

**'Language without observation is inconceivable, observation without language unfruitful, and observation and language without love does not lead to that which makes the education of our race human.'**

## **Thirty Periods a Week of German — 23 or Any Other Mother Tongue**

The best way for anyone to get an idea of the linguistic competence of mainly young people would be to look at all the Internet sites where they chat away and — because of the spontaneity of the way they express themselves — reveal their limited linguistic ability. It is widely recognised to be a problem: not only instructors, especially on commercial courses, complain that their apprentices left school without a proper command of German, university lecturers make the same complaint about their students.

One could let the matter rest there, pointing out that everyone manages to struggle through one way or another. But as educators we simply cannot accept this. We have a twofold task: to identify the causes of this disastrous situation and to find suitable means of addressing it.

There are doubtless many causes and in part they come from influences outside the education system. That is not under discussion here. In schools it is, in my opinion, the currently dominant theory of language teaching that is partly responsible. It puts too much emphasis on the positive effect of understanding of and knowledge about language to the neglect of letting pupils get into the habit of speaking and writing correctly through persistent practice. But I also believe that a not inconsiderable factor in this unfortunate situation is that the whole burden of developing language skills falls on German teachers with very few hours at their disposal. This comes from our habit of putting everything

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into little boxes, of organising teaching along the lines of the division of labour in an industrial concern: everyone has his subject and no one should interfere in someone else's territory. But it is not interference we are talking about, it is *collective responsibility*.

That is why I mean the title of this chapter seriously. The thirty or so periods a week pupils have, ought to be used to improve their language skills *as well*.

Already I can hear an objection. "That is all well and good, but if I follow that the pupils will tell me to my face, "What has my pronunciation, my grammar and spelling to do with you? We're doing Geography here, not German." ' That is a problem, but at least we should realise what the basic attitude is that makes pupils react in that way. They regard school not as an aid organisation but as a battlefield. Their aim is to resist any avoidable exertion and to see that they do not have to change unless it is really necessary. And this attitude is only possible because the pupils have not identified with the most fundamental educational aims of school. They see the syllabus as something imposed on them from outside; but if they saw it as guidelines to a goal they themselves wanted to achieve, they would be grateful for any hint on how to improve their oral and written expression.

But it is not the unsatisfactory results of our education system alone that justify the suggestion that the whole of the school staff should be responsible for developing language skills. The grounds for it lie deeper. Every subject is dependent, among other things, on language and that implies a responsibility which every teacher, whatever they teach, has to share.

Language is the intellectual house we all inhabit. It is intimately connected with thought. Both, *language* and *thought*, rest on the same foundation, on the concepts integrated into our consciousness which we link together according to the laws of logic. Thus a correct sentence always corresponds to a clearly conceived thought. And since thinking occurs in all subjects, we are all responsible for seeing that the pupils do learn not just to think correctly, but also to express themselves with corresponding clarity.

Thus every teacher, whatever subject he teaches, has an opportunity to help develop language skills where it is a matter of clarity

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of expression. The pupils should be made to feel the close relationship between thought and language. If I were a mathematics or physics teacher, my pupils would have to formulate every logical relationship, every conformity to a law of physics, in comprehensible sentences before they were allowed to express it in a mathematical formula. I would not be satisfied, however smoothly the pupils could recite ‘ $a + b$  all squared equals  $a$  squared plus  $2ab$  plus  $b$  squared’, they would have to be able to render this mathematical formula in language from their own understanding, not just because they had learnt it off by heart.

However, language is not our intellectual home simply because it allows us *to get a mental hold on the world*, to grasp it and comprehend it with our thoughts, but also because it makes *communication* with other human beings possible. And since communication takes place in all subjects, speaking correctly can be practised in all subjects.

A wide *vocabulary* and the ability to express oneself *in grammatically correct form* is the core of linguistic competence. But that is by no means the end of it, for that core has a suit of clothing, as one might say, in which it appears to listeners and readers. In speaking, this outer layer consists of *articulation and all rhetorical modes of expression*, in writing, of *correct spelling and punctuation*.

The cultivation of these two aspects of linguistic competence is at the heart of language teaching, but the goal — the ability to write and speak correctly — is so hard to achieve that it is beyond the German teacher unless the other subject teachers support him or, where there is one class teacher, he makes it part of every subject. It does not make sense at all for pupils to take care over grammar, spelling, punctuation and the choice of words in essay writing but to be allowed to break the rules as much as they like in their other subjects. Schools as a whole must insist that the central aims of the individual subjects should be observed across the whole range of pupils’ work.

How can the ideas I have put forward here be put into practice in the classroom? I see three main ways:

*Firstly:* We must create as many opportunities for speaking as possible and teachers and pupils must concentrate on speaking correctly.

Particularly useful is *free discussion among pupils*. This is appropriate whenever the pupils must *discover things for themselves*, as well

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as for any exercise involving observation, describing pictures, expressing opinions on problems and interpreting texts. A teacher's mastery can be seen in the way he trains a class in the rules of free discussion.

*Secondly:* Correction by the teacher. Unfortunately the view is widespread today that correcting pupils makes them feel hurt, discourages them and increases their sense of inferiority. That attitude kills two birds with one stone: you're one of the good guys and at the same time you've got rid of the most onerous of a teacher's tasks. If this attitude becomes general we needn't be surprised about the poor results of education and we can happily dispense with all our quality assurance systems.

Admittedly, correction can have a hurtful, discouraging effect, but that is on a quite different level, on that of the teacher's emotional relationship with the pupil. In an atmosphere of acceptance, it is quite possible, even in primary one, to put in a second 'n' if the child has written, say, 'funy' without upsetting him. And when the child is told to write the word again, he will understand it as it is meant, as help. In our leisure activities we quite happily accept our mistakes in a movement or way of doing something being pointed out and being asked to do it properly; it is only in school that it is looked upon as morally reprehensible.

Outside the language classes it is essential that mistakes in *written work* be corrected, especially in science subjects. No teacher would think of letting the mistakes in language, which he points out to the pupil by correcting them, affect the mark given.

Just as important, however, is correction in *oral work*. Here the art for the teacher lies in making as little fuss as possible over the correction. I have found it works well simply to say the correct word or phrase, almost as an afterthought, even following the pupil's tone of speaking. The pupils had got into the habit of repeating the correct version and then continuing with what they were saying. Mostly they didn't even notice that I had corrected them.

*Thirdly:* Setting a good example is essential. For a teacher, improving one's own linguistic competence is a lifelong task: ensuring that one's vocabulary is vivid, comprehensible and varied, one's sentences are correctly formulated and clearly pronounced.

In this connection I would like to discuss two forms of teaching

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which are somewhat looked down upon by modern educational theory: 'chalk and talk' and storytelling. In both cases the teacher's language serves as a model.

'*Chalk and talk*' is the original form of teaching: someone who knows something tells it to others who would like to hear it or need to know it. This form of teaching has its advantages and can produce positive effects. Necessary information and connections can be conveyed very efficiently. Also the pupils are repeatedly given a model of how problems are analysed, judgments made and knowledge presented.

*Storytelling* presents unique events which the pupils could not find out for themselves by discussion or through the exercise of logic. Someone — the teacher or a pupil — knows about something and passes on their knowledge.

Storytelling has been criticised. For some educationalists it is problematic that the teacher is at the centre and makes the pupils' minds dependent on him, pushing them into passivity. I do not accept this criticism. A person who is listening, transforming words into mental images, being emotionally involved is just as active as the person telling the story. The speaker and the listener are in an equal relationship, neither is at the centre, the centre is the story, to which both have given themselves up.

Telling a story and listening are truly elementary. For thousands of years people of all races have used storytelling to pass on to the next generation traditional knowledge that is considered vital. It is not surprising, then, that children respond particularly well to storytelling and usually put off any other activity if they can listen to someone telling a story in a way that is both geared to children and exciting.

Many children today do not like going to school, and the older they are, the greater their resistance. In my opinion the reason lies in the fact that schools place too much emphasis on the intellectual side — what Pestalozzi calls the 'head' — and neglect not only the 'hand' but also the 'heart'. Good storytelling always appeals to the emotions. Educationalists who would like to banish storytelling from the classroom, or marginalise it, must be clear that with that we would lose one of the main opportunities to appeal to the children's emotions and thus arouse their interest and make them willing collaborators in the learning process.

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During the last twenty years of my work training teachers I repeatedly found the positive effect of storytelling confirmed. When the trainee teachers first arrived, at the age of sixteen, I regularly asked them for their assessment of the history teaching they had had so far. The unfortunate truth was that there were only very few who had enjoyed it and had developed an interest in history; and they were always those whose history teacher had been a person who regularly recounted fascinating stories.

My recommendation to teachers in all subjects, then, is to take every opportunity to tell a story that will capture your pupils' interest, and not just at infants level, but in all classes. That will not only add spice to your own teaching, through its example it will also contribute to 'language training in all subjects'.