

Teaching Foreign Languages in Steiner Schools

“Receive the children in reverence; educate them in love; let them go forth in freedom.” Rudolf Steiner

This essay aims at giving an overview of foreign language teaching in Steiner Schools. It covers Years 1-12, as Waldorf teaching is considered a continuum. Waldorf education aspires a human being in developing him- or herself in an individual time frame, which takes into account the moment a child comes in this world to the moment the living soul leaves this life. Furthermore, insight into Steiner’s anthroposophy is given. Finally, teaching aspects are looked at in more detail, in order to combine theory and practice in a Steiner foreign language classroom.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) founded the first Waldorf School in 1919. In the aftermath of the First World War, it is not surprising that he emphasised the importance of independent thought for these first pupils and future citizens. Despite ever-changing political environments, this idea continues to underpin Steiner-influenced philosophies around the world to this day. “The subject is the means, the thriving human the goal.” In this context, foreign language learning takes centre stage in Steiner’s education. Through language learning, he argues that students can overcome nationalism. Furthermore, if you speak a foreign language you open up another linguistic and inner realm and develop further aspects of your personality and thus enhance empathy and intercultural understanding.

In order to reach this goal, two foreign languages are taught from Year One in Steiner Schools and lessons seek to emphasise the 'language genius' – the spirit of a language as rendered from its core sounds and sentiments. This language genius is awoken in children through poems, songs and stories that get recited in the first three years of schooling. Students get familiar with the language by solely concentrating on the oral aspects of learning and only start to write in the foreign language in Year Four.

To overcome the *foreign* in foreign language learning, lessons have to be conducted in an authentic, soulful, vivid, and joyful immersion. This leads to a significant and multi-disciplinary role for the foreign language teacher. The teacher needs to feel deeply connected with the language in order to experience and convey the language genius. Cultural sensitivity and the ability to empathise with native speakers are vital requirements for teaching a language according to Steiner. One must first understand the history, culture, customs and traditions of a people and their language to demonstrate, and hopefully convey the language genius to young learners. Furthermore, encouragement and motivation are the core factors in a Steiner School where pupils of all ability are taught together.

Steiner's anthroposophy

Steiner described the human development in steps of seven years. The first seven years are characterised by *imitation*. The world is good, in every sense of the word, for the youngsters. Young children have the ability to imitate sounds, movement and a whole language. In a well-conducted lesson, children soak in a language, similar to the

first language acquisition, and forget that they are dealing with a foreign tongue. The teaching concept is based on shaping and forming.

The second septennial phase (age 7-14) addresses *enlivening* pupils. Students aspire to a *loving authority* to give them stability in an ever-changing world that they realise is not so consistently good. Around the age of 9 the child crosses the “Rubicon”, a metaphor to describe the transition from childhood to adolescence. Suddenly, sole imitation is not sufficient anymore, children will start to question the teacher and strive for justice in every conflict. Emotions are still the main focus of argumentation as the mind and intellect only fully develops towards the end of this septennial – if at all.

Between the age of 14 and 21, language learning occurs consciously, sole imitation stops at the age of 9. Teaching is based on *awakening* and enabling pupils to finally live autonomously. The teacher tries to discover what eventuates inside a student and strives to emancipate the soul. In order to do so, Steiner emphasised the life force in each individual that needs to be discovered and consolidated in the last few years of schooling. Rather than solely aiming at A-level qualifications, Waldorf Schools concentrate on much broader goals; Namely an interest in the world, moral behaviour, trust in life and in one’s own abilities and a passion for uncovering one’s life mission. Or to say in Steiner’s words:

“Our highest endeavour must be to develop free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and direction to their lives. The need for imagination, a sense of truth, and a feeling of responsibility – these three forces are the very nerve of education.”

Steiner's foreign language acquisition theory is based on the development of a human being. Humans start to move, crawl and walk before they begin to speak in cohesive sentences and finally *understand* all the sounds and lexical items. Thus, in Steiner Schools, students start to learn a foreign language by pure imitation and with an emphasis on movement: in rhymes, songs, poems and plays. Comprehending grammar and thereafter learning to write and read only starts after the age of 9 in Year 4. This process is called inductive learning and is one of the main differences to conventional schooling, where the rules are presented first and then learned through practice (deductive method).

In the context of early language learning, we should consider the concept of 'synaesthesia', where several senses work together to both interpret meaning and control the way we convey it. Steiner describes twelve senses instead of the usual five. Next to the common five *physical* senses, he describes further senses of being interested in the world, the thought sense, the word sense, the life sense, a sense of equilibrium, the sense of self and the sense of movement. Interestingly, he juxtaposes the sense of words with the sense of movement, which feeds directly into his language learning theory.

Moving and speaking are very closely connected. Without moving our jaws and muscles, there would not be any sounds. 90 percent of a conversation is nonverbal (gesture, body language, facial expressions, tone) so only 10 percent of what is said is consciously ingested. Speaking is in fact conveying meaning with our whole body. Steiner coined the expression 'kinesic interaction', for language specific movements and physical reactions in an interaction. Keeping

this in mind, an emphasis on movement is vital in a foreign language classroom.

Language teaching at Waldorf schools is a combination of two opposite poles of language teaching tradition. One pole is the grammar and translation focused approach (cognitive psychology of learning), known in the traditional Latin classroom. On the other hand, the natural approach (behaviouristic psychology) primarily concentrates on speaking, based on the first language acquisition. Here, no grammar is consciously taught. Steiner, however, sets the evolving human being in the focus of anthroposophical pedagogy. Therefore, one can find aspects of both approaches in Steiner teaching, in accordance with the development of a pupil.

Another key factor according to Steiner is that the teacher needs to holistically educate her- or himself if attempting to teach others. Filling in the role of a teacher, consequently developing a loving authority is a process and not completed by attaining teaching certificates. In a relatively free curriculum, Waldorf teachers need to creatively organize their own syllabus. Essential characteristics are an attentive, respectful atmosphere, setting goals, encouraging autonomous learning, providing meaningful content while using authentic language, and giving feedback.

“You see now how Waldorf School education aims, little by little, at enabling the teacher to read, not in a book and not according to the rules of some educational system, but in the human being himself. The Waldorf School teacher must learn to read men [and women] the most wonderful document in the world. What he [or she] gains from

this reading grows into deep enthusiasm for teaching and education” (Steiner 1923).

Teaching aspects

Teaching a foreign language in the lower school begins with traditional rhymes, songs and poems. The teacher strives to tell as many stories as possible and aims to create inner images for the students. The use of language should be as authentic and monolingual as possible. Since establishing a whole poetic language base in the first three years of schooling, it is advisable to let subject teachers conduct the language classes. The teaching goal is the development of a feel for the language and for the immanent genius of a language.

Class Four represents a special year in Steiner language learning, as the students start to write and read for the first time. According to Steiner, students need to start learning the alphabet and firstly copying the rhymes and poems of the primary years. Only now do they have an inner image of letters and have developed a sense for spelling in a foreign language. Additionally, their command of their mother tongue should be sufficiently established by Year Four. Without further ado, they can start to decipher their first simple reader in a foreign language. The teaching goal is to anchor a child through writing.

Reading is the main source of learning in the following years. Classes 5-9 start with fairy tales, sagas, folk tales and history and geography. Finally, biographies, short stories, reports and articles are introduced

to foster an interest in the world. The level of language will gradually rise and the goal is to awaken a passion for literature.

The upper school finally deals with authentic, unabridged texts and introduces the classics, contemporary literature and diverse non-fictional texts. Teaching goals are primal experiences of aesthetic and cultural aspects of the target language. Every student gets the opportunity to gain these experiences according to his and her individual abilities and out of an inner motivation. Achieving this, students attain valuable development tasks and explore an inner aspect of their personality through a foreign language.

To sum up, it became apparent that teachers in Steiner Schools deal with a whole range of questions when it comes to the individual student that often get neglected in state school education. If the child is the curriculum, Waldorf Schools rely on very flexible and passionate teachers who never stop to ask questions about a child and its life situation. These questions are raised by the subject matter, the weekly staff meetings, communication with parents and most importantly the child him- or herself.

“ And when you begin to see that you cannot do so, it is then that you lose heart. That is the point my dear friend – do not lose heart: know that it is not the momentary success that matters, it is the working on and on with iron perseverance.” Rudolf Steiner

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