FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE WALDORF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: STUDENTS' VIEWS AND PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

The Waldorf approach, with currently over one thousand institutions on all five continents, is the largest independent school movement in the world. It is built on the humanistic ideals and values of its founder, the scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who maintained that all teaching should be based on true understanding of the developing human as a being of intellect as well as of feeling and volition. These three aspects of the human nature are reckoned with and fostered in all subjects of the Waldorf curriculum, including, of course, foreign languages. This article attempts to discuss the theoretical background which shapes the teaching of foreign languages at Waldorf (Steiner) schools with a particular focus on the role of language in human development. Furthermore, it presents the outcomes of a survey which focuses on the thoughts, feelings and experience of Czech elementary Waldorf school graduates practising this approach to foreign language instruction.

Keywords

Waldorf education, foreign language instruction, the Direct Method, holistic learning

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Introduction to the Waldorf approach to foreign language teaching

Two foreign languages for all children from the first class were introduced into the curriculum of the first Waldorf school in 1919 by its founder, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). His educational concept, born in the wake of the devastation of World War I and grounded in anthroposophy, was drawn on the hope that the new school would educate human beings capable of creating a peaceful and just society. Language teaching was supposed to play a central part in this. Steiner believed that exposure to a language different from one's own balanced the one-sided influence of the mother tongue and enabled one to grow into open-minded, more accepting and understanding individuals. Hence the ability to communicate verbally is only one part of a larger process whose aim is to facilitate human understanding among people. Steiner was particularly concerned about the separation between people and nations and he appealed for conscious cultivation of mutual understanding which can counteract the tendencies for separation: "Even between individuals who speak different languages, whatever divides them can be cleared away if each experiences the picture quality of his own language. Re-awakening the spirit of language in the

various languages ought to become an important element of social education.” (Denjean, 2013: 22¹)

The Waldorf teacher, trainer and researcher Peter Lutzker (2002:54) argues, in accordance with Steiner’s and Goethe’s understanding of the senses, that foreign language learning is not purely intellectual but a sensory process which forms and refines those organs of perception through which language is perceived. He shows that the perception of language in its entire gestalt is based on the integration of the sensory perception of syllables, words, tone, melody, gestures, etc., and it “constitutes the wonder of human acquisition” in both native and foreign languages “with the decisive difference that senses that had already been developed in learning a first language (or languages), are required to profoundly extend their capacities with a new and unfamiliar context”. This widened perception leads to an opening up to the otherness of a foreign language, to learning to accept ambiguity and uncertainty, to attaining a new linguistic standpoint. Similarly, according to Kiersch (1997:22), the central objective of language teaching in Waldorf schools is to “deliver an untarnished, living experience of an essential area of sensory reality”. The significance attached to direct perception and personal involvement of the pupils also justifies why electronic media are considered unsuitable and tend to be avoided in this type of school, especially with younger children.

In the Waldorf curriculum, two foreign languages are still taught from class one, ideally three lessons per week each². This is how Steiner (2003: 121) characterized the methodology in a lecture given in 1921: “Foreign languages are presented so that children can really go into them, which means that while teaching a language the teacher tries to avoid using the children’s native language. ... Thus children learn the new language directly before learning to translate words.” This shows that from the very beginning great importance was placed on encountering the new language directly, rather than through translation – a method universally accepted nowadays. In practical terms there are two main pillars to foreign language teaching: one is the ability to communicate, the second, preferred especially in the early years, is poetic language. By learning songs, verses and rhymes young learners naturally acquire not only meaningful chunks of language but also its prosodic elements, such as intonation or stress³. An experienced Waldorf teacher and trainer Templeton (2007:15) believes that “teaching is a balancing act between conscious, cognitive language learning and activity-based incidental learning”. In a similar vein Jaffke (Templeton, 2007:168) adds that “just as in first language acquisition it is the learner’s

¹ Quotation translated from Czech by the author.

² Jaffke (2006) mentions a survey carried out in the early 1990s which showed that only about a fourth of all German Waldorf schools still offered six foreign language lessons per week in the first three years, which is mainly due to financial constraints and/or staff problems. In the Czech Republic, offering this number of weekly language lessons in the early primary years is virtually impossible due to the compulsory time allotment for the different subjects as defined by the Framework Educational Programme.

³ A detailed account of foreign language instruction at Waldorf primary schools with plentiful practical examples can be found in Dvorakova, 2011.

own active involvement that enables him to grow into his mother tongue, so it is the child's own both external and inner activity in the classroom that enables him to make progress in a foreign language". When pupils focus on activity rather than on their speaking attempts, they may feel less inhibited, and thus be more naturally enticed into participating.

As already mentioned, every subject at the Waldorf school is taught in a way that contributes to the healthy development of the child, taking into account the threefold nature of the human being. A well-balanced lesson will appeal to the faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing, in other words it will have an 'intellectual' part, a 'rhythmic' part, and an 'active' part. Although one will find numerous variations to the general pattern depending on the class and the teachers' personalities, foreign language lessons typically begin with a strong rhythmic element which brings the class together and produces a receptive mood. New material is usually introduced in the following part of the lesson when pupils are more focused by the joint opening activities and still fresh enough to concentrate. In the final, settling down part Waldorf pupils at the lower school often listen to a story, while in the upper classes they frequently engage in practice or short writing activities (Stott, 1995). Textbooks are replaced by a wide range of resources which vary with age. Steiner advocated the use of authentic, culturally valuable language in lessons and he was deeply against teaching materials contrived artificially only for school purposes, considering them sterile and distant from real life. He also pointed out that no living relationship can develop with that which has no life in it. This is one of the reasons why Waldorf pupils write their own books: it allows them to connect more intimately with the foreign language they are learning and personalize their knowledge.

Waldorf teachers are described by Edwards (2002) as nurturers, partners and guides to children¹. But what specific skills and qualities are expected of foreign language teachers? Kiersch (1997) emphasizes the following four requirements:

- (1) they should be fluent in the target language and have sufficient experience with it from a stay in the relevant country;
- (2) they should speak with grace and artistically and have a solid repertoire of aesthetically valuable texts, as well as knowledge of how to use them in a classroom situation;
- (3) they should have humour, empathy and certain classroom management skills;
- (4) and they should have knowledge of certain techniques such as dramatic improvisation, storytelling, doing plays with pupils, etc.

According to Jaffke (2006), foreign language lessons are taught either by trained language teachers or by class teachers who may or may not be fully qualified for the subject. Every language teacher at primary school should have, in addition to a large repertoire of various activities, interest in working with tremendously lively children, flexibility, stamina and a good sense of humour. He or she works together with a team of all the other

¹ Edwards finds that these characteristics commonly describe the role of teachers in Waldorf as well the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches.

teachers towards a more complete perception of the child. Correspondingly, being aware of what the pupils are doing in their other classes is essential for designing appropriate lessons and selecting the most suitable materials and activities. It is obvious that the method makes considerable demands on teachers, but as Barnes (1991) puts it, it is also rewarding and works as a “guarantee against going stale”.

Interviews with Czech Waldorf school graduates

The following interviews were carried out with Waldorf school graduates in order to find out what they thought, felt and experienced in their foreign language lessons during their nine years at elementary school. The interviewees were students of the Ceske Budejovice Waldorf Elementary School in their ninth year, who volunteered to participate in the study. There were three girls (Adela, Barbora, Tereza) and two boys (Krystof, Simon), all aged 15 at the time of the interviews, which were done separately with each person so as not to influence each other's views. Each pupil had studied at their school since the first class and, coincidentally, all of them had generally very positive attitudes to foreign language learning and excellent or very good results in these subjects throughout their studies. The extensive in-depth interviews (carried out in the mother tongue at the very end of the last school year) consisted of twenty-two open-ended questions. For the purpose of this article, I have selected ten questions and their full answers that in my opinion most pertinently add to the ideas discussed above. They deal with early introduction of two foreign languages into the curriculum, the goals of foreign language lessons, using the target language as the language of instruction, the ways the lessons appeal to thinking, feeling and willing, learning materials, assessment, artistic activities and foreign language teacher qualifications. The final question prompted the students to comment on a unique aspect of their experience, namely the fact that they were taught both foreign languages by the same teachers for the entire nine-year period¹.

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Question 1: Why in your opinion are two foreign languages taught at the Waldorf school from the first year?

Adela: Because children get used to the fact that foreign languages are part of their learning. They learn them together with their mother tongue, which is not fully settled yet either, and they store it all well in their memory.

Barbora: I think it is because the younger the brain, the more it can absorb. My dad, who started learning English at the age of 27, has often complained about how difficult it was for him. A child can absorb a lot more.

Krystof: Starting later, like in class five, would mean that we would have to hurry and cram a lot. Starting in the first class means that we have more time for everything and we also have more time to understand all the things.

¹ It is a typical feature at Waldorf schools that class teachers stay with a class from one year to the next, ideally through the entire elementary school. Foreign language teachers also have the possibility to continue with their classes for several years, but it is not so commonly practised.

Tereza: Well, I think the earlier a person starts the better. The two languages are somehow interconnected, for example they have similar grammar or vocabulary, and that helps learning.

Simon: It's a good and useful thing. We learn more in nine years and we can work at a more leisurely pace.

Question 2: What in your opinion is the main learning objective in these subjects?

Adela: To make learning joyful for the children. To teach us how to use foreign languages and how to use them practically, so that we can get to know new people and new countries. There is something very true about the proverb we have in Czech – *Those who know many languages live as many lives as the languages they know.*

Barbora: To learn the languages, of course. But not by following a textbook. The lessons must be fun and lively, so that we enjoy learning.

Krystof: The aim should be to teach the pupils to communicate on basic topics that can be useful when you want to travel or study abroad.

Tereza: To learn something because we live in a time when knowing at least one foreign language is a bare minimum. It is immensely useful and you cannot do practically anything without knowing foreign languages.

Simon: Obviously to learn the languages because they are useful for our future job, travels and whenever we want to find things out.

Question 3: Did you find it appropriate that teachers used the foreign language to communicate with you from the very beginning?

Adela: I didn't experience any other way, but I am sure it is the best way how to enter into the new language, how to get used to it. It wouldn't have been natural to start speaking to us in the foreign languages like in the fifth class. Our teachers always spoke clearly and slowly and we did concrete things when we spoke, so we understood most of the time. I don't think we ever had a problem with not understanding or not knowing what to do, and we were very happy to be experiencing something so new. I was excited about everything in the first class.

Barbora: I think so. When children are small, people speak to them in the mother tongue the same way and they don't understand everything right away either. First they just repeat and do what the parents do. And that's how we learned too.

Krystof: I am sure it was alright. When someone didn't understand, the teachers helped them.

Tereza: I think that it's a good approach. At the beginning some of us might have been a bit puzzled and insecure about what exactly to do. So it might be a bit tough at the very beginning but it's better in the long run because you learn the language better. We enjoyed the lessons in spite of not understanding perfectly every now and then.

Simon: I think it's the right way to do it. When children hear somebody speaking the foreign languages, they can learn and remember faster. At the beginning, when I didn't understand at times or didn't know what to do, I found it harder, but one can really manage it fine.

Question 4: Your elementary school presents itself as “a school for the head, heart, and hands”. Is it also true for the way foreign languages are taught there?

Adela: It was often the case but because they had a lot of study content, we did not use our hands that much. In the lower classes we drew pictures and made all kinds of movements and gestures during recitation. We also performed plays – that was one of the best things we could try. When I think of it now, that was actually for the head, heart and hands all together. We learned so much through these activities and we had so much fun. In the upper classes we had to do various creative assignments, such as writing a poem or a story, and that’s when I definitely needed my heart.

Barbora: The head and hands were interconnected when we for example recited or sang, especially in the early years. And the heart? In my opinion, the heart is involved when the students are really interested in what they are doing. What really absorbed me were the songs we sang. Some of them were boring, but the ones I liked I could sing the whole lesson. And I also loved all the plays we performed and all the creative things, not filling out papers.

Krystof: I think so. We talked about things, we did things, and when all turned out well, we were happy.

Tereza: I think that it is true mainly at primary level when one learns vocabulary and phrases by using all kinds of moving about. The way I understand the head is that we did not have to cram so much, we learned a lot by experience, which helped us to remember things. Hands help the head, definitely. Because the methods we used were fun, we all enjoyed learning foreign languages, no one was bored in these lessons. I would also say that our school is a kind of a family circle, it is a lot more than just being at school, we have all kinds of events outside school and it is very friendly.

Simon: It was definitely for the head because we had to think. It was definitely for the heart as well, for example when someone likes English, it makes them feel good and learning it can be fun, enjoyable and joyful. And for the hands ... I don’t really know.

Question 5: There are no textbooks, no digital technologies in Waldorf schools. What do you think are the pros and cons?

Adela: I never really needed them. It’s a question for the teacher, not the pupil. Modern technologies are much more convenient for the teachers, but in my opinion it’s not the most important issue whether you learn from a book you write yourself or a tablet. For me my books were always nicer than a tablet anyway. I still keep them all.

Barbora: My mum has some English textbooks at home, I browsed through some of them and they aren’t really worth it, I think. You do a chapter, then it’s over and it’s not connected with other topics. I am not sure how interactive whiteboards can really help with learning. Outside our school I once went to a presentation where the teacher just showed a pdf file and

scrolled down the text. I don't really see any special benefits in this. When you have these technologies in class, it looks cool and advanced, but I don't think it affects the quality of lessons. That is mainly the teachers' job.

Krystof: Textbooks explain things straight away. We had to explore and discover things our own way. I liked that a lot because then I understood and remembered things better. Some people may enjoy working with digital tools and find them useful because they learn in a different way. But when they are used in lessons, the teacher would have to communicate with students about what's on his or her tablet and I find that quite strange. I prefer "face to face" communication.

Tereza: Frankly speaking, I don't really see the benefits. Technologies might be more fun, but in terms of remembering things they are worse. When a person just sees something for a short moment, he or she can't store it in memory. Having to write our own books and observing teachers working with us on the board helped us to remember things more deeply.

Simon: We didn't have textbooks but we had different kinds of worksheets and other materials and of course the books we created. I would have enjoyed watching videos in English with native speakers - that could have been quite good.

Question 6: You were not assessed by marks (with the exception of classes 8 and 9) but by reports from your teachers. How did that affect you? Did you consider the requirements adequate?

Adela: It was very important for me to learn what I need to work on next year. In my case it usually had to do with writing. I enjoyed the concrete and detailed reports and advice. When I grew fonder of English, I tried to focus more on that. I think that the amount of work and homework we had was just right and if someone was interested in doing more, they certainly had the space to do so.

Barbora: A lot. I could find out what I deserved praise for and what I needed to improve. This way is definitely better. My teacher often wrote that I know a lot but I need to speak more, so I tried to do that. I think that our teachers always tried to encourage and support us rather than focus on what we can't do. Some of us did extra work and some of us were happy with the basic course.

Krystof: It was much more concrete than marks, the teacher explained what the pupils needs to improve. A mark doesn't explain anything. The teachers' way of working was appropriate to our age.

Tereza: I enjoyed all the reports. It's true that there was a time when I wanted marks because everybody had them. But looking back I think it's enough that they were introduced only in class 8. In English I practised writing quite a lot on my own. I wrote a diary and I wrote summaries of book chapters we had read. I did that for several years. Teachers corrected my work and I think that it helped me a lot.

Simon: I think that reports are nice. When they're well written, they're much better than a mark. A mark, on the other hand, is more straightforward: a one means that I understand it and I can do it. I didn't always learn something new about myself because I knew how I was doing in

lessons. When the teacher wrote that I should pay more attention, I really tried. I don't know if it improved, but I definitely tried.

Question 7: Why in your opinion were artistic activities included in your foreign language lessons?

Adela: We can learn a lot through songs and rhymes and poems. Sometimes when I hear a word or a phrase, I remember the song I learned it from. Because we repeat them often we remember the texts well – at least that's how it worked for me.

Barbora: I think that these activities connect us with the country whose language we are learning. When we did *The Raven* for example, we tried something traditional that came from the country where English is spoken. I also felt it when we sang national anthems.

Krystof: When we did drama and plays, we practised a lot of speaking with other people and then we could understand better.

Tereza: At primary they are good because the pupils enjoy their lessons more and remember better. At lower secondary I would say they liven up the lessons.

Simon: Singing is wonderful, but only when the class enjoys the songs. Theatre is also super, we are active, we don't have to sit at our desks, everybody speaks and also listens a lot at the same time. Recitation is a kind of speaking, that's also good.

398 *Question 8: How did you perceive the morning poems at the beginning of lessons?*

Adela: At first, I had to get used to everything and when I did, I started looking for meaning in them. I thought that it was great that the poems and prayers changed every year because we experienced variety in the languages. Sometimes there were words or phrases I wouldn't have encountered otherwise. The introductory poems set up a pleasant atmosphere and get us ready for the lesson with something quite simple that we can do together. The thirty seconds it usually took us to say them was definitely not a waste of time.

Barbora: These poems were one of the things I didn't understand right away. Later it became easier and I found them similar to what we recited in the main lesson. I felt a need to understand them so often I took the text home and looked up unknown words because I wanted to know what we were saying. After nine years it was a very natural thing for me to start a lesson with a prayer or a poem. I guess it will feel strange at the new grammar school to start just with *Sit down* and nothing else.

Krystof: It was a sort of a start into the language, tuning into it and feeling that now comes the time to use the foreign language.

Tereza: I enjoyed our poem beginnings because they opened the lesson and got us ready for it. We said them together, so it flowed nicely, and I wasn't nervous about forgetting a part. I also enjoyed saying a different poem every year because it didn't become a boring routine.

Simon: I must admit that this is something that I found quite boring. I think it's enough just to stand up and greet each other with the teachers. In Czech we only had two different opening poems in the course of the nine years and that was really boring. In English they changed more often, which was better for me.

Question 9: What skills and qualities should a Waldorf foreign language teacher have?

Adela: A lot of patience in the first place. It's helpful when the teacher can play a musical instrument and sing. He or she should be well-read and have interest in what's happening in the world, so that he or she can captivate the students not only by the foreign language but also by interesting topics we can discuss in the conversation parts of the lessons. The teacher should be able to use the foreign language well in speaking, understand children, enjoy teaching and not get easily mad or upset. He or she will have to handle a large group, so it's important to be able to cope with it and give enough space to those who enjoy the subject as well as to those who have difficulties.

Barbora: Be very very patient. And they must reconcile themselves with the fact that pupils not always understand everything from the very beginning. They should be fond of children and they must love the language to be able to manage and connect everything.

Krystof: I think that the main quality is patience with the children. He or she should be able to explain things clearly and be creative so that his or her pupils are keen on cooperating with him or her and develop positive feelings towards the subject. He or she should be pleasant to talk to and have mastery of the foreign language.

Tereza: The teacher must have a certain feeling for what the pupils may enjoy and an ability to do all kinds of things. We enjoyed our lessons because we did a lot of singing, acting and stuff like that. We didn't just have to sit through the lessons at our desks.

Simon: He or she should definitely master and like the subject. A foreign language teacher should have authentic pronunciation and not have a strong accent. What really helps is when the teacher enjoys his or her work and doesn't do it just because it's a duty.

Question 10: Both your English and German lessons were taught by one teacher all nine years. What pros and cons did you see in that?

Adela: I think it's by far the best possible situation because the teacher knows us from the first class, knows what we need more time for, what we enjoy. With this knowledge he or she can design the lesson in a way that's best for the class. I think that this way they can teach us best. When a teacher changes in the course of the years, there is always an adjustment period with a lot of revision and getting to know each other, and only after that can we start learning something new. It takes a long time before the work of the teacher connects with the work of the class.

Barbora: This way the teacher knows the pupils perfectly, one hundred per cent, what they can do and what not. It's simply ... well, it's just good. We

actually had a second teacher when the whole class began to split into groups, so we experienced another person, too.

Krystof: I would probably feel something like cheated if I had just one teacher all the time because a different teacher has different methods and knows different things. We had two English teachers from the fifth class and two German teachers from the seventh class and for me it was very enriching.

Tereza: The main advantage is that the teacher knows the pupils very well after the nine years – what they are good at, what difficulties they face, what they can expect from each other. A different teacher has different vocabulary, which is useful. The way we had it – one teacher all nine years and a second teacher from the fifth class in English and the seventh class in German – was ideal. The groups changed teachers, so we experienced both of them.

Simon: The advantage is that we are used to each other and we know what we can expect. The disadvantage is that you don't hear other people too much. But I wouldn't say there is anything wrong with it.

Conclusion

I would contend that the students' responses are valuable in their own right as five authentic personal testimonies of their nine-year experience with Waldorf education. Of course, a substantial variation of opinions would most likely be found if the interviews were carried out with a larger group of students from different schools. The five interviewees involved in our study regard their school's foreign language methodology in mostly positive terms. The aspects they seem to have appreciated most were:

- learning two foreign languages from an early age (Adela: *"Because children get used to the fact that foreign languages are part of their learning."*) and not being assessed by marks but written reports;
- creative, practical, varied and joyful lesson content, well interconnected with other topics in the curriculum and presented in a way which offers opportunities for one's own active participation (Krystof: *"We had to explore and discover things our own way. I liked that a lot because then I understood and remembered things better."*);
- the teachers' various skills as well as their interest in the pupils (Simon: *"What really helps is when the teacher enjoys his or her work and doesn't do it just because it's a duty."*);
- direct, hands-on (rather than virtual) and personal involvement (Tereza: *"Having to write our own books and observing teachers working with us on the board helped us to remember things more deeply."*)

They have revealed experiencing periods of not understanding the foreign language completely at certain points, especially in the early years or during certain artistic activities, but they were all in favour of the direct approach and have confirmed being able to cope with it successfully in the

long run. They all generally acknowledged the value of and reported interest in artistic activities, especially drama, music and poetry (Barbora: “*I think that these activities connect us with the country whose language we are learning.*”). Neither of them was critical of the absence of textbooks or digital technologies in their lessons.

Eight months after these interviews, I approached each of the five students with a new set of questions to find out how they fared at secondary schools. The two boys were generally contented with their new school’s approach to teaching foreign languages, while all the girls expressed deep disappointment with principally doing only textbook exercises (especially in their English lessons) and having very few opportunities for practical usage, communication and further growth. On the whole, they miss having creative and artistic activities, but all of them report feeling well prepared for further studies.

This article has attempted to render the approach to the teaching of foreign languages applied at Waldorf schools from the theoretical perspective as well as that of its actual participants. Waldorf is an approach which, among other aspects, acknowledges the contribution of imagination and creativity to human development. Moreover, it operates with the fact that language learning is a powerful formative force and its value consists not only of assisting learners with acquiring a new communicative tool but also of enriching their inner lives and enabling them to experience different cultural values and attitudes. More than any other method, as Kiersch (1997: 24) says, it “can make a useful contribution to *the art of living*”. Quite uniquely then, the Waldorf path to educating for peace and mutual understanding does not go through cognitive activities but via cultivating the ability to perceive. What becomes of these ideals in real life depends on the particular qualities of every school.

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