

Foreign Languages in American Waldorf Schools

by Michael Navascués

For many of us involved in the foreign language field, it is clear that adolescence is an inappropriate time to begin foreign language study. The pervasive American practice of cramming language learning into two to four years of high school and college has not proven effective for many students. It is obvious that too much is attempted in too short a time at an age when most teenagers have lost a good deal of the child's natural imitative capacities, and moreover have become engrossed in the distracting problems of personal and social identity. Why not begin at a much earlier age, as most other countries do? In our still largely monolingual society, the antipathy that many Americans feel toward language learning could surely be countered by a sympathetic, living experience of another tongue during the flexible, formative years of childhood. Waldorf schools, with their developmental concept of education, have for many years offered a viable approach to this problem.

There are some interesting similarities between the activities in a typical Waldorf morning main lesson and what goes on in a lower grade foreign language class. In their language class the first and second grade Waldorf children might recite together a poem that is being memorized, sing a simple folk song, play finger or circle games, and practice rhythmical counting. There might be a story period in which the teacher presents a dramatized narration of a short fable. Although

the children will not understand the precise meaning of many words and phrases, they will absorb the feelings and the different sounds and rhythms of the other language. Clearly they are capable of enjoying the drama, suspense, or humor of a simple tale and can capture its essence if it is carefully presented by means of gesture, mime, and pictures or other visual props such as puppets or toy animals.

At this stage, more important than an exact comprehension of meaning, is the fact that the children are listening to the sound and soul of the other language. On a small scale, this is akin

to what babies do when they absorb the mother tongue out of their environment, listening, watching, mimicking, and then finally and miraculously, creating their own meaningful language. Of course, in

"A person who sympathetically enters into another language opens doors in the soul, becomes sensitized to other peoples and other modes of experiencing reality, and not least of all, learns to understand his or her own language better."

comparison with the baby's constant exposure to its native language, the amount of time devoted to language learning in a Waldorf elementary school is all too brief. Much can be accomplished, however, by introducing children to other languages at an early age before their natural linguistic capacity declines. To begin with, the young schoolchild retains for a number of years a marvellous ability to imitate - and Waldorf teachers are well aware how much young children learn by imitation. Thus, most children can readily attain an excellent pronunciation of the foreign language. Sounds which an adolescent or an adult might find difficult, impossible, or just plain em-

barrassing to reproduce, the child delights in imitating and repeating. An innate sympathy for the differing qualities of the other language is naturally imparted to the young child in this way.

Each language is unique and to a certain extent one-sided or limited in its expressive capabilities. The child who develops a personal and positive relationship to another form of speech can acquire something very important that would otherwise be lacking if he or she remained in the limiting confines of the native tongue. A person who sympathetically enters into another language opens doors in the soul, becomes sensitized to other peoples and other modes of experiencing reality, and not least of all, learns to understand his or her own language better. The new language provides a subtle, contrasting counterbalance that helps offset the one-sidedness of the person's native tongue and culture. In Waldorf schools, the curriculum calls for two modern languages to be taught to each child. This creates a more complex and fruitful three-way balance. In the first grade language class, everything is learned by listening, group repetition, and continual recitation, an approach we might call "oral-choral." The children are not exposed to any foreign language writing for the first two to three years. Ideally, English is not used at all, or as little as possible. The teacher needs to create a living language environment by building with the class a varied repertoire of verbal resources which the children listen to, recite, sing, or use in games. To assist the children in comprehending what would otherwise be unintelligible sounds, the teacher adds a variety of visual images in the form of gesture, mime, pictures, and any kind of props that would convey meaning. Rudolf Steiner, founder of the first Waldorf school in 1919, was a very early proponent of methods in some ways similar to the "direct," the "audio-lingual" and the "natural" approaches developed in later decades by language educators.

Little by little, through the varied techniques that the foreign language teachers elaborate and the class practices, the children's immediate environment penetrates their consciousness through the sounds of two other languages. Nature with its changing seasons, her animals and

plants, rivers, meadows, and mountains; the human body with the foods and clothing that it needs; society with its families, homes, and towns; time and its division into months, days, and hours; daily routines and favorite pastimes--these are familiar aspects of life that concern the child and that slowly she learns to apprehend through the linguistic soul of different cultures.

In the second grade, the teacher begins to ask for individual responses and recitations, making the children gradually aware of the social function of language. Each one will have to learn to listen attentively in order to comprehend and respond with accuracy. Now begins the long and often arduous process of trying to communicate more actively in the language. By the end of third grade, some classes are ready to begin writing a few phrases and words with which they are familiar. Fourth grade marks an important transition toward the written language. The teacher may begin by writing on the board some of the songs, poems, and phrases previously learned orally. The pupils copy the text in their notebooks; later they will be asked to read aloud what they have written. Familiarity with the content of the text helps the child develop a natural, unstrained relationship to the written language. A drawing might accompany the text, and by the end of the year, each child will have a brightly colored collection of songs, poems, mini-stories, plus a section for vocabulary and grammar.

Grammar is introduced in a more conscious way in the fourth grade. An effort is made to present grammar in an imaginative, lively manner, avoiding the lengthy abstractions of traditional grammar books which often stifle pupil interest. Verb conjugations may be first learned orally by reciting the forms rhythmically while clapping, singing, gesturing, or marching. The teacher may lead the class in an inquiry about some aspect of a written sentence, and then the rules will be deduced, formulated, and written down. The Waldorf developmental philosophy stresses the importance of the ninth or tenth year as a significant turning point in the child's consciousness. A new sense of separateness, of self-awareness, begins to awaken in the child. Steiner believed that during this transformational phase, the child

could be helped in part by the study of grammar. Awareness of the structural elements and rules of language can fill the need for rational structure and coherent form. But Steiner warned against teaching grammar pedantically and in excess. The child can easily be repelled by such an approach and may end up suffering indigestion!

As in the English grammar lesson, the pupils make their own grammar notebooks from the material presented by the teacher. After they have begun to grasp the basics of writing and reading, the children are asked to write things of their own, perhaps a brief letter, a description, or a short summary of something that has been read or experienced. Practice in reading progresses gradually each year, so that by junior and senior high school, samples of representative literary works can be read. Along with literature, the pupil studies the geography and elements of the history of the countries whose languages he is studying. Here again, fruitful parallels and connections with the main lesson subjects can be found, revealing the wisdom of a holistic educational philosophy. Reciting and conversational practice in the foreign language continue through the grades, but the demands of the grammar, reading, and writing components of the curriculum require a major share of attention and an extended time-frame.

The decision about which languages to teach is made by each school faculty. Steiner himself, when lecturing in England, declined to give an opinion on whether German and French should be taught in the first English Waldorf school. He indicated that the teachers would need to make a decision based on the circumstances of life. German and French have been the "traditional" languages in many of the established American Waldorf schools. Increasingly, however, there is a perceived need to offer Spanish. Not only is there a centuries-old Spanish presence in North America, but the destinies of various Hispanic peoples have become more and more entwined with those of Anglo-Americans. Russian and Japanese have also been offered in some schools. As for the classical languages, some Waldorf schools have followed the European model by offering an introduction to Latin and/or Greek beginning in the fifth or sixth grade.

Among the Waldorf schools that continue through high school, one finds many different arrangements in the modern language programs. Some schedule intensive language blocks, perhaps offering one language the first half of the year, and the other for the second half. At least one school allows the option of dropping one modern language so as to acquire greater depth in the other. Other schools offer a third language starting at the elementary level. This allows transfer students without foreign language backgrounds to start at a beginning level. One highly commendable feature of Waldorf high schools is the opportunity for students to participate in an exchange program abroad, spending a few weeks to a few months with a family and attending the Waldorf school there. This can be one of their most exciting and memorable experiences. If the stay in the foreign land is of several months duration, a rapid and wonderful increase in language fluency can be achieved. Along with the joy of making friends in a distant land there is the deep satisfaction of being able to put to practical use the language skills that have been practiced in class for years.

Parents sometimes wonder why, after a number of years of foreign language classes, their children don't come home and begin speaking in one of the languages, or perhaps cannot answer a question posed to them in the language by someone outside the class. The answer partly has to do with the relatively limited exposure to the foreign language. Try to imagine how long it would have taken your child to learn English if he had been allowed to hear it for only ninety minutes a week, and not at all in the summer months! Although two lessons per week per language seems to be the norm in the Waldorf elementary schools of the United States, three times a week is considered more desirable, and some schools have moved in that direction. It must also be kept in mind that children develop the "receptive" or "passive" listening skill more quickly than their speaking ability. Moreover, a class full of children will of necessity spend a lot more time listening than speaking individually. This can be partly offset by the teacher planning group activities, which can range from brief situational dialogues to putting on a play.

One of the major problems confronting foreign language programs in American Waldorf schools is a scarcity of qualified teachers with some knowledge of, or at least interest in Waldorf pedagogy. (With the recent rapid increase in the number of Waldorf schools, this scarcity extends, of course, to all areas of teaching.) In North America there are no formal training programs designed specifically for foreign language teachers. Some language instructors, however, have been through a regular Waldorf teacher training program, and this broad pedagogical base can greatly assist them, as they develop their foreign language specialty. In any event, personal study and research, and visits with experienced Waldorf foreign language teachers become indispensable for the novice instructor. Occasional workshops provide a much needed forum for exchange of ideas, information, and teaching techniques. Compounding the difficulty in recruiting teachers is the fact that foreign language instruction in the public elementary schools in the United States, despite a recent growth of interest, has had a very short and spotty history, and is virtually nonexistent in most school districts. There is thus no pool of trained primary school foreign language teachers from which a Waldorf school might draw.

Within the framework of general goals and teaching approaches, the Waldorf foreign language teacher has a great deal of freedom in developing the language program and selecting the appropriate materials and techniques. The program must be created by the teacher week by week, and evaluated as to effectiveness. This is a weighty responsibility, requiring initiative, creativity, perseverance, careful preparation, and a willingness to work with restless youngsters who have trouble understanding all those strange sounds!

In view of these circumstances, it is not surprising that there is not only a scarcity but also a high turnover of Waldorf foreign language teachers. No doubt part-time status and weak salary structures in some schools are additional factors. Some schools have been obliged to curtail or delay the start of foreign language programs. And too often schools must scour the area in

search of replacements for departing teachers. Stability is needed for a foreign language program to flourish, and a lack of stability in that program can affect the overall health of the school. Like the learning of some other skills, the sequential nature of language learning requires a very gradual unfolding of the child's abilities. In order to thrive, foreign language programs require careful long-range and day-by-day planning and coordination by a skilled and imaginative faculty dedicated to the Waldorf ideal. The Waldorf schools of North America face myriad challenges, but one may hope and expect that in the future more conscious attention and effort will be devoted to attracting, preparing, and retaining foreign language teachers.

These challenges are a reflection of our society's general indifference toward the study of other languages and cultures. Of course, this situation does not detract from, but rather highlights the many fine achievements of foreign language teachers and their classes. Waldorf schools stand committed to implementing cohesive foreign language programs (in not just one but two languages) from the first grade through junior and senior high school. This might not be so unusual in some other parts of the world, but in our society it is nothing short of remarkable and the Waldorf schools stand in the vanguard of foreign language instruction in North America today. The many talented, enthusiastic, and dedicated Waldorf language teachers deserve the full support of their school communities, and recognition in the broader educational sphere. They meet a profound need of our fragmented world and psyche.

This article reflects the teaching of foreign language in the United States only.

Michael Navascués is a professor of Spanish language and literature at the University of Rhode Island. He also teaches Spanish to the fifth-grade class at the Meadowbrook Waldorf School in West Kingston, Rhode Island. Michael recently spent a semester sabbatical visiting Waldorf schools and studying their approach to foreign languages. He has been working on an annotated bibliography and a curricular overview of foreign languages in American Waldorf schools.