

## Raising children’s metalinguistic awareness to enhance classroom second language learning

### What this study was about

[The study](#) looked at how different ‘starter languages’ could help to develop primary-school children’s metalinguistic (language) awareness, and the impact this had on their subsequent learning of another language.

### What the researchers did

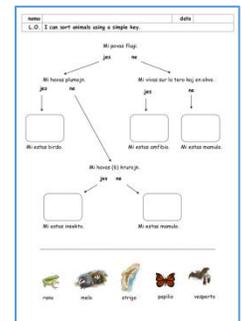
178 children aged 8-9 years participated in the project. They were taught in their usual classes, and allocated to one of four groups. Each group (30-50 children) comprised classes from two schools to counterbalance school effects. The same teacher taught all groups. For the first half of the school year, each group followed a different language programme: German, Italian, Esperanto, or a programme called Esperanto-plus. Groups following the Esperanto-plus programme learned language like the other groups but also had activities designed to focus their attention on how the language works (language form). In the second half of the school year, all groups followed the same French programme, which also included activities focused on language form. Each half-year programme lasted 16 weeks and comprised 20 teaching hours (60 minutes teaching per week, and 15 minutes follow-up teaching). Esperanto was chosen as it is a constructed language which is potentially very helpful for beginner language learners to sharpen their metalinguistic (language-learning) skills; it was designed to be easy to learn and use, and is regular and transparent.



Ich bin ein	Wolf.	23
Ich bin ein	Tier.	76
Ich bin ein	Säugetier.	58
Ich bin ein	Fleischfresser.	40
Ich bin	nachtaktiv.	89
Ich bin	grau.	92
Ich habe	vier (4) Beine.	61
Ich wohne	im Wald.	73
Ich fresse	Tiere.	76
Ich bin ein	Konsument.	38
Ich kann	gehen.	108

reference card

The teaching approach was story-based, using [specially-designed project books, reference cards, task sheets](#) (see examples) and other materials, including songs linked to the curriculum in science (natural habitats, first half-year) and geography (Canada, weather, travel, second half-year). Children were tested for language learning aptitude at the beginning of the first half-year and for [metalinguistic awareness](#) at the beginning and end of the first half-year. They [were tested in French for reading, listening, writing, and grammar](#) at the beginning and end of the second half-year, and again eight weeks after the end of the course.

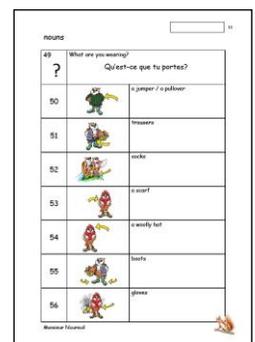


task sheet

### What they found

Children who followed the Esperanto-plus programme with additional focus on language form made significantly greater progress in metalinguistic (language) awareness than the Italian group, and marginally greater progress than the German group. This suggests that learning Esperanto together with a focus on the structure of language enhances children’s metalinguistic awareness. These results suggest that children as young as eight and nine were able to benefit from form-focused instruction, and were able to learn explicitly, that is they could learn from the explicit instructions given by the teacher about grammar and could apply the rules which led to a development in metalinguistic awareness. There were no significant differences between the groups in their subsequent learning of French. Children in the Esperanto and Esperanto-plus groups differed less from each other in their knowledge of French at the end of the year than the children in the German and Italian ‘starter language’ groups. This suggests that learning Esperanto may have had a ‘levelling effect’ which compensated for the differences in ability between individual children. This has also been noticed in other studies. Language learning aptitude was found to have a significant effect on the children’s L2 achievement in the French programme (which included form-focused activities), regardless of the starter language.

project-book page



nouns	What are you wearing?	Quelle est-ce que tu portes?
49	?	?
50	?	je pense / je pense
51	?	maison
52	?	maison
53	?	maison
54	?	maison
55	?	maison
56	?	maison

### Things to bear in mind

The study was a small-scale study, and numbers were smaller in the second half-year. Children’s metalinguistic (language) awareness developed following the Esperanto-plus programme, but it is not yet known whether the form-focused (language-structure) activities used in that programme would have the same effect if introduced in the context of other languages such as Italian or German as they did in the context of Esperanto.