A Creative Approach to Foreign Languages for Waldorf Teachers

by RENÉ M. QUERIDO

The teaching of foreign languages plays an essential part in the Waldorf curriculum. Rudolf Steiner intended children to be exposed to two contrasting foreign languages, three times a week, from the first through the twelfth grade. The learning of a foreign language greatly depends on imitative musical abilities. Although they are somewhat ebbing from the change of teeth onwards, the language teacher can still make use of them in a most creative way. Much will depend for the future mastery of the language whether in these early grades the children can be submerged in the living atmosphere of the spoken word. The classroom – whether French, Spanish or German is taught – should become for the 45 minutes of every language lesson a part of that particular country. Not a word of the native language should be spoken there. The children will be greeted in French, "Bonjour, mes enfants. Comment allez-vous aujourd'hui?" The class replies, "Très bien, merci. Et vous?" Out of this dialogue, we might come to speak about the weather. "Regardez, il fait beau aujourd'hui. Le soleil brille." . . . "Oh, quel temps! Il ne fait que pleuvoir." After this lively dialogue the class in chorus will practise a number of pronunciation exercises. First, two or three are introduced, and then, little by little, through the weeks and the months, a whole repertoire is built up. It might take three or four minutes to recite these in chorus and individually. The class will also stand up and appropriate movements can be introduced.

"Ton thé t'a-t-il oté ta toux?"
"Tue ta toux que ta toux te tue."
"Bon Papa, ne bats pas beau Paul."
– and many others.

The importance, though many of them are humorous, does not lie in the meaning but in the learning to cope with the tongue-twisting sounds. And then, the class will be led into the recitation of a poem. Here again, the musicality of the mood is stressed. Great poetry is chosen rather than the jingles written specially for children. Already at an early age, children can be introduced to the genius of fine poetry: Ronsard, Charles d'Orleans, Lafontaine, Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Leconte de Lisle, Theophile Gautier, and others. Gradually, a rich repertoire of poetry, which is learnt by heart orally only, can be built up. It is an invaluable treasure in later life, and more than anything else it develops a sensitive appreciation for the language. As an example, we quote a poem by Charles d'Orleans (1391-1465) "Rondeau", which he wrote during his long captivity of more than 20 years in the gloomy fortress of the Tower of London and where he recalls nostalgically the sweet beginnings of spring in his beloved France:

"Le temps a laissé son manteau
De vent, de froidure et de pluie,
Et s'est vêtu de broderie
De soleil luisant, clair et beau.
Il n'y a bête, ni oiseau

Qu'en son jargon ne chante ou crie:
Le temps a laissé son manteau
De vent, de froidure et de pluie.
Rivière, fontaine et ruisseau
Portent en livrée jolie
Gouttes d'argent, d'orfevrerie,
Chacun s'habille de nouveau.
Le temps a laissé son manteau."

In dealing with such a poem one will of course not stress either difficulties of vocabulary or points of grammar. That would be totally inartistic. The children, out of the mood of the language, will gain a sufficient understanding through the spoken word. No translation need be given. But by way of a vivid introduction in French and the use of the blackboard, the general meaning can readily be conveyed. One could ask the students briefly to retell in English the substance of the introduction that the teacher has given. In working with a poem, it is important that the teacher himself/herself has memorized it well and can recite it with enthusiasm. One might only spend about five to ten minutes each lesson on the recitation of poetry taking a few lines at a time and from one lesson to the next repeating, continuing the process until the poem is known in chorus by the whole class and individually by each child.

The Early Grades

From the first to the third grade, nothing is written and it should be stressed that all the work is done orally. One would proceed in a similar way in German or Spanish. During the remaining part of the lesson in these early grades, a great deal can be done by way of introducing the children to the seasons, to day and night, the kingdoms of nature: rock, plant, animal; the parts of the body, telling the time, the course of the day with its many activities. These can be mimed and acted: we are asleep, we wake up, we open our eyes, we jump out of bed, we wash ourselves, we dress, we have breakfast with the family; what do we eat? what do we wear? how do we go to school? etc. One might also bring a suitcase and unpack the various items that one takes with one on a journey. Shopping, telling the time, and a host of other daily activities in the third grade, when the students have a building and forming block, can thus appropriately be woven into the foreign language teaching. The main activity of the lesson should certainly consist of practising the language by way of speaking, reciting, singing, games, etc. – but also by creating moments when the children listen to a story that the teacher tells. The singing of folk songs and rhythmic acting

songs accompanied by gestures can also play a major part in these lessons.

The same holds true for German as it does for French or Spanish: only the finest poetry is chosen. What a joy and enrichment for children to be introduced as early as the age of six or seven to masterpieces by Goethe, Schiller, Uhland, Rückert, Morgenstern. Great poets are the creators of language and embody the genius of their people.

"Gefunden"
Ich ging im Walde so für mich hin,
und nichts zu suchen das war mein Sinn.
Im Schatten sah ich ein Blümchen steh'n,
wie Sterne leuchtend, wie Auglein schon.
Ich wollt' es brechen, da sagt' es fein:
Soll ich zum Welken gebrochen sein?
Ich grub's mit allen den Wurzlein aus,
zum Garten trug ich's am hübschen Haus.
Und pflanzt' es wieder am stillen Ort;
nun zweigt es immer and blüt so fort.

Goethe

The learning of foreign languages is highly effective and stimulating only to the extent that the teacher is able to bring considerable diversity to the lesson, yet never tires of repeating the form he has established. There should be much variety between standing up and sitting down, moving the desks to the side, creating a circle and again reforming the setting of the classroom, and then again spending time listening quietly. Thus, the active and passive elements of the language receive their full due. It is obvious that in the first grades, as indeed later on, the children understand more than they can actually reproduce or express correctly. Great care should be given to beautiful and correct pronunciation; slovenliness should not be allowed to creep in.

The Middle Grades

In the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, we enter into a new phase. Gradually we can now begin to write down some of the poems, stories and dialogues acquired in the repertoire of the first three grades; it is essentially the task of the middle years by way of writing to learn to read the foreign language, to be able to do simple dictation and to write answers to questions that have first been dealt with orally in a living way. Now gradually the structure of grammar has to be brought in, starting with the verb (the doing word). Conjugations can now be learnt rhythmically by heart: Je suis, il es, il est – clap, clap! Nous sommes, vous êtes, ils sont – clap, clap! . . . Ich bin, du bist, er ist – clap, clap! Wir sind, ihr seid, sie sind – clap, clap! . . . with clapping, stamping, and appropriate movements. Out of the will nature of the language, the verb, one gradually develops the noun (the naming), actually a more abstract activity, and then one weaves in adjective and adverb, which represent the feeling element of language. There is no need to teach grammar with the help of a text book. The children make their own. And over the years, it can be added to, unfolding from the simplest rules and exercises to the most complex ones. By and large, the grammatical points in the foreign language will be taught about one year after they have been mastered in the native tongue; co-operation between teachers can add greatly to bringing structure and form to this aspect of the work. Grammar should always be taught out of a lively relationship with the spoken word. It has an important place in giving a backbone to our understanding, but if it is brought too early or in an abstract way, it can do much towards deadening our connection with the living word. There are unfortunately too many such instances today, resulting in a deep-seated dislike for foreign languages.

Much of what has been practised by way of poetry, songs, pronunciation exercises, etc. will be continued in the middle grades, but now, in addition, the printed book will be introduced. At the end of the fourth grade, the students will have learnt to write the language beautifully and to read fluently and correctly from the board or from their own written books. A certain amount of copying is by no means a waste of time. It strengthens the spelling, and attention is thereby focused on a number of grammatical difficulties. We should always be ready to enjoy the oddities of the languages we are teaching, such as, "Un ver vert va vers un verre vert." . . . "Dirigent, Der Regent". Proverbs and idioms and the etymological derivation of words can now be brought in,

adding spice and humour to the lessons, which progressively have also become more formal. An important place is now given to the telling and retelling of stories. One might start with legends and folk tales, and then in the fifth and sixth grades begin to add historical anecdotes. The stories are told in a lively, dramatic way by the teacher in the foreign language with the support of mime and blackboard, or even drawings that he might have made in advance. They should be relatively short, and after a first retelling one can quickly ascertain whether the children have understood the main points. On a next occasion, the story will be told again, but now in a more elaborate form adding descriptions and dealing with points of vocabulary and idiomatic expression. On the third occasion, the children will begin to retell the story and the teacher might write the first version on the board, guiding the process along. This can then be worked on further by the children and can now be used in a variety of ways. It can become the object of a lesson in style, in grammar, in question and answer, can become the basis of a short dramatic scene that is now written down and acted out.

The telling and retelling of stories gains in importance after the sixth grade, and in the seventh, eighth and ninth grades it forms, together with reading, an essential part of the curriculum. The language teacher will be helped a great deal by considering the History and Geography blocks the children receive in their Main Lessons: sixth grade, Roman History, Middle Ages; seventh grade, Renaissance, Reformation; eighth grade, Revolution; ninth grade, Modern History. From the fifth or sixth grade onwards, the students should also become familiar with the geography of the country of which they are learning the language. But it should always be taught in that language. This could go hand in hand with the customs and habits of the different regions of France, for example, the Breton, the Alsatian, the people from the Provence and the Champagne, their folklore, their national costumes, their food, their legends, their industries and natural resources. This is the time to introduce the children to the French cheeses, the manufacture of wine and champagne, the perfumes of the Côte d'Azur, etc. Equally, one would bring examples of the various dialects in German' Bayerisch, Schwäbisch, Plattdeutsch. Again, if one were teaching Spanish, one would bring the regions of Spain to their attention in a lively way: the dances, the music, the cathedrals, the mentality and outlook of the Spaniard. But one would also deal with some representative Latin American countries, Mexico in particular. It should be noted that the audio-visual plays no part in Waldorf Education, as so much more can be achieved through the lively creativity of the teacher in relation to the class.

High School

Treasures of the literature of the various languages in the form, to begin with, of poetry, then of the short story and later of the novel and the play, will continue to be brought to the students. In the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades, a careful literature curriculum should be established, but this of course cannot be maintained unless the basic skills of speaking, reading, writing, dictations and conversation have been well established in the earlier grades.

The following guidelines in connection with the high school may be useful. In the ninth grade, the youngsters are revolutionary, in the black and white phase of their development, swinging between the comic and the tragic. Here one can introduce the Sturm und Drang period of German literature: the young Schiller, the young Goethe. In French, one would deal with the French Revolution, and poems of Victor Hugo, André Chenier, appropriately related to the period. The short stories of Alfred de Vigny, Balzac, extracts from "Les Misérables" by Victor Hugo and "Le Comte de Monte-Cristo" by Alexandre Dumas are most useful. The teaching of this grade should be accompanied by a dramatic note spiced with humour. It is also the time in which, as the intellectual ability of the student is now maturing, the grammar and structure of the language should be revised and firmly established.

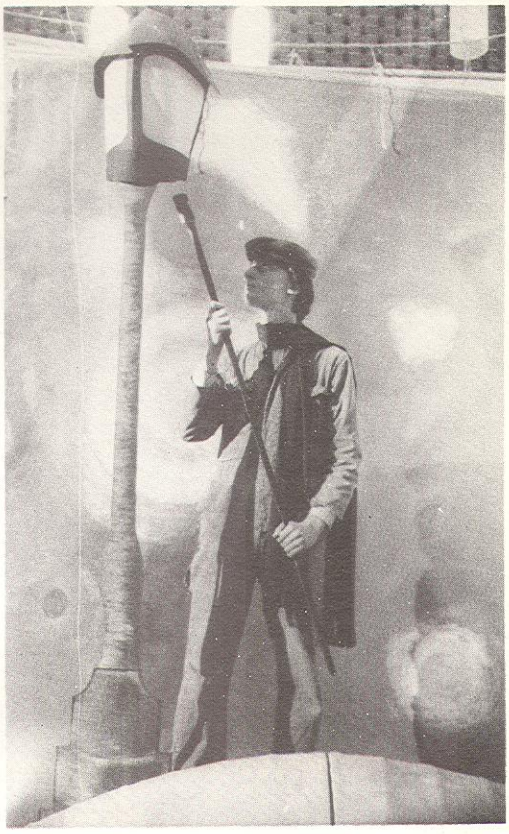
In the tenth grade, Romanticism plays a central part in the life of the teenager. One can now choose examples from Lyricism and

deal with aspects of the history of the language. Students are interested in etymology and the structure of language as long as it is brought in a lively fashion. They begin to enjoy more consciously the peculiarities of a language and the more one can bring comparative examples, also from Latin and Greek and possibly from some other language, the better it is.

The eleventh grade lends itself to the tackling of drama. No student should leave the high school without having experienced the difference between Racine, Corneille and Moliere. Le Grand Siècle, for instance, can be used as a major project and brief excursions can be made into the earlier poetry with extracts from Chrétien de Troyes. In German literature one can contrast the drama of Goethe and Schiller, though a study of "Faust" would best be postponed until the twelfth grade. In addition, one can bring aspects of Wolfram von Eschenbach and other Minnesänger. It is during the eleventh grade that we deal in the Main Lesson with the story of Parsifal, the "pure fool", who fails to ask the crucial question because of his inner dullness. In this grade, the History of Music is introduced and the language teacher can be inspired to form his lesson so as to embody aspects of the general curriculum. For instance, he might deal with the biographies of great composers typical of a particular country: Rameau, Berlioz, Chopin, Debussy – for France; Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner – for Germany.

In the twelfth grade, special emphasis is given to the literature of today. Students of French should be introduced to Albert Camus, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Anouilh, Ionesco, and in German: Max Frisch, Dürrenmatt, Wolfgang Borchert, Heinrich Böll, and others.

Furthermore, in the upper grades, students can be encouraged to present the fruits of their research in a particular area. Some might choose to speak about a political situation, the social conditions, aspects of government and the judicial system of a particular country. Others might choose to research more deeply the psychological traits comparing, for instance, the outlook of the Frenchman and German; others again might present vignettes of the crafts and industries of a particular region.



From a production of 'Le Petit Prince' – Class X

Such projects are presented orally in the foreign language in front of the class, and then summarized in the form of an essay in French, German or Spanish by each student.

From the above considerations, it will already have become apparent that the teaching of foreign languages is not merely of pragmatic use. We endeavour to go far beyond a mere basic knowledge as is so often practised today. What can be the significance of this more comprehensive approach? Doubtless, language is a means of communication between human beings, and it is perhaps one of the most important ones. It is also the gateway to understanding a particular folk which has its own genius, its own individuality, its own musicality, and expresses itself in countless manifestations of everyday life.

Language is born in the child by imitation during the first couple of years of childhood. First he moves, crawls, learns to walk, and then, out of gesture, speech is born as the mother tongue, and it is by way of speaking that the

first glimmerings of thinking arise in the third year. Our whole way of thinking is, to begin with, determined by the language we speak, and it is well known that, once we start learning another language, we also begin to think differently. Every language has its own thought forms. Certain concepts and words are quite untranslatable from one language into another. The Frenchman says: J'ai raison (I have reason) – meaning I am right. The German says: Ich habe recht (literally, I have right) – when he means to say: I am right. The German has "Weltanschauung"; he is constantly striving for a total comprehensive view of the world. The Englishman prides himself on a "sense of humour", the Frenchman on "savoir vivre" (to know how to live, or: a way of living). The Frenchman uses "penser à" (to think at – which has an analytical connotation); the German "über etwas nachdenken" (literally, over something after think) – the gestures of the word is more towards an all-comprising, synthetic type of thinking; whereas the English "to think about" suggests that one goes around the subject viewing it from as many aspects as possible. Apart from such subtleties, let us take a few more common examples which seek to indicate that much is lost in translation. The word "tree" – especially if it is portrayed eurythmically – has quite a different sound gesture from the German word "Baum" or the French word "arbre". The sound gesture of "tree" might be said to emphasize the trunk, whereas "Baum" stresses rather the abundant foliage of, for example, a linden tree, whereas "arbre" evokes the image of the typical slim poplars trembling in the wind that one finds along the roads of France.

More is lost in translation than is generally realized, and one of the tasks of teaching foreign languages in the Waldorf School is to recapture the genius of language which – as we master it gradually – can further the understanding of another nation, another way of thinking, another way of relating to life. Without such a bridge, much is lost that is enchanting and captivating, and also seeds of distrust and prejudice between peoples are sown. In addition, through the learning of two foreign languages from the early nursery rhymes and songs in kindergarten through the first to the twelfth grades, an ever-widening palette of inner colours is developed, quickening our understanding for our fellow human beings. Once we have learnt two foreign languages, the third, fourth and fifth come more readily, and again our range of inner sensitivity is expanded.

Each language can be compared to an instrument in an orchestra. It has its own genius but also its own limitations. English lends itself most appropriately to suggestion, to expressing things between the lines, it is full of innuendo, of the partial statement. German, on the other hand, because of its pictorial character, is particularly well suited to philosophical discourse. It always strives to plumb the depths and soar to all-encompassing heights; whereas the French language is the immaculate instrument of precision, the rapier that pierces with a disciplined thrust.

Experience also shows that through the learning of a foreign language, we become more subtly aware of our mother tongue. We rediscover its own particular capacities of expression in speech, in prose and in poetry. From about the fourth grade on, very special attention will be paid to comparing proverbs and idiomatic expressions in the different languages. They are introduced little by little with appropriate examples: "Er hat einen Vogel" – he has a bird, meaning he is crazy. "Elle a une araignée au plafond" – she has a spider on the ceiling, meaning she has a bee in her bonnet. Much quaintness and humour can thus be introduced into the lessons. Also at this time, attention will be given to a beautiful, musical way of speaking. Children should not only learn to speak correctly but also with due respect to the beauty and musicality of the language.

In conclusion, the profoundly social task of learning a foreign language should be stressed. In this connection, it is appropriate to pay tribute to two of the early Waldorf teachers who did more for the development of foreign teaching than any of their successors: Dr. Konrad Sandkühler and Dr. Herbert Hahn.

Konrad Sandkühler taught English as a foreign language and French at the first Waldorf

School in Stuttgart for many decades. His approach was most stimulating and he was able, out of his own profound knowledge of a number of languages and their evolution, to bring countless examples that inspired his students. Many under his guidance became fine linguists. Perhaps one may be allowed a personal note: I recall with particular joy a long conversation that I had with Konrad Sandkühler, as we walked along the Boulevard Saint-Germain in the spring in Paris some twenty years ago. We spoke in French about the Troubadours and Scholasticism, and the development of Old French into the modern idiom. Having punctuated this inspiring part of the conversation with cups of coffee on the terrace of a café, we continued conversing in English about Shakespeare and the evolution of the English language through the ages, culminating in the modern American idiom and the usage of English today. Then, speaking German, we returned to the Latin Quarter talking about Goethe and Schiller and their place in the shaping of the German language. I found it most memorable and inspiring in my own teaching of languages.

The other remarkable personality and linguist was Herbert Hahn, one of the founders of the Waldorf School together with Rudolf Steiner. He mastered absolutely fluently no less than twelve languages and gave us late in life his magnificent book, "Vom Genius Europas", where he discusses the unique contribution of the Italians, the Spaniards, the Portuguese, the French, the Dutch, the English, the Swedes, the Danes, the Norwegians, the Finns, the Russians, and the Germans, by way of the uniqueness of their language, their folk, their geographical setting, and their way of life, each contributing to a total spectrum. This monumental work is unfortunately not yet available in English translation. In addition, he gave countless advice on the practical teaching of foreign languages, and the author of this article owes him a very special debt of gratitude. He never tired of stressing the importance of the oral work, the recitation, the poetry, the conversation, the training of the ear to perceive the "imponderables" of language. With Goethe, we can say, "What is more precious than gold?" "The Light." "What is more quickening than the light?" "Das Gespräch." . . . conversation, that which takes place in speech between one human being and another.

Perhaps it may be said that the teacher of foreign languages in a Waldorf School is dedicating his efforts to the re-enlivening of language so that a true sense of brotherhood may arise among human beings.