

Entering deeply into the foreign language and understanding it from within. What does that mean?

When foreign language lessons were introduced in the first Waldorf School in 1919, Rudolf Steiner set new and revolutionary standards, such as introducing two foreign languages from Class 1. If we look back at these standards now, 93 years later, at a time when effectiveness and ever faster cognitive information processes prevail, we realize that Rudolf Steiner's comments are as innovative and topical as ever:

In these lectures I have mentioned that a certain genius lives in language. The genius of language is ... ingenious. We can learn much from the way language fits together and carries its spirit.¹

There is untold wisdom in these words ... All human characteristics are expressed in the way various cultures form their words. ... If you understand language in this inward way, then you will see how the I-organization works.²

The postulation “to allow the living power of language to play into the child soul”³ in the lesson so that pupils can experience the language in their feeling first, runs like a thread through Steiner's instructions on language teaching:

“This is of special importance also with regard to the element of speech. Languages are the outcome of a direct human response to inner experiences. If one is able to

1 Rudolf Steiner, *The Foundations of Human Experience*, GA 293, Lecture 11, p. 175f., Hudson NY 1996, tr. R. Lathe & N. Whittaker

2 Rudolf Steiner, *The Roots of Education*, GA 309, 15 April 1924, Hudson NY 1997, tr. rev. by H. Fox

3 Rudolf Steiner in *the Waldorf School*, GA 298, 11 June 1920, Hudson NY 1996, tr. C. Creeger

*immerse oneself in the quality of spoken sounds, one can still hear in them the important part which such inner responses have played in the formation of certain words. But in our abstract life, when the logical content of language plays the leading part, this perception of the artistic element almost has been lost. True, there is an inherent logic in language, but this represents only its skeleton, something which is dead. There is much else besides logic in language. Its breath and pulse can be felt only by those who have been touched by the creative genius of language itself.*⁴

Translation and comprehension through feeling?

Even if the very young pupils, intellectually aware as they often are now, ask for direct translation into their mother tongue, teachers must not give in but try to guide the pupils towards allowing themselves to enter emotionally into the stream of listening to and experiencing the language. In the first years of school, the children deeply experience the life and spirit inherent in the foreign language, not through intellectual comparisons and translations, but by feeling themselves into and participating in producing the language. The pupils of the lower classes still have the capacity to take hold of the genius of each sound with their whole being: *"We must not drive these feelings out of the children. They should learn to develop the sound from the external objects and from the way in which their own feelings are related to them. Everything should be derived from the feeling for language. In the word 'roll' the children should really feel r, o, l, l. It is the same for every word. This has been completely lost in modern culture."*⁵

Pedagogically, there is a vast difference between children learning the meaning of the word "Schornstein" by inwardly translating it and comparing it with the English word "chimney" or children internalizing the essence and meaning of the word "Schornstein", as a new word, through actively speaking the language. *"[...] children learn to speak these languages from the very beginning [...] without the meaning being translated into their own language. Thus, the word in the foreign language is connected with the object, not with the word in the mother tongue. In this way, children learn 'table' afresh in a foreign language; they do not learn the foreign word as a translation of the word 'table'. In other words, they learn to enter right into the foreign language."*⁶

Giving space for taking hold of the language

Astonished we witness in Classes 1, 2 or 3 the joy with which the children discover and actively enter into the foreign language with their whole being. These are moments that can inspire the teacher to continue to write or adapt verses and stories so that there is always inspiration for taking hold of the

4 Rudolf Steiner, *Soul Economy*, GA 303, 5 January 1922, Great Barrington MA 2003, tr. R. Everett

5 Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood*, GA 311, 18 August 1924, p. 120, Hudson NY 1995, tr. H. Fox (adapted)

6 Rudolf Steiner, *The Spiritual Ground of Education*, GA 305, Oxford 23 August 1922, p. 96, Great Barrington MA 1991, tr. Unknown (adapted)

language anew. The following variation on the (well-known) English nursery rhyme allows the children to repeat the sound and rhythm of the language, while grasping the new content:

Incy Wincy Spider climbed up the chimney-crown.

Along came the storm wind and threw poor Incy down.

Out came the sunshine and sent away the storm.

Incy Wincy Spider climbed up the chimney warm.

It is amazing with what devotion and vigour class 1 children like to speak such a verse. Listening, speaking, sound and rhythm, sensory awareness, movement, music, and the meaning of words come together as in one stream. If the individual pupils enter into this stream inwardly, making it their own, one can sense the richness, the potential for integration and development the young persons' I organization carries, especially in the vivacity with which they speak: *"Now we come to the I-organization. ... Just as the astral body can reveal itself through music, the true nature of the I-organization can be studied through the word."*⁷

Age, linguistic development and self-awareness

This intimate connection of children with language, out of their I-organization, allows for great sensitivity and effectiveness in foreign language learning at the various stages of development: *"Nevertheless, [with the change of teeth, author's note] until nine or ten, children bring with them enough imaginative imitation ... I hardly need to say that teaching languages must be closely adapted to the children's ages."*⁸

The profound transformation children go through in their 9th or 10th year requires an entirely new approach to teaching: While Lecture 4 of "Foundations of Human Experience" describes the feeling as will-related, as *"developing, not yet existent will..."*⁹, Lecture 5 speaks of feeling as interwoven with will and thinking: *"[...] feeling stands between cognition and willing in the centre of soul activity and radiates its essence in both directions. At the same time, feeling is incomplete cognition and incomplete will; it is restrained cognition and restrained will."*¹⁰

When, in the 9 or 10-year old child, through the participating will, the feeling is "remelted" into stronger I-awareness, it also moves closer to the thinking: children experience the world outside and the language more consciously. The foreign language lessons can now, vice versa, contribute to a strengthening of the pupils' sense of self when, with the continued stream of the enlivened speaking, the language is taken hold of more and more consciously. When, in Class 4, we begin to write in the foreign language and to consciously explore its grammatical

7 See note 2 (translation adapted)

8 R. Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education*, GA 307, Ilkley, 15 August 1923, p. 162, Great Barrington 2004, tr. J. Darrell

9 See note 1, p. 91

10 Ibid., p. 101 f.

structures, we support and promote the children's I-development with the way we teach. The young person, in beginning to think about language and about the world in a new way, reaches a new level of self-awareness: *"At this age, we can begin (gradually, of course) teaching grammar and syntax rules, because the children are reaching a point where they think not only about the world, but also about themselves. As far as speech is concerned, thinking about oneself means not merely being able to speak instinctively, but also being able to apply rational rules in language. [...] It is most important to keep in mind that children do not pass willingly from awareness to self-awareness until nine or ten. To teach grammar before then is absolutely irrational."*¹¹

In summary, all foreign language teaching in the first years of school has the following aims:

- From the beginning of school to the age of 9 or 10: experiencing and speaking the language, and moving in the language, in a way that involves the child's whole being
- Entering into and feeling the sound qualities and rhythms of the foreign language
- No comparative, intellectual translating of words, but discovering and grasping their meaning through speaking, feeling and doing
- Accommodating the new I-awareness that emerges at the age of 9 or 10 by applying a new methodical approach
- Beginning to write in the foreign language from Class 4, using verses the children know well because they have deeply experienced them
- Developing, step by step, out of feeling and imagination, a conscious understanding of grammar

If, as teachers, we perceive and recognize the greater and smaller transitions that occur during child development, we will learn to tell what methods and procedures are suitable at each developmental stage. Experiencing and actively producing the foreign language challenges the child's whole being, while revealing his or her emerging creative I-organization. We will then observe moments of resonance in our lessons, when development and living method are in tune: *"This is why Waldorf education uses the two or three preceding years to introduce language lessons at the right age according to the principles of human development. Perhaps you see why Waldorf education aims to gradually enable teachers to read the human being as such – not according to books or the rules of an educational system."*¹²

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¹¹ See note 8, p. 163

¹² See note 8, p. 164