

Introducing Dialogue in Early Foreign Language Teaching

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(Received 2015.1.5)

In many Asian countries, discontent is often voiced about the way people were taught foreign languages as schoolchildren. Frequently heard utterances are along the lines of “We had English at school for ten years but still can’t speak it.” The present article describes an approach to learning that enables teachers to encourage students of elementary school age (6-11 years) to use language in meaningful age-appropriate conversation from the very first week of learning. The game format plays a prominent role in this process.

Key words: teaching English at primary/elementary school level
early communicative competence
relevance of formulaic expressions (‘chunks’)

In his comprehensive presentation of *Waldorf Foreign-Language Teaching* Johannes Kiersch expressed the opinion that in the first three school years the language teaching had significantly fallen behind Rudolf Steiner’s expectations as far as active use was concerned.¹⁾ It is no use arguing which specific expectations Rudolf Steiner had concerning the communicative competence of pupils in Class 3, as we have no definitive statements about this.

In the course of the first few years of the Waldorf School, Rudolf Steiner gave a number of hints about foreign language teaching in the Lower School. The following perhaps belong to the most important ones:

In 1920, in a lecture cycle to teachers, Rudolf Steiner recommended introducing the language in an informal, every-day, conversational way. This would have a tremendously awakening effect on the souls of the children if pursued without any overt grammar. “*Our children start learning English and French as soon as they start school. We spend more time on this*

than is usual.” [GA 301]²⁾

“*We connect not with the words of the other language, but directly with the thing described ... “The child simply learns to speak the language in direct connection with the outer world.”* [GA 311]

“*What matters is that you conduct the language lessons as conversation.* [GA 300b]

“*In the first three years (of school) poetic language is definitely to be preferred to prose.*” [GA 300c]

Early foreign language teaching then rests on two pillars: the legato language of poetry and the language of daily interaction, prose. Rudolf Steiner’s expressly stated preference for poetic language unfortunately led to the decades-long misunderstanding that children should primarily learn foreign language poems and songs by heart in the first three years of school. Yet he indicated equally clearly that the dialogical element and “every-day conversation” should be fostered just as much.

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¹⁾ J. Kiersch 1992 *Fremdsprachen in der Waldorfschule: Rudolf Steiners Konzept eines ganzheitlichen Fremdsprachenunterrichts*. Stuttgart 1992, p. 81

²⁾ R. Steiner: *Die Erneuerung der pädagogisch-didaktischen Kunst durch Geisteswissenschaft*. Vierzehn Vorträge für Lehrer aus öffentlichen Schulen, Basel, 20. April bis 11. Mai 1920 [GA 301]. - 3. Aufl., Dornach 1977, p. 93

Recent research in foreign language teaching has shown that it can be a great help for learners at the beginning if for these “every-day conversations” they are given certain formulaic expressions or *chunks* which have not yet been analysed cognitively, i.e. understood in detail, but whose meaning as a whole can be clearly recognised through their context – and through the body language of the teacher. They represent *islands of security or secure havens* for the beginning learners and enable the children to interact with one another in the foreign language right from the first lesson.

Various researchers in early foreign language have recently pointed to this phenomenon³, but it seems that incorporating these repetitive chunks when encouraging children to speak to each other is much too little practised.

This procedure can be most clearly demonstrated in connection with learning games. (The English examples given here can easily be applied to other languages).

Play is the ideal framework for here the pupil’s attention is fully focussed on the play-activity. Learning happens “by the way” (incidental learning). According to E.-M. Kranich children develop “... - especially when playing - those competences through which in later life all learning and working can attain their full human potential - by completely connecting with the activity and the effort and the intensified activity. In play, children completely fill their will-

activity with meaningful content, with imagination, intelligence, and joy. ... Play is the activity in which all the child’s abilities work together most completely.”⁴

The Penny Is Hidden

Let us start with a little dialogue which, like so many, starts with a rhyme:

*The penny is hidden,
Where can it be –
In my right hand, in my left hand,
Please tell me.*

The teacher shows the children the coin and then hides it behind her back. Now one of the children is given the coin, puts both hands behind his or her back and then brings each closed hand to the front in rhythm with the lines “right hand, left hand” with the coin in one of them. Then the other children ask: “Is the penny in your (right) hand?” “No, it isn’t. It is in my (left) hand.” ... The pupil who has guessed correctly is allowed to hide the penny the next time round.

It makes sense to practise this short dialogue in chorus to begin with, but then the individual children can ask and answer the question from the first lesson in Class 1.⁵

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³ C. Jaffke 2008 *Fremdsprachenunterricht auf der Primarstufe. Seine Begründung und Praxis in der Waldorfpädagogik*. 3. Aufl. Stuttgart [Erste Aufl. Weinheim 1994]: p. 288 und 313f.

⁴ E.-M. Kranich 1992 *Entwicklung und Erziehung in der frühen Kindheit*, in: S. Leber (Hg.): *Die Pädagogik der Waldorfschule und ihre Grundlagen*. 3. Aufl. Darmstadt, p. 80

⁵ The following dialogue offers itself for learners of German as a foreign language:

*Pinke-panke, Schmied ist kranke,
Wo soll er wohnen –
Oben oder unten drin?*

A coin, a button or a hazel-nut is hidden in one hand behind the back. Then both fists are brought forward and alternately beaten one over the other. If the ‘correct’ hand is picked, it is opened with this answer:

Genau, genau, Du bist so schlau.

If the ‘wrong’ hand is chosen, it is opened with this rhyme:

Leider ist Herr Krause heute nicht zu Hause.

I'm Standing, I'm Sitting

We can take the popular *action rhyme* "I'm standing, I'm sitting" as the starting point for a second activity:

*I'm standing, I'm sitting,
I'm writing, I'm knitting,
I'm reading, I'm counting,
I'm swimming, I'm shouting.
I'm eating, I'm drinking,
I'm talking, I'm thinking.
I'm giving, I'm taking,
I'm sweeping, I'm baking.
I'm laughing, I'm looking,
I'm washing, I'm cooking,
I'm driving, I'm rowing,
I'm kneeling, I'm growing.
I show my right hand,
I show my left hand,
I show both my hands,
And now I will stand (sit) still.*

Through the fixed expressions, this sequence of actions offers a whole series of possibilities to give children the appropriate expressive tools for guessing games. To begin with, the children work their way into the context of the chain of actions through speaking them in chorus accompanied by the appropriate gestures. Then this context is broken up and leads over into various question and answer games:

1. The teacher asks: "*Am I sitting?*" The children answer, initially in chorus: "*No, you're not, you are standing.*" As soon as the children have understood what it is all about, individual children can make up three questions, encouraged by the teacher: "Who would like to do three things / ask three questions?" – 'Obvious' questions are very popular, like: "Am I driving?" "No, you are not, you're sleeping."

2. One child leaves the classroom and does something in the corridor. Another child stands at the door and observes. Initially, the children limit themselves to actions they know from the above verse. By and by, new ones are added. The children in the classroom now ask the "reporter" in turn: "*Is*

she (he) looking?" "No, she isn't / is not." – "*Is she counting?*" "No, she isn't." etc. "*Is she jumping?*" "Yes, she is."

3. One pupil goes out and comes back a short time later. Now he or she is asked: "*Were you looking?*" "No, I was not/wasn't." "*Were you laughing?*" "No, I wasn't." "*Were you running?*" "No, I wasn't." etc. "*Were you lying on the floor?*" "Yes, I was."

4. The fourth variation is more appropriate for Class 2 or 3 when the pupils have acquired a basic vocabulary about clothing. One child stands with arms outstretched in front of the class and slowly turns so that all the children can clearly see the details of his clothing. Then the child goes out and changes three things (e. g. opens a shirt button, changes hair or rolls up one trouser leg a little). When he comes back, the others ask questions like: "*Have you rolled up your trousers?*" "*Have you changed your hair?*" "*Have you exchanged your shoes?*" "*Have you opened your shirt?*"

The English Bag

A third example can be used to introduce various word families: the *English Bag*. It might be toy cars (if possible authentic ones like a London taxi, a London double-decker bus, a police car, an ambulance, a fire engine ...). It might also be various animals, or objects which the children deal with every day in school or at home like a pencil, a pencil sharpener, an eraser, a fountain-pen or a ruler. As another variation we can bring things from the kitchen: a tea spoon, a soup spoon, a knife, a fork, a ladle. We can also use various fruits or vegetables. The possibilities are endless.

Using five different formulaic expressions ('chunks'), the children can take part in this game with almost no other prerequisites:

1. "*In the English Bag there is ...*" The objects are taken out of the bag one after the other, displayed, named and laid on a table or, in the case of the movable classroom where all the children are sitting in a circle, on the floor. The children repeat

the words in chorus. It makes sense to keep the number of objects small at the beginning, not more than five.

2. In a second step, individual children are allowed to say which object should be put back in the bag. Teacher: "Please tell me what to put back in the *English Bag*." Pupil: "*Please put back the [small London taxi].*" "*Please put back the [ambulance].*"

3. One pupil is given the *English Bag*, puts his inside and touches an object – hidden from the other children. They try to discover what object the pupil is just holding: "*Have you got ... in your hand?*" "*No, I haven't.*" / "*Yes, I have.*"

4. Five children are given an object from *The English Bag*. They stand in a circle and as soon as the other children have closed their eyes ("Eyes shut, heads down, please!") they swap the objects among one another ("Give one, take one - no grabbing!"). Then the five children go around and put their object on the table of one of the children (in the movable classroom, on the floor in front of one of the children). - One child counts slowly from 1 to 7, so that those who cannot make up their minds where to place their object realise that time is running out.

When all the objects have been distributed, the five children stand next to one another in front of the blackboard and the others are told to open their eyes: "*Heads up, please.*" All the children open their eyes and those with an object in front of them pick it up and stand up. Now the gripping question: "Did you put the crocodile on my desk/in front of me, Robert?" "No, I didn't/did not." – "Yes, I did." ... The children who have guessed correctly move forward to the next round. To avoid confusion, they first stand apart from the others (by the window or door). The ones that were picked go back to their seats.

5. Finally, the children who were not chosen say which object they put in front of which pupil: "*I put*

[the rattlesnake] on [Jennifer]'s desk / in front of [Jennifer] ..."

*

Many more such examples could be invented. – My most recent teaching experience in the Lower School in Germany and abroad have confirmed to me how easily and indeed, naturally children immerse themselves and move about in the foreign language with the help of fixed expressions.

From Doing to Understanding is a basic pedagogical principle for teaching in the Lower and Middle School. In the games described, the children use core elements of English grammar, although they have no awareness of the existence of grammar. These elements are, among others,

- the *Present Continuous/Progressive*
- the forms of the *Past Continuous* and
- *Present Perfect*
- *Simple Past*

It is from the Middle School that language teaching also has the task of making the learners conscious of the grammatical structures and rules giving them "that inner groundedness they need for life".⁶ It makes sense that experienced teachers come back to play activities in which the children's emotions were involved. In this context these teachers make use of the numerous formulaic expressions that their pupils have by now acquired unconsciously. The more such fixed expressions are learned in the Lower School, the better.

Recent didactic research has shown that language expressions acquired in the early learning stages of are applied, i. e. are also used in other contexts. Thus they have great relevance far beyond the framework of the 'every day conversations' in the Lower School.⁷

Numerous other topics are, of course, also dealt with in these *factual/every-day conversations*

⁶ R. Steiner: *Gegenwärtiges Geistesleben und Erziehung*. Ein Vortragszyklus, Ilkley (Yorkshire), 5. bis 17. August 1923. [GA 307] Dornach, 5. Aufl. 1986, p. 194

in the first few years of learning. They cover colours, classroom objects, family, pets, the weather, the seasons, food and drink.

An “Every-Day Conversation” — Poetry-Based

The following transcript (extract) from of a lesson at the end of the school year in a Class 3, shows that also the poetic language for which a basis was laid in the first three years of school can form a starting point for ‘every-day conversations’. A poem about the seasons was the starting-point for the following conversation. In this conversation, the children often used turns of phrase that for them had become fixed expressions (chunks), but some questions clearly went beyond the familiar frame.⁸ It is noteworthy that the teacher often accepted shorter utterances by students and expanded them into longer sentences. Through such expansions, the children become attentive to longer, connected expressions. All utterances that are grammatically incorrect are mirrored in correct language in a way that the respective pupil does not feel exposed or ‘corrected’.

The poem was first recited in chorus. When the children had sat down, the following conversation

took place.

Teacher: “I have a few questions for you. Please tell me some signs for spring!”

A pupil: “The blackbird comes and sings sweet and clear.”

Teacher repeats what was said to make it clear for all the children. Then he asks: “What else does the blackbird do besides singing sweet and clear?”

Pupil: “The blackbird builds its nest.”

Teacher: “And another sign for spring?”

Pupil: “The violets peep through the blades of grass.”

Teacher expands: “The violets, very shy, little flowers, they peep through the blades of grass. Do you know another sign for spring?”

Pupil: “The very green trees.”

Teacher: “Yes, the trees get green.”

Another pupil: “The spring is before summer.”

Teacher: “That’s right, spring comes before summer. - Please tell me some signs for summer.”

Pupil: “The honey-bees hum.”

Teacher: “The honey-bees hum, that’s right.”

Another pupil shouts: “Herr X, ich hab’ noch eins

⁷ Karin Aguado 2002 Formelhafte Sequenzen und ihre Funktionen für den L2-Erwerb: *ZfAL* 37: p. 27-49

Roshanak Saberi 2008 “*Memorisierte Chunks*” - *Möglichkeiten der unterrichtlichen Integration*.

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⁸ This is the poem in question:

What does it mean when the blackbird comes *What does it mean when the crickets chirp,*

And builds its nest, singing sweet and clear? *And away to the south the swallows steer?*

When violets peep through the blades of grass? *When apples are falling and leaves grow brown?*

These are the signs that spring is here. *These are the signs that autumn is here.*

What does it mean when the berries are ripe? *What does it mean when the days are short?*

When butterflies flit and honey-bees hum? *When leaves are gone and brooks are dumb?*

When cattle stand under the shady trees? *When fields are white with drifted snow?*

These are the signs that summer has come. *These are the signs that winter has come.*

The seasons come and the seasons go;

The skies that were stormy grow bright and clear;

And so the beautiful, wonderful signs

Go round and round through the changing year.

Teacher: ["Mr X, I've still got something else.":
 "The cows stand under the shady trees."
 Teacher: "Very good. Now why do the cows stand under the trees?"
 A pupil calls out, without putting up her hand: "Too hot!" – Many pupils laugh approvingly.
 Teacher: "Yes, that's right, because it's too hot in the sun. That's why they go under the shady trees, the cows."
 Another pupil: "The butterflies flit."
 Another pupil: "The berries are ripe."
 Teacher: "Yes, that's right. You can go and pick the berries and eat them, or you can cook them at home and have some nice jam in winter . . . Do you know any other signs for summer?"
 Pupil: "The sun is . . ." - thinks , another child helps by shouting, "hot".
 Teacher: "and . . .",
 Pupil: ". . . high."
 Teacher: "Yes, the sun climbs high in the sky."
 . . .
 Another pupil: "Kids singing."
 Teacher: "Yes, the kids sing out in the garden, don't they."
 Another pupil: "Swimming."
 Teacher: "I see, you go swimming. - Now children, please tell me some signs for autumn."
 Pupil: "The apples are falling."
 Teacher: "That's right, in autumn the apples fall."
 Another pupil: "The crickets chirp in the autumn."
 Teacher: "That's true, the crickets chirp. Another sign?"
 Another pupil: "Away to the south the swallows steer."
 Teacher: "Yes, the swallows, they steer away to the south, to warm countries."
 Another pupil: "In autumn the leaves grow brown."
 Another pupil: "In autumn the kids eat apples."
 Teacher: "In autumn the children eat apples. Another sign for autumn?"
 Pupil: "It's getting cool in autumn."

Teacher: "Yes, in autumn it gets cooler. Some days in autumn can be quite cold already."
 Another pupil: "In autumn, cows do not stand under shady trees."
 Teacher: "Right, now do you know any signs for winter, please?"
 Pupil: "The brooks are dumb." Teacher: "Yes, the small rivers do not speak any more. You cannot hear the brooks murmur any more, because the water has frozen."
 Another pupil: "The days are short."
 Another pupil: "The snowman comes."
 Another pupil: "The night is long."
 Teacher: "Right, in winter the nights are long."
 Another pupil: "We go *Schlittschuhfahren*."
 Teacher: "I see, you go skating on the ice."
 Another pupil: "Children go skiing."
 Another pupil: "The leaves are gone."
 Teacher: "Very nice!" . . .
 Another pupil: "The fields are white with drifted snow."
 Teacher: "Wonderful."
 Another pupil: "The tree is white."
 Teacher: "Yes, the trees are white. And another sign?"
 Another pupil: "The house is warm." Teacher: "It's nice and warm in the house, isn't it? – All right. That's fine. Thank you very much."

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Note

1) Memories of My Time at Hiroshima University (January through June 2005)

2) When I look back at my time as visiting professor at Hiroshima University in 2006, I'm filled with gratitude, for it was a very rich half year for me: Not only was I able to have weekly sessions about my field of research – foreign language teaching to children - with a group of highly motivated students. My host professor, Satoshi Higuchi, generously gave me the chance to attend a high-ranking philosophic symposium at *Todai*. I was also invited to give seminars for the *Japan Association for Language Teaching* (JALT) and for the *Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children* (JASTEC) in places as far afield as Hokkaido and Kagoshima. At *Hara Shougakko*, the local primary school, I had a chance to teach their Class 1 English on an almost daily basis, an activity that attracted huge media interest.

- One weekend, I was invited to take an active part in planting a whole field of wet rice, accompanied/ supported by the rhythms of traditional drums — a highly memorable experience. – At the invitation of the local tourist board, I spent an unforgettable weekend on the beautiful island of Miyajima together with a group of foreign students and lecturers. - Another highlight of my stay was, of course, the public presentation in the big auditorium of Hiroshima University about TEACHING ENGLISH. This happened towards the end of my stay and I was able to present together with the man who had been nominated Teacher of the Year, now Prof. . . .

The following contribution is dedicated to Prof. Mori on the occasion of his retirement in March 2015.