

Foreign Language Teaching and the Art of Educating¹

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“Each language penetrates us differently and reveals human nature in a different way, which is why we must complement the effect of the mother tongue with other languages”³

“Naturally this does introduce into the lessons something that makes teaching somewhat strenuous.”⁴

Interesting developments have occurred in the almost hundred years since the inception of Waldorf education. One of these developments is that, over the decades, the institution of the class teacher has gained prominence at the expense of the subject teachers. This is particularly true in the case of foreign language teachers who are sometimes treated as if they were an inferior kind of species.

There is no point in trying to work out why this is so.

We will instead look at the great importance that Rudolf Steiner attached to the foreign languages in his concept of Waldorf education. Just before the first school was founded he even identified the new school with the early learning of foreign languages which he saw as one of its particular strengths.

Let us try and trace how Rudolf Steiner envisaged the teaching of foreign languages. He certainly wanted it to be different (in the case of modern languages) from any conventional approach. (We will not consider the classical languages which, from today’s point of view, took up too much of the curriculum in the early years). We assume that there is general awareness in the Waldorf movement of the fact that Steiner proposed to teach modern foreign languages from

an early age to make use of the abating powers of imitation that enabled the children to learn their mother tongue. (This is the reason why Steiner suggested that under certain conditions a second mother tongue could be started in kindergarten).

For reasons of clarity it should be mentioned that main stream science knows today that the acquisition of the mother tongue is not based on cognition, or intellectual activity, but on quite different faculties. Steiner envisaged (or explained) that foreign languages must be learned entirely from the human encounter, from the conversation between teacher and pupils, from dialogue: just as it happens with the mother tongue, through verbal interaction: comprehension and the ability to speak must arise out of the activity.

Before the school was founded, during the weeks when Steiner worked on the *Study of Man*⁵, he knew that his intention was extraordinary. He told the teachers – who weren’t teachers yet – about the foreign language teaching in the future school:

“Naturally this does introduce into the lessons something that makes teaching somewhat strenuous. But you cannot avoid that particularly in the lessons with the pupils who will enter into the older classes, a certain amount of effort will be needed.”

Steiner did not spend much time explaining the beginnings of foreign language teaching. Conversation should be practised based on imitation, poems learned, as much as possible memorized. He stressed that foreign language teaching in the lower school was most successful if taught continuously by the same teacher.

1 First published in the Journal of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum, Nr 46, Christmas, 2012

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3 Steiner, Rudolf (2004): A Modern Art of Education. Ilkley [5 to 17 August 1923] GA307, Lecture 11, 978-0880105118

4 Steiner, Rudolf (2000): Practical Advice to Teachers. (Translated, revised & edited by Johanna Collis) Stuttgart [21 Aug to 5 Sept 1919] GA294, Lecture 9: On the Teaching of Languages. 978-0880104678

5 Now published as: Steiner, Rudolf (2004): Foundations of Human Experience. (Translated by Robert Lathe, Nancy Whittaker) Stuttgart [20 Aug to 5 Sept 1919] GA293. 978-0880103923

If you have experienced the constant changes of 'foreign language' teachers you will know what he was talking about: much of what pupils learn is lost because it is rare that a proper handover takes place. It's like changing one's piano teacher. "You must start from scratch, dear. You can forget what you have learned so far."

Foreign language teachers who stay with a class over years know what the pupils have learned in terms of vocabulary, poems and verses and what they can build on. If one takes foreign language teaching seriously one must make sure, as far as possible, that the classes keep the same teacher in each foreign language for many years.

Just imagine that you can, for three years, spend two lessons a week with a class in a language, without writing or teaching formal grammar! And you can carefully develop the vocabulary, make sure children repeat whole sentences correctly, teach poems, verses, songs, encourage dialogue between the pupils – a three-year crescendo.

Like a juggler who keeps the juggling balls in the air, the foreign language teacher keeps the pupils' knowledge alive; but the balls must rise higher and higher and they don't only consist of songs and poems.

"It is not until the second stage, from age 9 to 12, that we begin to develop conscious awareness of the language. This we do by introducing grammar."

These simple statements refer to the change that occurs in the children at that time. What has been learned so far is now made conscious through grammar. Thoroughly! Speaking and conversation are now used to draw attention to the grammar.

"Only the rules should be written down in the book that the children use for regular grammar and syntax learning. It will therefore be very economical and good for the children, if you allow them to discover a particular grammatical rule of the language in question based on an example you have invented, and if tomorrow and on the next day you return to that rule and ask children to find their own

examples. The educational value of this method must not be underestimated. (...) There is a big difference between just asking children about a grammar rule and letting them read out examples dictated to them and preparing examples in a way that allows the children to forget them and asking them to find their own. The activity that the children carry out in finding their own examples is immensely educational. (...) But you too must also make up some careful examples and not hesitate to make the children aware of this"

Steiner then continues: ***"... if you manage to awaken enough interest in the children that they ask their parents over supper: can you make up an example for this rule? – then you will have been really successful. You achieve this if you throw yourself heart and soul into your teaching."***

The above passages are taken from Steiner's considerations regarding foreign language teaching in "Practical Advice for Teachers"⁶. The question is: do they reflect Steiner's enthusiasm for this kind of teaching or are they archetypal instructions for Waldorf teaching? We will keep this question at the back of our minds while we look at some more passages:

"It would be particularly good with regard to foreign languages if the lessons could be organized in a way that would allow the different languages the children have to learn for one reason or another to stand side by side. (...) Much would be gained if one and the same thought developed by a teacher with a pupil in one language could be developed by another pupil in another language and a third in a third language, so that one language would abundantly support the other. Of course such things can only be done if one has the necessary means, in this case the teachers. (...) He learns a thing far better if he has in his soul the method of applying it in a number of directions."

All the quotations given above are taken from Lecture 9 of "Practical Advice for Teachers." The lecture was given just weeks before lessons at

6 Practical Advice for Teachers, see note 3. (translator's note: the translation of the quotations have here partly been adapted to give consistency of style and terminology)

the Waldorf School began. In Lecture 10 Steiner goes a step further when he says: ***“If you read something aloud to your class while the pupils follow the text in their books you do nothing but waste their time. It is the worst you could possibly do. The right way is for teachers to relate freely whatever they want to put across to the children or, if they want to present a passage or poem verbatim, to speak it by heart without using a book ... Or, if this is not expecting too much of children, they can be given for homework the task of reading what has been dealt with during the lesson. In foreign languages, too, homework should be restricted mainly to reading tasks.”***

These considerations are followed by comments regarding essays in the foreign language (and in the mother tongue: *“free composition really has no place in school before the age of fourteen, fifteen”* (!) Steiner concludes this chapter by pointing out that the method he described would allow teachers to ***“always bring together will and intellect in the right way”***.

Is this Steiner speaking as an idealist or as a realist? If we understand him rightly he says that ideas and their implementation always go together. How far are we away from this ideal with our teaching? Or do we teach in this way? There is excellent foreign language teaching going on in upper schools where one can really say that teachers ***“throw themselves heart and soul into the teaching”***.

How is it in the lower and middle school? Are the instructions given above being put into practice there? We will not go into the crisis that occurred when the teachers didn't want to implement Steiner's recommendation for pupils who joined the school later (introducing streaming across classes).

The next question we want to address, using the example of foreign language teaching, is whether these indications by Rudolf Steiner determine 'the art of educating' at the exclusion of other approaches?

This is an inconvenient, if not dangerous question, but – just before the hundredth anniversary of the art of educating and its primary

application in Waldorf schools – this question needs to be asked. There is secondary literature on foreign language teaching that does not consider this question. It offers its own proposals which are not based on Steiner's indications.

We must ask ourselves whether the teaching of foreign languages up to the upper school, that is, in the lower and middle school, really observes Steiner's indications.

For the sake of clarity I will try and extract the quintessence of these indications. According to Rudolf Steiner, the aims of foreign language teaching include:

- Establishing a learning process based on intense interaction between teacher and pupils from class one
- Oral teaching only in the first years
- Vocabulary and conversation are conveyed through dialogue, complemented by verses, poems and songs which are not, in themselves, the aim of the lesson. The aim of the lesson is to learn to speak and understand the language by using it.
- The main purpose of the lessons is the learning of the language, so there needs to be continuous progress from class 1 to enable the children to gain the confidence to continue.
- According to Rudolf Steiner, reading books together in class makes no sense for language acquisition. He suggests a separation of listening and reading: the teacher should narrate the content of the book by heart while the children just listen, and the pupils read the same passage afterwards in the book.
- Foreign language learning is enhanced if the same topics are dealt with in different languages at the same time (which is also possible if the teachers are different as long as they work together).
- The energy of the grammar lessons lies in the simultaneous finding of examples for the application of grammar rules by pupils and teacher. Examples must not be written down.
- Understanding does not grow from literal translation but from rephrasing what has been read.

In summary we could say – to use a term from biochemistry – that foreign teaching is energy-rich in the highest degree!

Main lesson blocks, in contrast, are elegiac-phlegmatic: they stretch over a long period of time, allowing pupils to deeply enter into the matter, expand, brood, write, draw, and even digest what has been taken in. Foreign language teaching, as Rudolf Steiner envisages it, is quite different: it is all concentration, intense dialogue between pupil and teacher and between pupil and pupil. The whole lesson is intense and energy-rich. Or, as Steiner says in this context: **“Up to the age of 9 foreign language learning consists in learning to speak”**.

If we look at the art of educating today we frequently come across unintended inversions which have somehow emerged. People tend to think, for instance, that lessons in the lower classes are all about imagination and that from class five one must come “to the point”. Steiner explains that it is exactly the other way round and that between the ages of 10 and 15, imagination is the highest principle.

The idea that the class teacher has superiority over his foreign language teaching colleagues could be another such unintended inversion. Foreign language teaching might provide the wake-up energy that can warm and permeate the entire school day. Maybe a hygienic-pedagogical mystery lies hidden somewhere here. It might well be that, due to their strong contrast, main lesson and foreign language lessons can mutually enhance each other, because of the stimulating effect that polar opposites have. Shortly after the first Waldorf school had started, Rudolf Steiner noted with regret: **“Language teaching is seen as secondary here; the teachers are already tired.”**

During the Christmas course of 1921/22⁷ he said to an eager audience in Dornach:

“Next to the main lessons, the foreign languages are the most important subjects”.

As soon as the school had started, Rudolf

Steiner realized that it was extremely difficult to apply the Waldorf method to foreign language teaching. The teachers did not achieve what was expected of them and their reaction was to resort to “conventional” foreign language teaching methods for which they were then criticized by Steiner.

The problem largely persists to this day. If we look at foreign language teaching up to and including class eight we find considerable deficits in Waldorf-specific teaching and therefore also in pupil performance.

Steiner said in the faculty meetings: **“What is fertile in our method must first be developed”**. Elsewhere he said: **“If the Waldorf method is really applied the results will also come.”** Or: **“... it is difficult to achieve progress in the foreign languages if one does not master the necessary method.”** [...] **“The general impression is that the children know too little”**.

The Waldorf school movement is approaching its one-hundredth anniversary and it is time to look at the gains and losses. What does the balance look like? Much will depend on a serious retrospective and on whether school will continue to develop the Waldorf method. The first step: **“You can achieve such successes if you throw yourself heart and soul into your teaching”**.♦

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7 Steiner, Rudolf (2003): Soul Economy and Waldorf Education. (Translated by Roland Everett, revised by SteinerBooks) Dornach, 16 lectures [23 Dec 1921 to 7 Jan 1922] 978-0880105170