

Education for Global Citizenship: The Importance of Language Learning

A Position Paper of the Universal Esperanto Association

Achieving SDG4: Quality education for all

What is education for global citizenship?

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “Global Citizenship Education aims to empower learners to assume active roles to face and resolve global challenges and to become proactive contributors to a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure world.” Global citizenship is an awareness of one’s place in the world; it involves a set of values that can be instilled in a person at any age; and it empowers all to work for a more peaceful world. Education for Global Citizenship is receiving increasing attention as a component in quality education.

The 66th Conference of NGOs sponsored by the UN Department of Public Information (Gyeongju, Republic of Korea, 30 May – 1 June 2016) cited in its concluding Action Plan several elements that should be included in education for global citizenship, particularly:

- “An education based on creative and critical thinking that enables all people to actively contribute to political and developmental processes in a complex, interlinked, and diverse global society...”
- “An education that teaches conflict resolution, a deep appreciation for diversity, ethical reasoning, gender equality, human rights and responsibilities, interdependence, multilingual and multicultural competence, social justice, sustainable development...”

The Action Plan describes education for global citizenship as “an essential strategy to address global challenges as well as to promote gender equality, facilitate the eradication of poverty and hunger, build skills, eliminate corruption, and prevent violence, including violent extremism.” Such education “promotes truly sustainable production and consumption, mitigating climate change and its effects, protecting our waters and biodiversity, and preserving indigenous knowledge.”

Effective communication is the key to global citizenship.

Implied in the idea of global citizenship is an ability to communicate effectively across borders in a spirit of equality and reciprocity. Such an ability allows us to learn firsthand and directly about the lives of others and the challenges and opportunities they face. Thus “multilingual and multicultural competence” is a necessary prerequisite for many of the other requirements of global citizenship, since it alone allows for such equality and reciprocity. Simply imposing our language on others is insufficient and unequal. Thus, learning foreign languages and appreciating linguistic and cultural difference is an essential part of global citizenship. Promoting and managing linguistic diversity is the most important way to make sure that all voices are heard, allowing everyone to have a direct connection with, and influence on, the institutions that affect them.

Global citizenship requires that we appreciate, and manage, linguistic diversity.

Most of the world’s citizens speak more than one language, and in some societies plurilingualism is necessary for survival. Even in largely monolingual settings, learning a second language offers greater access to the world and expands communicative and psychological boundaries. Understanding others does not compromise the loyalty people have to their own country, but rather strengthens common bonds shared among people regardless of citizenship. Fostering a sense of unity in diversity allows people to empathize across cultures, thus advancing peace and creating a reluctance to go to war with one’s neighbours.

The English language is important and prestigious, but not enough.

The preferred language of wider communication tends to be English. English carries prestige and opens opportunities. The habitual use of a single language in international affairs, however, fosters the illusion of universal comprehension. It excludes those with a less than fluent understanding and puts native speakers of English at an unfair advantage. Non-native speakers of English must work harder to express themselves. Fluent English speakers, native and non-native, are easily persuaded to take the lead and drown others out. The result is unfair linguistic discrimination.

Yet the NGO Conference in Gyeongju was conducted largely in English, effectively excluding those with no English and disadvantaging many of those for whom English was not a native language. While it may be argued that such exclusion encourages the disadvantaged to master English, such an approach is highly discriminatory and flies in the face of the principle of inclusion and human rights that lies at the very heart of education for global citizenship.

While the Universal Esperanto Association recognizes the value of English, we believe that a broader knowledge of all languages would be beneficial to all. In addition to supporting multilingualism, we encourage the learning of the neutral and easily mastered international language Esperanto, based as it is on the principle of linguistic equality.

Esperanto is a neutral, fair, and easily acquired means of worldwide linguistic communication, worthy of promotion.

The ideas and values embodied in global citizenship are best discussed in a neutral medium that belongs to no one but is shared by all. Such a medium is the international language Esperanto, a language without borders, created to bridge cultural differences and differences of belief in a second-language environment in which everyone is equal. We have as much to learn from others as they have to learn from us. It is vital that we learn to appreciate our differences rather than fruitlessly trying to assimilate everyone to a single world-view. Esperanto speakers are often already convinced global citizens. Our Association encourages them to do more, by facilitating travel among young people, promoting the United Nations in Esperanto circles, and stimulating debate on world issues.

Created over 130 years ago, Esperanto has stood the test of time. Its hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of speakers across the world are able to reach a level of competence rapidly because the language is relatively easy to learn. Indeed, it provides an ideal introduction to language study in general. Above all, it inculcates in its speakers a sense of fairness, an appreciation for diversity, and an

openness to new ideas – a first step on the way to true global citizenship. With its worldwide community of speakers, it offers abundant opportunities to test our assumptions and to develop a sense of the interdependence of all people.

Our Association works for international understanding on the basis of reciprocity.

Our Association uses the international language Esperanto to facilitate international cooperation and global citizenship. We support movements to preserve languages, especially those of indigenous peoples, and to promote linguistic diversity. Discussion must be reciprocal between the planners and the planned to truly understand the needs, ideas, and cultures of peoples around the world. Esperanto is a non-partisan and neutral bridge among languages – a bridge that allows full language parity.

There are speakers of Esperanto all across the world in the majority of the Member States of the United Nations. They believe that Esperanto helps develop a sense of global citizenship in the individual, that it is particularly well adapted for the discussion and resolution of major world problems, and that it merits serious investigation by those eager to promote worldwide understanding and mobilization around the United Nations agenda.

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