

The power of Esperanto

By Ingrid Pillar | July 26, 2012 | Language learning, gender & identity

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Herzberg am Harz, the Esperanto City
(Source: Der Spiegel)

The rural Bavarian high school I attended in the late 70s and early 80s had two international exchanges going, one with a school in Britain and another one with a school in France. The two exchanges differed in many ways. To begin with, the British exchange was much more popular than the French one. Almost everyone wanted to go on the exchange program with the British school because English was compulsory for everyone from the first year of high school and everyone thought, then as now, that English was useful, cool, etc. By contrast, French started only two years later and there was a choice between French and Latin. So, fewer students were eligible to go on the French exchange and those who went were much more committed to French.

I went on the exchange with the British school when I was 11 years old. Together with a friend, I stayed with a local family for a few weeks, went to the school but into a separate language program, along with everyone else from my school, and had an afternoon and weekend program with activities and sightseeing. My home-stay family was nice but I found the food so horrible that I felt hungry for most of the time I spent in Britain. Having kids on language exchange provided a supplementary income to my host family and so having kids from continental Europe was quite normal to them and they actually put me in touch with a student from Spain, who had stayed with them a few weeks before me, and with whom I established a pen-pal relationship for a couple years. Back home, I wrote a few letters to my British host family and sent them Christmas cards for a few years but they never responded and we soon lost contact.

We didn't really establish much contact with any of the British kids and they never reciprocated the annual visits that our school paid them.

My friends' experiences on the British exchange were similar to mine. However, the French exchange (on which I never went because I chose Latin as 2nd foreign language and started French only quite late as 3rd foreign language) was different. Students also stayed with host families but attended real classes in addition to dedicated French lessons. Furthermore, it was not only the German kids who went visiting but students from the French partner school regularly came to visit our school as well.

My sister's French 'exchange sister', for instance, came to spend time with our family a few times as a teenager, too, and they are in contact to this very day, having established a lasting relationship that started with a school exchange.

The general point of all this is that different languages enable quantitatively and qualitatively different relationships. English in this case resulted in many but relatively weak relationships while French resulted in fewer but more reciprocal, multi-faceted and stronger relationships.

Indeed, looking at it from the perspective of the English speakers it would seem that they are just so swamped with everyone wanting to learn their language that it's hard to develop any real interest in English language learners. My daughter's elementary school here in Sydney has an exchange relationship with a school in South Korea similar to the one my German school had with Britain. Each year, 3-5 Korean students show up for a term and everyone is really nice and welcoming and inclusive, as far as I can see, but no one would even dream of reciprocating their language learning, their culture learning, their visits, or simply show any interest in anything Korean.

So what does all that have to do with Esperanto?

Today 125 years ago, on July 26, 1887, [Dr L.L. Zamenhof](#) published the first textbook, *Unua Libro*, for the international auxiliary language he had invented. While [Esperanto](#) is no doubt the most successful international language ever constructed, most people look at it as a slightly crazy idea and if asked to assess its usefulness as an international language few people would consider it very useful. Indeed, in the [2012 Eurobarometer Report 'Europeans and their Languages'](#) (about which I wrote last week) 67% of Europeans considered English the most useful language and no one even asked them about Esperanto.

However, the idea that English is highly useful as an international language and Esperanto is for the lunatic fringe only holds if you look at it in the abstract. It's obvious that theoretically English will enable a learner to speak to many more people and do more things and establish more relationships. However, locally it may be a different story, as it is in the central German town [Herzberg am Harz](#). Herzberg is officially bilingual in German and Esperanto and calls itself *la Esperanto-urbo* (the Esperanto city).

All schools in Herzberg am Harz teach Esperanto, public signage and much service is bilingual, and the town specializes in Esperanto-related tourism ranging from language classes, holiday camps to hosting Esperanto-related conferences. And many tourists simply enjoy visiting Herzberg to practice their Esperanto. The town is partnered with [Góra](#) in Poland and the two places have established a strong partnership which they conduct in Esperanto.

In sum, tiny provincial Herzberg has established a national and international profile for itself through its commitment to Esperanto ([read an interesting article about Esperanto in Herzberg in the magazine *Der Spiegel* in German](#)).

The power of smaller languages



Esperanto works well for the people of Herzberg and Góra because of the high level of commitment to the language exhibited by its speakers. It may be the language of a very small group of people but these people are highly committed not only to their language but also to internationalism. And that's exactly what makes Esperanto more powerful for its speakers than English: where English speakers are indifferent, Esperanto speakers want to establish strong, multi-faceted and reciprocal international relationships.

My introductory example proves the same point: despite the fact that [56% of Germans speak English but only 14% speak French \(and 39% of French speak English but only 6% speak German\)](#), the French-German relationship is usually seen as at the heart of the European Union and the European idea and it is certainly as strong as the quantitatively much more impressive relationships of France and Germany with Britain and the USA.

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