Method. It seems the method probably ended with the 2008 retirement of its central proponent, Günther Lobin.