

The "30 Golden Hours" project to learn and teach Esperanto

Alessandra Madella

Department of Foreign Languages, Zaozhuang University, , aminafuji2@yahoo.it

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Abstract

The "30 Golden Hour" project of the Italian Esperanto Institute and the International League of Esperanto-speaking Teachers is a 20-hour online video course of the international language Esperanto. It was developed in the new vogue of online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. It targets high school teachers, who might in turn teach Esperanto to their own students. The project is based on a study of the history of the international experiments on the propaedeutic aspect of Esperanto, which has become my book L'esperanto: facilità di apprendimento e aiuto nello studio di altre lingue (2023). The present study asks two of the research questions that guided these previous experiments. First, can a simple language such as Esperanto be learned independently and taught even by beginners with the right materials, with minimal support on the part of more experienced Esperanto teachers? Secondly, can the study of Esperanto increase the students' metalinguistic competence, with possible propaedeutic effects on the study of other languages, as well as a deepened awareness of the structures of their native tongue(s)? The example of a teacher who finished the course and taught Esperanto in a CLIL course provides an interesting answer to both questions.

Keywords: *Esperanto; video course; metalinguistic competence; propaedeutic effects; CLIL.*

1. Introduction: Esperanto and the "30 Golden Hours" project

Esperanto is an international language created by the Jewish doctor Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859-1917), who first presented it to a Russian readership in 1887. Its aim of facilitating just and equal communication on a neutral basis immediately resulted in several followers. A century of history has created an Esperantist community with a shared culture based on promoting and practicing intercultural understanding (Caligaris, 2016, 2021). Almost since the beginning, the simple grammar of Esperanto and its logical principles of word-formation have inspired different experiments to prove that it is easier to learn than ethnic languages, as well as that it could have propaedeutic effects on the learning of other languages. One of the most recent experiments is the so-called "30 Golden Hours" project (also known as "30 ore d'oro" in Italian or "30 oraj horoj" in Esperanto). It was devised conjunctly by the Italian Esperanto Institute (Itala Esperanto-Instituto, IIE) and the Italian section of the International League of Esperanto-speaking Teachers (Internacia Ligo de Esperantistaj Instruistoj, ILEI) in the Summer of 2021. The video course that constitutes its core can be downloaded for free from the website www.30oredoro.it. It consists of ten modules of two hours each, which cover not only the language but also its literature, music, and animations, as well as the history of the Esperanto movement and valid reasons to join it. Ten additional hours of free study with the possible assistance of experienced tutors make up the "30 hours" of the title—an ideal length for refresher courses for secondary school teachers in Italy.

Teachers in secondary Italian schools are, in fact, the main target of the course, designed by publisher Brunetto Casini and English teacher Laura Brazzabeni, with the help of a small team of fellow esperantists. Italy was one of the countries that were hit first and the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools closed from March to

September 2020, and the health situation continued to disrupt teaching and learning even after reopening (Borgonovi & Ferrara, 2023). This condition made it extremely difficult for external parties or personnel, such as Esperanto teachers, to enter Italian schools. A way out of this impasse was to teach Esperanto directly to secondary-school teachers, asking them to teach their students in turn, in exchange for the free course. Luckily, the pandemic also had the unintended consequence of popularizing video courses, which created a potential audience ready to be tempted by this offer. Also on the Esperanto side, the involuntary isolation provided the opportunity to explore more in-depth the possibility of video creation and the use of new technologies for language teaching. Out of this combination comes the topical experience of the “30 Golden Hours.”

In this paper, I show the beginnings and the current state of the project, which has not yet fulfilled its expectations in terms of Esperanto courses opened in Italian secondary schools, but has nevertheless produced some interesting results. I concentrate in particular on the guidelines of the project in which the historical and theoretical starting points are described. They can be downloaded for free from the dedicated course website, www.30oredoro.it. With the addition of further materials and interviews, they have then become my book *Esperanto: Facilità di apprendimento e aiuto nello studio di altre lingue* (Madella, 2023a, 2023b). They provide an overview of the century-long history of Esperanto experiments, demonstrating that it is easier to learn than ethnic languages. The teaching of Esperanto also promotes the formation of a metalinguistic competence, which allows a deeper understanding of the functioning of one’s own language and has positive repercussions on the learning of other languages. Its simple and logical grammar and structure, in fact, can function as a map to provide students with a more conscious understanding of how a language works, with a propedeutic or reinforcing function on the learning of foreign languages. Moreover, the role of Esperanto as a language of peace and intercultural communication, with its own literary and artistic culture to promote these values, can supplement the work of civic education and help to form engaged and informed citizens with a cosmopolitan worldview. The book currently exists in Italian and Esperanto, but it has attracted a wide interest in the international Esperanto networks: the Croatian version is due for publication in February 2026, Korean and English translations are currently being prepared, while a possible Bulgarian translation has been announced. Meanwhile, the Education Commission of the French Esperanto Federation is discussing a possible adaptation of the video course itself to the French context. Therefore, I argue that, while the “30 Golden Hours” project has not yet fully achieved its expected results in terms of a greater diffusion of Esperanto in Italian schools, its potential remains great, and its influence is already felt and discussed on an international scale.

The present study focuses on two research questions, which were also one of the constant guiding lights throughout the history of past experiments. The first is whether it is really possible for a teacher who followed the video course to use the same materials to teach Esperanto to her own students, without or with minimal external support from experienced Esperantists. This aspect could certainly represent a valuable asset when offering the course to secondary schools, as it underscores the feasibility of the project from a practical point of view. The second question is whether Esperanto really works in enhancing the metalinguistic competence of the students and has positive effects not only on the study of other languages and on a better understanding of one’s own native tongue, but also on the study of other subjects, such as mathematics. This matter is extremely important in a world in which the spreading of AI might have unwelcome consequences precisely in this area. As Nicolas Guichon said in his presentation during EuroCALL 2025: “The use of digital tools (translation, speech-to-text) may bypass the crucial cognitive engagement that leads to developing metacognitive awareness of how the target language works” (Guichon, 2025). It seems, therefore, crucial to be able to propose the help of Esperanto to counteract this potentially negative trend. From this point of view, the international language could offer its contribution to a more positive use of teaching technologies that could further the development of metalinguistic competence in the students.

2. Method

2.1. Context, contents, and participants

Italy was the second country affected by the COVID-19 pandemic after China. Schools had to organize their distance learning in an extremely hasty fashion, without previous preparation. The difficulty of dealing with

modern technologies initially had a negative influence on the learning of traditional subjects. Casini noticed a negative effect on the scores of the Italian language in the standardized assessment developed by the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI) to evaluate the proficiency of Italian students. This descending curve is particularly concerned with upper secondary schools in different regions, including Tuscany, where Casini's publishing house Edistudio is located. Therefore, he had the idea of proposing to the regional educational authorities of Tuscany the "30 Golden Hours" project as a way of reversing the trend. In order to support his proposal, he asked me to write the guidelines of the project, concentrating particularly on the history of the studies and experiments that showed the potential benefits of the learning of Esperanto on the study of other subjects.

Tuscany's educational authorities read the materials, expressed interest in the initiative, and offered to send a letter to all the secondary schools in the region to better introduce the "30 Golden Hours" project. In this way, it was possible to gather enough prospective students to effectively produce the video course and start the project in the following months. The lessons include sections taught by famous professors of the Esperanto movement. For instance, the literary part is covered by Carlo Minnaja, author with Giorgio Silfer of the most complete book on the history of Esperanto literature (Minnaja & Silfer, 2015). The motivational part was written by Renato Corsetti (1941-2025), who in his years as professor of psycholinguistics at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" was the motor of several experiments on the metalinguistic effects of the teaching of Esperanto, together with his colleague Mauro La Torre (1946-2010) of Roma Tre University. The part on the Esperanto community, which makes the international language a living tongue with its dynamic and variegated culture, was curated by Irene Caligaris, author of one of the most complete studies of the topic (Caligaris, 2016, 2021). The properly linguistic and grammatical part of the course was offered by Brazzabeni, an experienced language teacher, the general director of the Italian Esperanto Institute, and the current president of the Italian Esperanto Federation. These parts were in turn supplemented by lighter examples, considering the perspective final destination of the materials in a secondary-school context. Accordingly, my task was to show how to stimulate fun classroom activities through my original animation in Esperanto, "La aventuroj de Saĝa Steleto kaj de la Mirinda Teamo" (Madella, 2021).

The video course targeted secondary school teachers, since high school students who become interested in the international language have more chances of wanting to become part of the movement, compared with younger students. According to a recent international survey by the Serbian Esperanto League, for example, 31% of active esperantists first learned the language between the ages of 15 and 20, in contrast to only 11% who learned it at an earlier age (Petrović, 2024:15). Moreover, experience has shown that high school students might be more motivated to join the movement if they find there common interests with people of the same age. Otherwise, their curiosity might just be a passing fancy, as it is for several people who learn the international language as a game on Duolingo, but who do not really feel the need to meet other Esperantists. Therefore, Giovanni De Lucia, president of the Italian Esperantist Youth, read the motivational part specifically written for the video course by Corsetti. The course and the tutoring were offered free of charge to the teachers, in exchange for the promise of introducing Esperanto in their school settings, on the basis of the provided materials. A participation certificate was provided for the teachers who completed all the modules and who asked for it, in the hope that their school would recognize the course as additional training. Teachers had the additional option to take the A2 exam CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) of the Italian Esperanto Institute, receiving the related certificate. In this way, the "30 Golden Hours" project started to enter its "teaching the teachers" phase in the Fall of 2021 (Madella, 2023c, 2023d).

2.2. The guidelines

My guidelines turned out to be a crucial tool in our attempt to persuade the educational authorities of Tuscany to support our project, as well as to convince the teachers to participate in it. Writing guidelines to accompany such a proposal is already a rhetorical tradition. Corsetti did the same in the early 2000s for the British experiment "Springboard to Languages." His contribution stressed in particular the metalinguistic competence that could stem from the learning of Esperanto, with possible propedeutic effects on the further learning of other languages, including the ability to translate simple vocabularies from sentences in languages yet unknown (Madella, 2023a: 96-102; 2023b: 88-94). Apart from Corsetti's advice, I also benefited from the impressive bibliography assembled

to back the experiment in a primary school in Turin, Italy, in the 1990s. Thanks to the help of Esperanta Radicals Asocio (Esperanto Radical Association, ERA), it became part of the *Circolare Ministeriale Pubblica Istruzione* (Circular issued by the Italian Ministry of Education) n. 126 of 1995 (Madella, 2023a: 88; 2023b: 81). My particular contribution was correcting some factual mistakes in previous documents, adding a detailed study of the rhetorical situations and the theoretical presuppositions of past experiments, and enlarging the scope to the most recent developments in the field. A particularly inspiring section in this sense was the one featuring interviews with some of the protagonists of past and present experiments. Thanks to funding from the European Union, my guidelines could grow in size and become a book published by Edistudio, first in Italian and then in Esperanto (Madella, 2023a, 2023b).

In practical terms, the guidelines and the related books provide a background that helps us to situate our research questions in an already existing tradition. The bibliography and the historical study clearly show that Esperanto experiments have been a constant presence, from the very first decades of the diffusion of the international language. The sheer quantity of materials available is impressive, even if most experiments would fail the more exacting test of current scientific standards. The biggest problem is that almost all of them have been carried out by Esperantists and therefore lack objectivity. Other recurrent problems are the relatively small number of participants and the lack of external control over the results. The few experiments that have been conducted most scientifically do show, however, encouraging results in relation to our metalinguistic question. “Springboard to Language”, controlled by non-esperantist researchers of a different university, proved the development of metalinguistic competence in British pupils. Their learning of Esperanto at primary school was reflected in their more conscious use of English and in their increased proficiency in understanding other languages at secondary school (Madella, 2023a: 96-102; 2023b: 88-94).

An experiment on the teaching of the rules of Esperanto to university students, carried out by the famous Columbia University psychologist Edward Lee Thorndike (1874-1949) in 1931, suggested an answer to our other question, whether even a teacher not so familiar with the language might teach it with good materials. This essential antecedent for the practical realization of our project came at the end of Thorndike’s six-year experiment for the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA). He could have been more objective, since he was not an Esperantist and his interest in the matter was only to gain insights for teaching in general. The IALA experiments proved that Esperanto could be learned by native speakers of American English faster than ethnic languages such as French and that it could be propedeutic to their learning of other languages. But the particular experiment discussed by Thorndike in the article “On the learning of rules in the study of a foreign language,” published by *The German Quarterly* in 1931, is noteworthy for another reason. It closes with the observation that the materials prepared by his assistant for the teaching of the Esperanto grammar were excellent. They focused particularly on teaching and testing grammar rules, the numerals, and certain common prepositions, conjunctions, and pronouns, as well as how to operate the Esperanto system of affixes. The so-called correlatives—such as “kial” (why) and “ial” (for some reasons) or “kiel” (how) and “iel” (in some ways)—deserved to be tested apart due to their extreme characteristics. On the one hand, they were designed to help reasoning and memorization, since each element reinforced the whole system. On the other hand, the similarity among these short correlative words was also the greatest cause of confusion for English-speaking students. In any case, the control group showed that, if there are good teaching materials, a bigger class with a less experienced teacher could have the same results as smaller classes taught with the most skilful methods a very experienced teacher could devise (Thorndike, 1931: 90-91, 94-95). This emphasis returns in the following experiments on the teaching of Esperanto in other parts of the world. From the EKPAROLI experiment in Australia in the 1990s to the already mentioned “Springboard to Languages” in Great Britain, the basic problem was always how to have non-Esperanto school teachers teach the language, if there were not enough Esperanto teachers around for too many classes. The general feeling was that only with a language as simple as Esperanto, this “teaching-while-still-learning” is possible (Madella, 2023a: 92-102; 2023b: 86-94). This point became an important rationale for the development of the “30 Golden Hour” project, in which teachers watch the video course and are then supposed to teach Esperanto to their class on the basis of the materials, with just occasional online individual help from experienced tutors.

In terms of the method for the present study, the research question whether the video course was sufficiently effective for the teachers to learn the language and to feel confident to teach it with minor help can be answered by seeing how many people finished the course and were able to teach their own class. Also, their feedback through

optional questionnaires at the end of the video course is an important indicator in this regard, together with their willingness to take the test of the Italian Esperanto Institute. The research question on the development of a metalinguistic competence can be answered by seeing the results of the only teacher who was able to teach the language for a sufficient amount of time, and the feedback of the other language teachers of his students.

3. Results

So far, 152 students have registered for the video course of the “30 Golden Hour,” with the following stochastic distribution: 24 in 2021, 62 in 2022, 44 in 2023, 7 in 2024, and 15 in 2025. Of the total registrants, 60 have declared their school identification code and were therefore teachers in Italian schools at the time of registration. The declared subjects of instruction were: Esperanto (14, mostly outside the school environment), Italian, Literature, History, and Geography (often together, 31), Foreign Languages (one or more, 25), Mathematics, Information Technology, or Physics (20), and some others (5). The age distribution is very wide, but a slight majority of the registered students were above 50 years old (private communication with Brunetto Casini, July 2025). It is not known exactly how many students completed the course, but 32 teachers asked for the completion certificate, in order to submit it to their schools: 27 in 2022, 10 in 2023, 3 in 2024, and 2 until now in 2025. In addition, nine passed the exam of the A2 or B1 levels CEFR, provided as an additional option by the Italian Esperanto Institute (private communication with the general director Laura Brazzabeni, August 2025). Most of the comments on the materials and the learning experience gathered through questionnaires at the end of the course have so far been positive, in some cases even enthusiastic.

In the second stage, however, when teachers are supposed to “give back” by teaching their own pupils, the numbers are much lower. Only one teacher, Carlo Nicola Colacino, has so far been able to teach a full-blown elementary course of Esperanto for a whole year, as a regular part of the school curriculum in a scientific-linguistic high school of Cascina, near Pisa. The materials designed for the video course of the “30 Golden Hours” were an essential part of the class, together with the attempt to stimulate the 16-year-old students to talk in Esperanto about their surroundings, everyday life, local festivals, or future plans. Interestingly, Colacino is not a language teacher but a professor of mathematics and physics. He successfully proposed the teaching as a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) project to show his pupils, linguistically talented but not so proficient in mathematics, that math is also a language, only without exceptions, basically like Esperanto. His students acquired a good elementary level of Esperanto. According to their teachers, they also showed improvements in mathematics, Italian, English, and Chinese that could be broadly related to greater metalinguistic consciousness acquired through the Esperanto training. In the case of foreign languages and Italian, the pupils—who were already an excellent class—showed a heightened motivation in their study, while the opportunity to start a correspondence in Chinese and Esperanto with my students of the Esperanto Faculty at Zaozhuang University certainly increased their intercultural awareness. In the case of math, the pupils developed the ability to understand that they just needed to memorize the minimum indispensable and they could then just rely on their reasoning to carry them further—as in Esperanto, where it is possible to build a vast amount of words from a small number of radicals and affixes (Madella 2023a: 257-265; 2023b: 241-248). A couple of other teachers offered shorter and less official courses of Esperanto, and three more were able to introduce the international language as parts of their Civic Education courses. However, many others, despite having successfully passed the exam of the Italian Esperanto Institute, were not able to teach due to bureaucratic problems or a lack of support from their home institutions.

Meanwhile, there are some proposals coming from abroad to adapt the video course to their local needs. Particularly, *Espéranto-France*, the French Esperanto Federation, has shown interest in this sense. But the lack of technological skills and experience in pedagogical video-making on the part of Esperanto activists might delay the realization of the project. However, several Esperantists with translation experiences of texts in applied linguistics have expressed interest in translating my online guidelines or the more extended printed book. The Croatian translation of the book is currently in the revision stage, and it is due for publication in February 2026. The Korean translation is on its way and aims to look for a non-Esperantist publisher to gain wider exposure. Bulgarians have similarly announced their intention of translating the book. And I have taken on myself the task of producing an English version.

4. Discussion

The “30 Golden Hours” project has gained some important recognitions. In 2021, it was recommended by the International League of Esperanto-speaking Teachers for the UNESCO Hamdan Prize for teacher training, and it finished among the top third of projects presented— the best result among Esperanto projects. In 2022, when the yearly Congress of ILEI was in Lignano Sabbiadoro, it received the official endorsement of the educational authorities of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region. As I mentioned, in 2023, I published the related books thanks to the support of the European Union. And in 2023, thanks to the “30 Golden Hours” project, the Italian Esperanto Institute received the prestigious award “European Language Label” of Erasmus + and INDIRE (the Italian National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research). The recognition is awarded to projects that stood up for innovation and for their contribution to the enhancement of language teaching standards (Madella, 2023c).

The actual results, however, have shown a decline in student registrations in recent years. In part, this development is due to contextual reasons, such as recurrent information attacks on the host platform of Edistudio or the passing of the enthusiasm for the great Esperanto congresses held in Italy in 2023: of ILEI, the Universal Esperanto Association, and the World Esperanto Youth Organization. However, there are also causes closer to the world of teaching or the actual needs of teachers in Italian schools. The most important reason is that the Italian Esperanto Institute has not yet succeeded in acquiring the permission to offer official refresher courses through the so-called “Sofia Platform,” the digital system developed by the Italian Ministry of Education for teacher training and professional development. Teachers who follow the course do it mostly voluntarily, often without recognition on the part of their home institution. Considering the great number of courses that provide this recognition on the “Sofia Platform,” it is certainly a testament to the quality of our offer that so many teachers are attracted to it, even beyond their compulsory training hours.

Unfortunately, the second stage of the project has seldom been realized, and Colacino’s case of a year-long course in the regular class curriculum remains a unicum. Teachers lament a lack of support in addressing the school bureaucracy and in persuading parents, colleagues, and principals that it might be a good idea to develop metalinguistic skills through the seemingly roundabout, but ultimately rewarding path of Esperanto. In fact, the history of Esperanto school experiments is not only a history of language teaching, but also an always-repeated trial of persuasion. In these conditions, the limited resources of the Italian Esperanto Institute and of the Italian Federation have naturally followed the path of least resistance. They have been channeled towards online courses, offered by a few experienced Esperanto teachers and open to students of any age and background, outside the school environment. The materials and experiences accumulated through the “30 Golden Hours” project remain, nevertheless, noteworthy. Hopefully, not too far in the future, acceptance of the course into the “Sofia Platform” could indeed trigger a renewed interest in this valuable learning and teaching opportunity. Therefore, it seems wise to develop rhetorical strategies to help teachers prepare to accept the challenge to acquire the necessary support from their home institutions, in order to give back what they have learned.

5. Conclusions

The “30 Golden Hours” project is a new addition to the centenary history of school experiments in the teaching of Esperanto. In this paper, I have attempted to show how it is based on a conscious reflection on this past, which is well illustrated by its guidelines. Three points are particularly relevant: 1) The metalinguistic consciousness that the teaching of Esperanto can develop and that can have positive repercussions on the learning of other subjects; 2) The simplicity of the language that allows “teaching while learning”, in the presence of good materials; 3) Esperanto as a language with values, but also spoken by a living and dynamic community interested in intercultural understanding. The “30 Golden Hour” project consciously situates itself at the intersection of these three trajectories.

Even if contextual factors have curbed its progress over the last two years, there is no doubt that the awaited recognition by the “Sofia Platform” and the development of more effective rhetorical strategies to support potential teachers could reverse this trend in Italy. Meanwhile, the enlargement of the project to other countries, through the ad hoc translation of the book and possibly of the video course itself, could generate new interesting adaptations.

We could even think about international cooperations for larger experiments, which could add scientifically objective proofs to the examples of the past and contribute to replacing the development of metalinguistic consciousness at the center of attention in the educational world.

Colacino's case, even in its uniqueness so far, is an exemplar of the fact that both research questions of this study can be answered positively: Esperanto can be learned by using our video course at a level sufficient for the teacher to feel confident to teach it by the same materials, and in a way that develops metalinguistic competence. It is, therefore, necessary to bring Colacino's experience to the attention of other teachers who might want to follow a similar path and of scholars who are researching the effective range of contents of CLIL courses in Italy, so that the awareness of the potential propedeutic effects of Esperanto might reach a wider audience.

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