

Integrated LOTE in the Primary Curriculum

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In 1996, I was the deputy principal of The Foothills School, an alternative secondary school in Perth, W.A. The school had been teaching Japanese for many years and no-one had ever actually learned Japanese as a result. We held a review to discuss whether that mattered, starting with a brainstorm of our reasons for offering LOTE at all.

Our list looked something like this:

1. To engage curiosity and provide a global perspective.
2. To build confidence and self-esteem.
3. To provide the cognitive advantages of bilingualism.
4. To encourage empathy and respect for ESL immigrants.
5. To give our students flexibility to learn other languages as needed later.

We also took stock of our resources, especially time. Our students had about 200 minutes a week for 3 years to spend on LOTE, ie less than 400 hours in total. We recognized that most of our goals would not be reached unless students did substantially master the target language.

We discovered that motivated adults need over 3000 hours to gain basic competence in Japanese, that French or German are available in 700 hours and Esperanto could be learned in just 100 hours. (Our students were far from being “motivated adults”!)

Checking back through our goals, we asked (and answered!):

1. Which language would offer the best connection to the global community?

Esperanto provides a few million contacts in over a hundred maximally diverse cultures. No other LOTE offers that breadth.

2. Which language would best build confidence and self-esteem, even for students with language deficits?

Only Esperanto is designed to be easily learned. It is completely phonetic and uses regular word-building and uncomplicated grammar. No other language can offer as much success, to as many students.

3. Which language best provides the cognitive advantages of bilingualism?

In the time available, the students cannot be functionally bilingual in any other language than Esperanto.

4. Which language would let our students know how it feels to be limited in expression by being deprived of one’s mother tongue?

Learning another natural language would better demonstrate the difficulty of ESL but, to have the experience of speaking a second language imperfectly, students have to get further into a language than they usually do now, so Esperanto might be the best option here, too.

5. Which language provides most transferable experience for future flexibility?

Esperanto uses many Latin and Germanic roots so that there is a lot of transferable linguistic knowledge between English, Esperanto and other European languages. However, in its agglutinative nature and relatively free syntax, it also prepares students well for successful learning of Asian languages.

The Apprenticeship Language Effect

Studies, in Australia and abroad, have shown that a year of learning Esperanto benefits the learning of Japanese or French even more than an extra year of studying the new target language. The usual explanation is that a year of Esperanto learning is about linguistic structures, not exceptions, so that a holistic image of the essential features of a language becomes visible, instead of being lost in the detail of random idiosyncrasies like silent letters and doubling rules.

Having concluded that Esperanto would best set students up for success, in relation to our goals, we decided that lack of a specialist teacher was not enough reason to justify a compromise. If it was worth the students time to learn, it was worth a teacher's time so I got the job. Before I started teaching, I had 6-7 lessons in Esperanto, I collected resources (mostly old and unacceptable for modern use) and started studying LOTE methodology.

In spite of my limited preparation, the course was a great success. By the end of term 1 year 8 were staying in at lunchtime and staying hours late after school to talk to Swiss kids (who had come to school early to talk to us) in Esperanto. They didn't have a big vocabulary at the time, but they were very keen to use what they had.

After 3 years of the program, I transferred to a Montessori primary school which was thoroughly fed up with LOTE. They felt that they had tried everything and found nothing satisfactory. I started teaching Esperanto to my class, then the next one too, and by the end of the year all of the primary school was learning Esperanto as LOTE. As with the high school students, they made good progress and soon reached the stage of being able to communicate, even though the time allowance was barely enough, at 40-60 minutes a week. In the 4th year of the program, 20 of the students travelled to Switzerland to visit the school I had made friends with years before. The children in the two schools had no common language but Esperanto, and it served the purpose.

The last school where I taught Esperanto was a state school in rural NSW, one lesson a week (except for sports days, the first week of term and some other interruptions) to years 5 and 6 for three years. This was not enough for all students to communicate independently in Esperanto. Ten students achieved it before moving on to one of the three local high schools, where they would learn either French, Italian or German. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our students gained significant advantage from their "apprenticeship" language, Esperanto, whichever language followed.

The next year, in June 2007, the 8 major Australian Universities held a crisis meeting calling for “creative solutions” to the failure of LOTE (Languages Other Than English) education in Australia. I wondered if what I had been doing for the last decade might be such a solution.

Research revealed that the failure of LOTE was nothing new: In 1996, The Australian Languages and Literacy Council concluded that “The key finding of the council's investigation is that our education systems are consistently failing to deliver any worthwhile proficiency in languages.”

Further, in 2002, The Executive Summary of the LOTE Report, commissioned by The Federal Department of Education, Science and Training stated that:

“Given the questions and concerns that have been raised in relation to LOTE, it is appropriate to ask whether the current model of provision can ever produce better results in terms of language learning, regardless of the amount of funding injected into it.”

Primary LOTE education in Australia uses a very different model of provision than other subjects, except music. These two are commonly provided by a visiting specialist, if and when one is available.

One disadvantage of this dependence is that a suitable LOTE specialist is frequently not available. For many years there has been a worldwide, "chronic shortage of qualified language teachers, despite measures to encourage recruitment”, as the British Nuffield Inquiry Report noted in 2000.

DEST polled school principals to find out why LOTE in Australian primary schools is “consistently failing to produce results”. Where programs have failed, or have been dropped, the explanations offered can be grouped into the overlapping headings of Teacher Availability, Time, Commitment, Continuity and Consideration for the Needs of the Learner.

These problems can all be addressed by engaging some lateral thinking:

1. Teachers

Australia has no shortage of competent, qualified, primary school teachers who are fully capable of learning anything that we would expect to teach to every primary school child.

Could the creative solution, and new model of provision, be something as simple and sensible as using the professional primary educators that we already have?

My own experience shows that a generalist teacher can teach a suitable “apprenticeship language” (Lo Bianco, ACER 2010) very effectively, and it may be important that they do so - as language experts frequently cite the problem of Australia’s “monolingual mindset”. This is the idea that it is normal to be monolingual, and that only immigrants seriously speak other languages. Having normal primary school teachers demonstrate willingness and capacity to learn another language to fluency, with the children, is our best hope of changing that mindset.

As someone who has been both a classroom teacher and a LOTE specialist, I believe that the primary classroom teacher is the best professional to teach a young child a new language because s/he is the more powerful role-model of non-specialist adulthood and:

- knows the child's abilities, maturity and motivations best,
- has effective techniques for managing the class,
- is appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced,
- is with the child all day and can provide extra time or a new task when needed,
- has the support of colleagues, administration and parents,
- is already settled in the community (important in rural areas)
- has control over the classroom environment and timetable,
- can integrate language use into classroom life and other subjects.

Making LOTE education an integrated part of the generalist teacher's work opens up opportunities for schools to raise standards in other KLA's through use of other specialists, in science or other subjects, during weekly RFF, or DOTT, time.

Not all teachers have the opportunities I had for extensive in-service training, as a LOTE teacher and HOD, so I have spent the last two years preparing the teaching resource I wish I'd had at the outset, "Talking to the Whole Wide World", which contains both all a teacher needs to know about Esperanto, and a wealth of teaching strategies for use with children of various ages and stages.

The book and CD set are no more difficult to use than any other resource normally used by primary teachers. Because rules in Esperanto do not have exceptions, teachers do not have to worry that they will teach something which turns out to be wrong, as would be the case with other languages.

In the first year, the class get to share the learning adventure with the teacher, and see that everyone needs to practice, look things up, make mistakes... this is important learning. After the first year, the teacher is probably in the more usual position of being ahead of the class and is increasingly well equipped to provide "language immersion" experiences for the class.

These two strategies, "apprenticeship languages" and "language immersion", are recognized as winners among language teaching methodologies by Prof Joseph Lo Bianco, author of Australia's language policy (among other things) and other experts.

Teacher supply is the reason identified by principals as the main one causing failure of LOTE programs. Fortunately, the solution proposed here also addresses the other four big reasons: Time, Continuity, Commitment and Concern for the Needs of Individual Learners

2. Time

Time issues include such aspects as:

- Total time allowance
- Starting time
- Lesson and practice frequency
- Lesson duration
- Discontinuity of the program
- Time on task, and
- Time flexibility to allow for individual needs.

Control of most of these is constrained by dependence on specialists. Well-prepared generalists can optimize these for the character of the particular class, ensuring that language education starts at the right time, in optimally-sized blocks, integrated into the curriculum, by teachers who know their students and are able to allow extra time or extension opportunities to meet the needs of all.

The one problem which use of classroom teachers does not, in itself, resolve- is total time allowance. However, if the way that we are employing the generalists is by choosing Esperanto, then that solves the total time problem by offering a language that fits within the current time allowance available to most primary schools for LOTE.

3. Continuity

LOTE learning is strongly cumulative, so continuity is essential. Primary Esperanto education can provide continuity by reducing dependence on scarce specialists (who may leave) as well as by developing cumulative communicative competence in a single language whilst generating interest in, and understanding of, the widest variety of cultures.

Because students can reasonably expect to master Esperanto in the primary school, choosing a third language in secondary school is less anticlimactic than abandoning a partly-mastered language to start again. Whichever language(s) they choose to study later, mastery of Esperanto as a first foreign language makes the next one easier and quicker.

4. Commitment

The Primary Esperanto Strategy is fair, effective and practical enough to inspire the commitment of principals, teachers, students, parents and the wider community.

5. Sensitivity to the Needs of Learners

Best educational practice requires consideration of the characteristics of the learners, both as a group and as individuals. Primary Esperanto is a strong strategy for the development of empathy, cognition, perspective, literacy, self-confidence and linguistic potential. It also provides maximum responsiveness to the needs of individual students by putting the LOTE program into the hands of the classroom teacher who cares for each child and knows them best.

To conclude, Esperanto may be the best choice for your primary school LOTE strategy because:

- ▶ To do so models fairness, and equal respect for all cultures.
- ▶ Its grammatic regularity and phonetic nature make it accessible in the time available.
- ▶ Educationally disadvantaged students often gain confidence from spelling and reading success in Esperanto, even if it has been elusive in English.
- ▶ Esperanto promotes English literacy, and later language learning, through transparent grammatical structure, sound/symbol constancy and use of Latin roots.
- ▶ It promotes numeracy by the exact match of words and concepts to the base ten number system and other primary mathematical concepts such as fractions and multiplication.

- ▶ Esperanto encourages creativity, analysis and synthesis through extensive use of regular wordbuilding.
- ▶ Esperanto gives access to the widest variety of cultures in all dimensions: language, religion, arts, environment, politics, economy, resources and intercultural relationships. This broad perspective provides context for a variety of future studies.
- ▶ Esperanto has no exceptions to its “rules” so students have time to learn more transferable general LOTE concepts, skills and attitudes which greatly facilitate learning other languages later.
- ▶ Esperanto allows quality preparation for generalist teachers in an affordable time frame.
- ▶ Classroom teachers who teach Esperanto model life-long learning and the value they put on languages.
- ▶ Classroom teachers already have the full support of colleagues, administration and communities to make language learning as an integral part of school culture.
- ▶ Primary school graduates, with experience of successful language learning, are best-prepared to make a meaningful commitment to the study of any third language and its culture in secondary school and beyond.

If you are interested in implementing this strategy in your school, you might like to view a short presentation that you can find by googling “World of Primary Esperanto (version 3)”, or contact the author through the website at www.mondeto.com.