

To begin with, I confess that it is very pretentious on my part to write this, since I teach in a college, not a high school, and since I am actually an anthropologist and not really a language teacher at all. It is true that I have had a good deal of “input” into our campus Chinese program (though it has never been clear to me just how you say “input” in Chinese) and that I dabble around with language teaching a little now and then. And I have studied a lot of languages and use several in my research. But I am not, basically, a language teacher; just the garden-variety kind of anthropologist.

Nevertheless I have noticed something that might interest language teachers. It grows out of many years of rather distant association with “Esperantists”; those are the people who surface from time to time in the world of education and keep wanting us all to learn Esperanto as an international auxiliary language. (They are nice enough people, when you get to know them, though they do tend toward monomania when you get them onto the subject of foreign languages.) Now an interesting thing about Esperantists in general is that the most fluent ones are often people who got interested in the language when they were in high school and studied it in a fit of adolescent enthusiasm. And an interesting thing about *these* Esperantists in particular is that after they have learned Esperanto, they are awfully keen to learn other languages, too.

As I have associated with the Esperantists and have spoken with the students taking the language at the University of California

(where I do my anthropology teaching) and at San Francisco State University (where I got myself mixed up in an Esperanto summer program), my earlier observation has been underlined more and more. It seems as though there is a certain kind of very intelligent high school student who becomes absolutely fascinated with the regular grammatical structure and ingeniously agglutinative vocabulary of Esperanto. The language is certainly no Pig Latin, but it is nevertheless easy enough that such a student finds he can make far faster progress learning Esperanto than he made learning any other language he has been studying. Almost before he knows what is happening, he finds — and to me this is the interesting point — that he is glimpsing a whole lot of intellectual issues about language learning that he never noticed before. Literary style, the relationship between literary works and living language, linguistics, and sociolinguistics become conscious problems for him, usually for the first time, and the notion that these are issues that transcend individual languages transforms his understanding. (You have probably guessed why a college professor finds this intriguing!)

The student who hangs around with his local Esperantists also begins to develop a very immediate awareness of the complexity of the world outside the United States, and of the desirability of his knowing about other countries and interacting with people in them. Since there are Esperantists nearly everywhere, no country can be dismissed as outside an Esperantist’s range of interests. Furthermore, the Esperantists are well

enough organized (with all sorts of magazines, published from Rotterdam to Peking and from Rio to Kyoto) that it is not too much trouble to find a few pen pals, and often this puts several countries on the map for a high school student that weren’t really there before. (I recall the astonishment of a young friend when she discovered that Bulgaria was where ancient Thrace used to be and that she was corresponding with a latter-day “Thracian.”) This, too, encourages an awareness of an international order. It is true that awareness begins in the parochial perspective of a rather unusual language movement and its problems and triumphs as an international grass-roots movement, but the perspective does evolve, and those of us who teach social sciences can be justifiably envious of the Esperantists’ ability to instill world awareness at the flick of a French or Iranian pen pal while we struggle in our classes against the adamant ethnocentrism of the mono- or at best bi-cultural adolescent mind.

Appetite whetted, the high school student often approaches foreign languages in ways or with perspectives he otherwise might not have had or takes on languages he otherwise might not have studied. (And sometimes he forgets all about Esperanto, to the despair of his fellow Esperantists.) One British school system found that spending the first year of their French classes studying Esperanto instead of French produced better fourth-year French students than did spending the whole time on French. It is not clear just why this happened. I would guess that not only does studying Esperanto clarify

a lot of ideas about grammar and vocabulary (such as the basic concept of an inflectional system and relatively free word order) and get the students used to the idea of using a language other than English — these were the experimenters' conclusions — but it also probably gives the student an idea of what it is like to be able to use another language and convinces him that he can do it.

Convincing students that they can and want to master another language seems to be half the battle in language teaching, and for students who have already studied *and mastered* another language, that battle comes already won. Or anyway that seems to be the result with those who take up Esperanto. Since no school system in the United States is methodically exploring these effects with ordinary students, it is a little hard to say how much these effects are confined to students of greater than average intelligence. But it seems hard to deny that the pattern I have described is quite usual, at least with gifted students.

Of course if the student *doesn't* forget the Esperanto, he has permanent command of a medium that does have a million or so speakers and quite a bit of literature, and that can come in surprisingly handy if he is destined to travel much outside the English-speaking world. But all that is *another* story.



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Motivating the Gifted High School Language Student



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