



*Theory and Practice in English Studies 3 (2005):
Proceedings from the Eighth Conference of British, American
and Canadian Studies. Brno: Masarykova univerzita*

Distinctive Features of the Waldorf Approach to Teaching Foreign Languages at Lower Primary Level

Kateřina Dvořáková

Pedagogical Faculty, University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice

One of the many distinctive aspects of the Waldorf educational system is that foreign language instruction is introduced in Class One. On the one hand, there is a significant overlap between current trends in language teaching and the Waldorf approach. On the other hand, there are numerous differences, such as the importance of artistic expression or absence of electronic media and textbooks. The paper will focus on the principles and features specific to the Waldorf methodology of teaching foreign languages to young learners.

Language development is of foremost importance in Waldorf methodology and as such is treated with great care and sensitivity. In terms of teaching foreign languages there is a significant overlap between modern developments in language teaching and the approach advocated by the school's founder, Rudolf Steiner. Many current methods (e.g. the communicative method or TPR) and commonly used techniques (such as singing or drama) appear in Waldorf language classes. Nevertheless, there are also numerous idiosyncrasies. This paper wishes to outline the basic principles underlying the learning process of young children as viewed by Waldorf methodology and explore some of the distinctive aspects of teaching foreign languages at lower primary level.

What makes the early introduction of two foreign languages in Class 1 possible at this type of school is an in-depth understanding of the human nature and language acquisition processes on the side of the teachers and the natural disposition to learning through imitation on the part of the children. Early learning is dominated by the child's immense capacity for imitation, which according to Steiner is "a thoroughly active, participatory learning process"

(Kiersch 1997: 32). (One remarkable manifestation of the power of imitation in very young learners I have personally witnessed is their ability to say a rhyme or sing a song they had never heard before together with the teacher purely on the basis of lip-reading.) This principle of *participatory imitation*, which is active from early childhood up until the age of nine, gives shape to the first three years of language teaching at Waldorf schools. The teacher is to speak directly to the children, enriching the spoken language with varied gestures, movements and facial expressions. Poetic materials, such as rhymes, songs, poems, stories, little dramatic dialogues etc., are the language teacher's main tools. Children are involved in oral repetition, mime, choral recitation, singing and dance. These activities are not treated as supplementary; they indeed form the core of a language lesson.

The nature of foreign language instruction in Classes 1-3 is often described as artistic. A Waldorf teacher must be an artist in the sense of mastering different classic forms of artistic expression (such as painting, singing, dancing, acting, playing musical instruments, modelling, etc.). He or she should ideally be also capable of employing language creatively to satisfy the pupils' imagination. Last but not least, there is the art of balance. Steiner's thoughts on the sense of language reveal the significance of alternating phases of productive activity with moments of attentive listening. The former, usually connected with movement, is more outward while the latter is inward oriented. At practical level this implies, for example, that activities involving movement, such as action rhymes, finger plays or singing games, should alternate with periods when words and sounds are at the centre of attention, e.g. whispering words to one another, letting children utter particular lines, etc. This balanced state is referred to as *relaxed alertness* and is believed to be the key factor in the success of teaching languages to young learners, even more so than in other subjects.

The basic principle of all areas in Waldorf methodology is to encourage *perception through feeling and active experience* in the children. Making an impression upon the child's senses is superior to placing emphasis on precise understanding as it is believed that language absorbed at this stage will find its exact meaning much later. Understanding in the first three years is rather spontaneous and emotional; children understand gestures more than words, they may have a feeling they understand although they actually don't. By using words and structures repeatedly in amusing contexts, they become firmly anchored to be lifted into consciousness later on. Therefore, it is highly desirable that the language children are exposed to in this phase of learning outreaches their understanding.

Translation is to be strictly avoided in the first three-year period and meaning is to be supported by clear movements, gestures and other non-verbal expressions. Also in later years Steiner views translation rather sceptically, finding it "uneconomical, and only very occasionally the right thing to do" (Kiersch 1997: 83). Teachers ought to be patient with pupils who anxiously desire translation to the mother tongue and not give in to this frequently pressing urge. By having to struggle through the difficulties pupils need to overcome their momentary frustration caused by a lack of understanding. They learn to be tolerant of ambiguity, which is generally acknowledged as one of the main characteristics of successful language learners (Ur 1996: 275).

Communicative language teaching views the target language as a vehicle for classroom communication. In spite of the many benefits using L2 as a language of instruction brings about, it is unfortunately very rarely adopted in Czech primary schools. At Waldorf schools the first three years of foreign language learning are to be conducted wholly in the target language. This is closely linked to the definition of the main aims of foreign language instruction. At one level, there are purely linguistic goals related to the development of communicative competence. More importantly, however, children should be enabled to perceive the language to the fullest by maximum involvement of feeling and imagination so

that they can later develop an understanding and appreciation of other cultures through the complex experience of its language.

The Waldorf approach to language teaching, as we have seen, makes very high demands on the teacher's target language proficiency. Being able to conduct a lesson in the foreign language is not enough; Rudolf Steiner calls for a living approach to language: "The teacher has to live and breathe the genius of language!" (Kiersch 1997: 90). The teacher's verbal and non-verbal expressions become gateways through which the children can enter the realm of the language being taught. They must reflect the teachers' innermost experience and create an outer picture of the language. This gains even more significance when we realize that children's ability to imitate extends beyond mere words. Apart from language they also emulate people's behaviour and sensitively perceive their inner states of minds.

Waldorf schools are not religious in the sense of subscribing to the beliefs of a particular religious denomination. They tend to be spiritually oriented and draw mainly upon the Christian tradition. Spiritual guidance is aimed at awakening the child's natural reverence for the wonder and beauty of life, and saying prayers is one of the numerous ways of accomplishing this goal. Prayers are usually said at the beginning of a new day but with younger classes they are also frequently used to announce changes in activities (e.g. before drawing activities, playing the flute or marking the long break).

The Czech word *průpověď*, unlike the English one, shows that even though prayers may contain references to religious terms, their nature is more spiritual than religious. The following are two examples recommended for lower primary level.

God made the sun and God made the tree.	The Earth is firm beneath my feet,
God made the mountains and God made me.	The sun shines bright above,
I thank you, oh God, for making the sun and the tree,	And here I stand – so straight and strong,
For making the mountains and for making me.	All things to know and love.

A Waldorf language teacher I discussed this matter with described them as "sublime". In her definition, prayers are poems which calm the children and enable them to experience "the here and now". She recites one with her class at the beginning of her language lesson but adds one at the end of it, too, as it has proved to pull the class nicely together, adding dignity and a sense of accomplishment to their joint effort.

The issue of using or not using textbooks in Waldorf language classes has not been clearly settled. Steiner clearly rejected the idea of teaching from textbooks but this attitude may have much to do with the low quality of contemporary books. The general guideline says that graded textbooks should not be used before Class 8. Instead, teachers should employ good collections, in the form of anthologies, the already existing Waldorf materials, or compilations according to individual taste. Reference works, such as dictionaries or grammars, are to be exploited only as background. In practice, Waldorf teachers do not usually find the available textbooks entirely suitable but do adapt selected passages or activities to make them more fitting to their specific needs.

As there are no textbooks in the first through fifth grades, all children have main lesson books, in which they record all that they've learned during the course of the year. Their entries in Classes 1-3 are only pictorial. Writing is deferred until it is thoroughly mastered in the mother tongue, usually at the end of Class 3 or at the beginning of Class 4. Children record learned and new material into their own books – there may be one book for everything or if the teacher prefers there may be different books (e.g. My English Reader for reading, a

vocabulary book, etc.). Children make these books themselves, they decorate them and each one is thus a sort of hand-made textbook.

Waldorf education is principally against the use of electronic media (TVs, tape recorders, videos, computers) and language teaching, where such audio-visual aids generally have their acknowledged place, is no exception. Electronic media are believed to hamper the development of the child's imagination, the faculty central to the healthy development of an individual. The main argument criticises the restricted scope of perception and the lack of involvement on the recipient's side, and contrasts it with a much richer scale of subtle sensory qualities offered by direct perception. Media diminish and distort reality and turn it into a caricature. The cognitive precision, which can be achieved in presenting subjects to pupils at school through electronic media, is trifling when weighed against the loss of reality. Though older children will inevitably experiment with all kinds of electronic media, younger children ought to be altogether protected from being exposed to them at school.

Knowing what to expect in a lesson helps children to feel secure and confident and learn more easily. They can predict what will happen in a lesson and it enables them to concentrate on the task. For this reason, teachers of young learners often implement the same lesson structure for every lesson. At Waldorf schools, language lessons follow the routine of the main lesson, which consists of three elements – the rhythmic part, the main teaching phase and the narration. In the early years, the rhythmic component tends to take up most of the lesson. The inclusion of narration depends on a number of factors (momentary circumstances, the hour and the day of the lesson, etc.) and it is up to the teachers to decide how often they find it suitable for inclusion into their lesson. In Class 1 and 2 the stories usually correspond to those done during the main lesson, from Class 3 onwards teachers use traditional story-telling resources or make up their own stories.

I have personally observed that Waldorf school pupils are closely, almost intimately connected with the rhythm of their lessons. Being so familiar with it enables them to assist their teacher in organizing the lesson – they can move on to the next stage of their lesson before the teacher has given any instructions. It has also been my experience that Waldorf pedagogy does not merely seek to *educate*, it truly *nurtures* a child, deeply respecting all his complex and changing needs. The teaching of two foreign languages from the first class shows that delaying foreign language instruction until the age of nine is a terrible waste of the precious skills which are only available during the first years of school attendance. Early exposure to a foreign language does not bear tangible fruits immediately but does lay solid foundations for future learning, and may prove to be a vital formative experience.

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