The Formative Qualities of Foreign Language Teaching

Erhard Dahl

A fifth grade teacher in Germany had been reciting "The Ballad of Semmerwater" at the beginning of the English lessons for some time. So the children knew the following lines by heart:

> Once there stood by Semmerwater
> A mickle town and tall;
> King's tower and Queen's bower,
> And the wakeman on the wall.

During this particular week the teacher had intended to practice listening comprehension. She wanted the pupils first to listen carefully and then do what their classmates asked them to do. Jakob was standing beside the teacher. He told his classmate Rosanna, "Go to the wall and point at the picture." As quick as a flash Sabine's arm shot up. The teacher asked her to tell the class what was on her mind. In German Sabine said, "That's wrong. A 'wall' is not a *Wand*. You told us when we recited the poem that the wakeman stood on a wall (in German: *Mauer*), a town wall (*Stadtmauer*)!"

Without saying a word, the teacher wrote on the blackboard the German words *Mauer* and *Wand*, then *essen* and *fressen*, and finally *Brief* and *Buchstabe*. Next to each pair she wrote a single English word: next to the words *Mauer* and *Wand* the word "wall," next to *essen* and *fressen* the word "eat," and next to *Brief* and *Buchstabe* the word "letter." "Which of you has noticed something?" she asked in German.

"Two different German words have only one English word," a girl observed.

A boy shouted out, "How marvellous! Now I won't have to learn so many English words!" A wave of laughter rippled around the classroom.

Said the teacher: "Wouldn't that be nice!—but look here!"

Now she wrote a second set of German words on the blackboard: *Schnecke, Affe, Straße,* and next to each she wrote two English words: next to *Schnecke* "snail" and "slug," next to *Affe* "monkey" and "ape," and next to *Straße* "street" and "road." The children looked confused and the teacher asked again, "Does anything strike you here?"

After a few moments a girl raised her hand, "Now it's just the other way round. For each German word there are two English words."

"Quite right!" the teacher said. "Germans see differences between *Wand* and *Mauer,* English speaking people don't. However, they distinguish between a snail and a slug, a road and a street and a monkey and an ape. We will come across many other English words in our English lessons, and a lot of them will remind us that people who speak a foreign language look at humans, plants, animals, and objects in different ways."

The little boy who had been so happy about the small number of English words blurted out, "What a shame!"

What did the teacher accomplish during these few minutes? Spontaneously she picked up a neglected aspect of language instruction, that is, she set aside pragmatic goals having to do with utility in order to reflect on the differences between two languages. One could say that she offered the children a chance to glimpse the "otherness" of the language they were learning. In short she was encouraging these children to think.

During a lecture given in Yorkshire, England, on August 15, 1923, in reference to the characteristics of different languages, Rudolf Steiner said that it is the task of teachers to compensate for the constricting effects of the children's mother tongue by

teaching them other languages.[1] Steiner was aware that our mother tongue could limit our worldview, thereby exerting a sort of bondage on our thinking. I believe this was Steiner's prime motive for including two modern foreign languages in the curriculum of the first Waldorf school. Of course, he wanted the pupils at this school to become good speakers of English; however, as he made clear to his English-speaking audience in Yorkshire, the crucial pedagogical aim of self-awareness, of thinking for oneself, cannot be achieved merely by using language instinctively. If they are to become free thinkers, children need to transcend the barriers of their native speech.

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Rudolf Steiner is not the only philosopher of education to have argued that language is far more than simply a neutral mirror of reality. Language embodies an active view of the world that favors certain possibilities of human behavior, certain ways of recording experience. A language carves out its own perspective on reality; no two languages set the world in the same mold.

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In the sections that follow, two aspects of teaching foreign languages will be pursued:

- Examples in the English language that demonstrate its "otherness"
- Other activities that can provide the children with formative educational experiences

The "Otherness" of the English Language

The categorization of reality

Each language—and hence, any speaker of that language—draws attention to different aspects of the world. If, for example, you do not recognize "shell" as being a distinctive attribute, then—as for instance in German—you will not distinguish between a snail (with a shell) and a slug (which has no shell).

Besides attributes such as these, the teacher should also demonstrate how semantic dimensions lead to a certain way of categorizing reality. For example, the distinction in English between "taking" and "bringing"—which are both translations for the single German word *bringen*—draws attention to the direction of movement, something the German language does not recognize: the difference between moving away from someone ("taking") and moving towards someone ("bringing").

Habits of perception

In working with vocabulary, the pupils' powers of perception can be refined in two different ways. On the one hand, by studying words, metaphors, and expressions that convey reactions of soul, they acquire enhanced skill to describe their sensations with greater nuance. On the other hand, there is also a sensorial element to their perception. This is why the teacher should not forget to describe the emotional quality of words and the emotional effect words have in different languages. The well-known German translator Walter Schürenberg writes, "If I use the word *Psychologie* for the English word 'psychology,' then I use the same word. However, it possesses a completely different specific gravity in German; a heavy load of pretension and education sticks with it"[2]—which is not the case in English. Similarly you cannot translate the English word "guide" as *Führer* because this word is so charged in Germany as a consequence of its use by the

Nazis. Another German translator, Esther Kinsky, asks, "How bright or dark does my *rot* become when I learn that in other languages it is called 'red' or 'rouge'? How lanky or overhanging is my *Baum* suddenly when compared to 'tree' or 'arbre'?"[3]

And finally there is the famous example of the German word *Heimat*. Which language can offer a true equivalent here? In this German noun are interwoven allusions to "heritage," "yearning," "obligation," and "pride."

Even the simplest words are charged with a particular energy, historical association, or emotional attachment; translators speak of "sentimental value" and "affective investment" inherent in words. As foreign language teachers we need to point out occasionally that for foreign speakers certain words and expressions have emotional echoes that are untraceable in the students' own mother tongue. If pupils experience this fairly regularly in the course of twelve years, we help them develop an inner suppleness, as it were—an ability to perceive in a more differentiated way. The greater the number of impressions that arise in my soul, the more alert and awake will be my perception. Conversely, I will also be ready and eager to meet my surroundings more actively.

A conscious encounter with the "otherness" of another language will help me to confront my own, native consciousness and thereby promote better self-understanding. In this way the foreign language classroom fosters not so much an expression of internationality as of cosmopolitanism. As Johannes Kiersch puts it, "Foreign language learning in the Waldorf school develops capacities of empathy. It fosters 'social pedagogy,' peace education, not by discussion or instruction but by developing perceptiveness."[4]

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The imagery of language

Drawing attention to the imagery embedded in a foreign language can also stimulate pupils to reflect on the tight-knit relationship between word and reality. The German expression *Gedankenkette* (literally "thought-chain"), for example, evokes the image of a chain; in English we find a different image: a "train of thought." Other examples of imagery that may arise in the English classroom: eyeball (German: *Augapfel,* literally "eye-apple"), horseshoe (*Hufeisen*, literally "hoof-iron"), windfarm (*Windpark*) or running neck and neck (*Brust an Brust laufen,* literally "running breast next to breast"). All of these metaphoric images appeal directly to the imagination, yet they also attest to the different worldviews inherent in any language.

The silence of one language and the talking of another

Every language suffers from gaps caused by the absence of a certain word, expression, or grammatical structure that another language can easily fill up. To make our pupils aware of these voids, to sensitize them to such absences, provides another opportunity to experience the formative potential of the foreign language classroom. I find German students are quite amazed to discover such gaps in their mother tongue or in the foreign language they are learning. A few examples:

– An English speaker is able to distinguish among "big," "tall," "large," "great," whereas a German speaker is confined to *groß*. An English speaker can distinguish among the actions "to reach," "to achieve," "to gain," "to attain," "to arrive at"—whereas in German there is just *erreichen*.

– Germans, on the other hand, can distinguish between a male and a female

neighbor—*Nachbar* and *Nachbarin*—and many other male and female forms of a noun. Here the void resides in the English language. This may lead to extraordinary difficulties for translators. In a recent German translation of Henry James's narrative "The Path of Duty," the German translator, Ingrid Rein, admits to being at a loss whether the protagonist is telling his story to a lady or to a gentleman because Henry James has his protagonist address the other with words such as "compatriot," "my dear," and "American," all of which can be translated into German male or female nouns.

A significant gap opens up in the German language when introducing the use of adverbs in the English-language classroom. Germans don't see any reason to alter the adjective in the sentence *Sie ist sorgfältig* ("She is conscientious") when they say *Sie schreibt sorgfältig* ("She writes conscientiously"). The distinction between "careful" and "carefully" is completely unknown in the German language. By making students aware that a foreign language ignores certain linguistic distinctions, they develop a new relationship to their mother tongue.

No discussion of linguistic gaps is complete without a consideration of subtle distinctions in English having to do with time. Here is a quotation from *Winnie the Pooh*: "They're funny things, Accidents. You never have them till you're having them." The German language has no expressive form for this experience of time. *Johannes spielt Geige* ("John plays the violin" or "John is playing the violin") could mean he does that regularly or he is doing it right now.

English often appropriates certain German words when there is no English equivalent. Here is a line from the novel *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels: "The October twilight was radiant with a pure pale *gegenschein*."

Among commonly used words that lack a counterpart in English are: *Angst, Zeitgeist, Bildungsroman, Doppelgänger, Ersatz, Leitmotif, Bildung, Schadenfreude, Weltanschauung, Gestalt, Feierabend.*

Conversely the German language is unable to translate English words such as "duty," "common sense," "affirmative action," "russet," and many others.

To my mind (another English word with no direct German translation!), in short, it would be a missed opportunity if we didn't point out in our classroom those human experiences which can *not* be expressed either in the pupil's mother tongue or in one of the languages the pupil learns at school.

Other Activities

Proverbs

If we want to get to know the collective experience of a people through their language, to appreciate what we might call folk wisdom, we can do no better than to learn some of their proverbs. If a German cautions you again risking it all for a particular thing, he would say: "*Setz nicht alles auf eine Karte!*" ("Don't put everything on a single map"). An English speaker would say: "Don't put all your eggs in one basket!" In German you get "*vom Regen in die Traufe*" ("from the rain into the trough") while in English you get "out of the frying pan into the fire." Almost in a pseudo-philosophical manner a German would say: "*Wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen*" ("He who says A must also say B") while a more pragmatic English speaker would say: "In for a penny, in for a pound!" Proverbs make the pupils see and feel the otherness of another language—and hence of their own.

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Stereotypical comparisons

Like proverbs, certain cliché comparisons can provide lively debate in the classroom.

For instance: *kerzengrade* ("candle-straight") to mean "straight as an arrow"; *sich gleichen wie ein Ei dem anderen* ("to resemble each other as one egg resembles another") to mean "like two peas in a pod"; *mausetot* ("mouse-dead") to mean "dead as a doornail."

Encountering Foreign Literature

A work of art remains silent if we don't—while reading—wander through the rooms of our soul, if we don't awaken the experiences, sensations, values, and attitudes we have developed. Foreign literature easily offers new experiences that will confound what we have thought, felt, and believed. By encountering this strange reality, unexpected possibilities of emotional reactions, imagination, memory, identification, perceptions, associations, and ways of thinking will emerge. "Access to world literature," Susan Sontag said when she was awarded the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* in Frankfurt in 2003, "provides escape from the prison of national vanity, of Philistinism, of compulsory provincialism, of imperfect destinies and bad luck. Literature is the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom."

Foreign literature prompts the reader to understand otherness, to see a view that differs from the perspective which has been shaped so much by one's own culture. If the teacher helps students to see this otherness not as a deviation from social norms of their own culture but as an alternative world of equal value, then lingering experiences that have blindfolded them may lose their grip, and absolute bonds that tie them to a particular worldview may weaken or dissolve. Once liberated from these constrictions, they will be able to choose their perspectives on life more freely.

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Conclusion

Rudolf Steiner's suggestions for teaching leave much leeway to pursue not just the pragmatic side but also the philosophical depths of foreign languages. Consideration of the philosophical implications of a language not only guards us from using it out of mere instinct but also enriches our appreciation of the wisdom hidden within its structure and its conventions. It does so by providing pupils with other ways of seeing the world and of expressing their relation to the world, by providing different instruments of consciousness, perception, and feelings, by giving them a chance to escape from the narrowness of the life they have led in their first language.

Isn't this what distinguishes foreign language teaching in the education of young people? All too easily we may approach the learning of foreign languages for its pragmatic utility. Foreign language teaching at Waldorf schools, however, is legitimized when it also points well beyond its pragmatic goals and sets out to explore its philosophic roots.

Endnotes

1 Rudolf Steiner, *Gegenwärtiges Geistesleben und Erziehung*, GA 307 (Dornach 1986), p.200.
2 *Akzente*, 3 (1956), p.422.
3 Esther Kinsky, *Fremdsprechen* (Berlin 2013), p.34.
4 Johannes Kirsch, *Fremdsprachen in der Waldorfschule* (Stuttgart 1992), p.30.

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