



## How UU CHILDREN CAN BENEFIT BY STUDYING ESPERANTO

We and our children live in a world which still has no official common language and where dozens of languages are nationally or internationally significant. Learning English is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive, even for native speakers. Despite the mental benefits of learning at least one additional language, most Americans thus remain monolingual and unappreciative of language diversity or multilingualism.

What to do? The "let them learn English" attitude applied to non-English-speakers is not only a mere reflection of economic and political inequality and domination but also a lost opportunity for a more spiritualizing approach, an approach which reflects the Unitarian Universalist (UU) principle of "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations."

As Unitarian Universalists and as Member Persons of the United Nations, we are caught in a dilemma when it comes to policies regarding foreign language learning in schools or at home. We affirm, on the one hand, "the inherent worth and dignity of each person." On the other, we affirm "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." These two affirmations can tug in opposite directions when it comes to learning foreign languages.

The inherent worth and dignity of each person entails the inherent worth and dignity of each person's language. Language diversity is thus something inherently valuable and not to be eliminated.

Yet (1) the purpose of using a language is to communicate, (2) communication fails without a common language, (3) humans speak 6000 languages, and (4) world community thus entails the adoption of a universal means of linguistic communication. Thus language unity is also inherently valuable and also not to be eliminated - indeed, it must be increased!

Given the multitude of languages that are inherently and internationally valuable, and which must be respected, what would be a win-win policy for UU youth classes or UU home-schoolers, or even for our American public schools and the United Nations, when it comes to learning a foreign language?

We would seriously suggest the policy of learning Esperanto - *specifically, the learning and use of Esperanto as a young person's introduction to foreign languages and cultures and to the United Nations global movement for a culture of peace.* Here's how:

☺ Esperanto is at least four times easier to learn than other languages. Parents and RE instructors can pick up Esperanto's basic grammar and pronunciation in a single weekend and then build up Esperanto vocabulary along with the students.

☺ The Esperanto vocabulary introduces children to the languages and cultures of Western Europe. Its phonetic spelling reduces learning difficulties and increases success-based motivation for later learning of those more difficult languages. Its regular use of roots, suffixes, and prefixes makes it a flexible, "building block" language that children enjoy taking apart and putting back together in creative ways to make new words and meanings.

☺ Esperanto's non-Western elements, which resemble those found in Swahili, Turkish, Chinese, and the Slavic languages, enable it to act as a stepping stone to the entire world, not just to Europe. It is easy to find young Esperanto pen pals in a particular country and to then deepen in that country's culture and history via letter or internet contacts.

☺ Esperanto's ability to connect children to the entire human family of languages and cultures helps us teach all three of the above-quoted UU principles: (1) the worth and dignity of each person and their language, (2) compassion in human relations, and (3) the goal of democratic world community.

In essence, Esperanto is useful to UU children, not only for its global network of peer group contacts, but because it teaches them a dignity-enhancing way to solve the global communication problem, namely, through a democratic common second language. It thus teaches them global family values based, not on US domination, but on peace through communication and through respect for language and cultural diversity.

For more information, contact us at:

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