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Performative teaching in the middle school. A report on practice

Interview with Silvia Albert-Jahn[1]

Peter Lutzker, Martyn Rawson, & Silvia Albert-Jahn

The focus of this interview is on teaching English as a foreign language in Waldorf schools from grades 4-8. After the first wholly oral and immersive phase in grades 1-3, the gradual progression to more conscious language learning begins in grade 4 with the introduction of writing and reading in the foreign language. Silvia Albert-Jahn describes the Waldorf approach to teaching pupils from this point on (roughly the age of 10-13). On hand the different developmental stages occurring during these years, she discusses both the contents and methodology which are used and elucidates the reasons for these choices. At the end of the interview, she considers the general goals of language teaching for this period and discusses the importance of the teacher's relationship to her pupils.

Silvia Albert-Jahn has been one of the leading practitioners in teaching English as a foreign language in Germany in Waldorf schools and in Waldorf teacher education for over 30 years. She has taught English in the Waldorf School in Mülheim/Ruhr since 1987. During this time, she has also been a regular instructor in foreign language teacher education at the Institut für Waldorfpädagogik in Witten-Annen and a guest instructor at other Waldorf seminars and colleges in Germany. She is a co-founder and principal organizer of the *English Week* where she has taught Waldorf teachers from all over the world since 1998. A particular focus of her work has been on the middle grades 4-8.

Peter Lutzker & Martyn Rawson (PL & MR): Christoph Jaffke has written in this issue about that first phase of oral immersion in English in the first three grades. I'd be interested to know what changes for you in grade 4 when one begins with writing and reading in the foreign language, when one begins working more consciously with language learning. Why does this shift take place at this point?

Silvia Albert-Jahn (SAJ): To answer this question, I think we should consider the development of the child at different stages. At the end of class 3 or by the beginning of class 4, the pupils

[1] The interview was conducted by Peter Lutzker and Martyn Rawson on 30th January 2022 on Zoom and the audio data collected was transcribed using the transcription software of Otter.ai. The transcription required only minor editing and has retained the dialogue in practically its original form. The digital transcription was then reviewed by both editors for clarity with respect to the questions and, afterwards, by Silvia Albert-Jahn who made no changes in her comments.

have reached a different stage in their emotional and spiritual development; in class 1, 2, and 3, they are really at one with the world and fully immersed in the foreign language which they experience as a whole, without thinking about it. That already changes in class 3. Teaching in the way you used to teach in grades 1 and 2 becomes more difficult. And in class 4, it‘s definitely time for a change.

So, we have to adjust our methodology to their stage of development. And at this the stage of development the child doesn't only want to *do* things, it's not merely action and performance anymore. The child now begins to emancipate himself from the world and becomes able to look at it. He wants to understand the world and also wants to understand language. So our ways of teaching have to meet this need and encourage the young learner to use his thinking capacities. Some of the elements still stay, you still sing, you still recite poems, but not to that large extent anymore. Instead you do different things offering them the possibility to understand the language and to understand the world.

PL & MR: This sounds like a big change.

SAJ: It is a big change.

PL & MR**:** Do you ease them into these changes, or are they ready right away for that shift?

SAJ: No, not right away. That's why I consider class 4 as kind of a transitional year. In class 4, I basically focus on writing and reading for two reasons: Firstly in order to save all the verses and songs, all the treasures of language that they have acquired so far and secondly, to make them familiar with the written word. The main focus really lies on writing and reading. There's not much grammar work, except for the very simple grammar rules in class 4 and that is the transition from only speaking to writing and reading. The actual work on grammar starts at the end of class 4 when they have experienced the written language to a certain extent and have become able to read simple sentences in the foreign language.

PL & MR: Do you start with writing in grade 4 and then move on to reading, or are you doing both at the same time?

SAJ: No, I actually start with writing; they write down the verses that they have previously learned. And then in remembering, they are also able to read what they wrote. Of course, they do not really read, it's a trick in the sense that they *think* they can read and you avoid all the obstacles you would have if you gave them new verses. There would be too many obstacles with regards to pronunciation. But since they know all these verses, it's no problem when they see that the spelling is different. They can identify the words anyway.

PL & MR: The spelling doesn't confuse them because they're not really reading it.

SAJ: At first, they're not really reading it. They will still speak the lines by heart, although they see the written version on the blackboard. Yet, they do feel confident about reading and often enjoy it, because they are not really aware of the actual way they are reading. But then you as the teacher have to find ways to really make them read. For example, read the sentences backwards, pick words, take them out of the text and so on. So, step by step one tries to really teach them to read the words instead of just speaking them by heart, but in a very playful way.

PL & MR: And after that initial phase you move on to the first readers. Can you tell us a little bit about the first readers?

SAJ: Various little stories are suitable reading material for 4th and 5th graders. You know, there are wonderful stories about animals by Brian Masters (Patter-Paws the Fox and other stories). These are stories that I would tell them before they read them, because something I appreciate very much is that they do not *first* get the text that they have to read. Before they actually read the text, they are given the opportunity to enjoy the story and to understand the content of it. When reading the story, they then do not decode the text for meaning, but they actively discover and understand what they have already learnt.

PL & MR: What other readers do you use?

SAJ: I have worked with The Pancake and a number of Arnold Lobel's stories like The Mouse Tales and The Frog and Toad stories.

PL & MR: And how do the kids react to these stories?

SAJ: They love them. That is especially the case with Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad stories. There is a wonderful timeless humour in all these stories and the language is easy to understand although the text has not been simplified. Although I have read them with quite a number of children, I still enjoy working with these stories very much.

PL & MR: The idea is that you first tell the stories and then they have the book and read it. How important is it that you're a good storyteller? How important is it for foreign language teachers to be good storytellers?

SAJ: Well, you have to create the images or the pictures to help them understand the story. And here, you have to use your whole body. By telling the story, you find appropriate gestures or you partly act it out and you have to be fully aware of the children sitting in front of you. Often you can see in their faces whether? they understand or not and if they don't, you have to react accordingly and tell the story differently or add other elements to your storytelling. You can repeat something, or you take them on board by having them repeat something, or you ask questions in between so that there is some interaction between the storyteller and

the listeners. You can also ask quite humorous questions in between - right or wrong questions for instance – or you can have them anticipate how the story goes on. All this helps to maintain the level of attention and the interest in the story.

PL & MR: Is this all in the foreign language? Or do you sometimes shift back and forth between German and English?

SAJ: This is all in the foreign language. I'm telling the story in English and stay in English all the time.

PL & MR: When you mentor teachers, or when you see young teachers teaching, are they able to do this? It seems to be a very important aspect of working with readers to be able to do that. Do you see ways of helping them to learn to do this?

SAJ: Well, I'm sure, for beginners it's always a bit difficult. Storytelling needs good preparation. If you are well prepared, then you can also improvise. But you need the preparation in advance. And this is what people sometimes tend to neglect.

PL & MR: What do you mean by good preparation?

SAJ: Good preparation means that you know the story from beginning to end very well. When preparing, you should not only focus on the plot, but also on little details, which describe and create the atmosphere. In the course of time the preparation will get less time-consuming. You will become more and more experienced as a storyteller and will also have the courage to improvise, being inspired by the pupils and the particular classroom situation. However, as a beginner, you really have to practice telling stories.

PL & MR: This method of introducing the story by telling it first seems to be a very decisive aspect of preparing them to then read it. Do you continue with this method in the next grades?

SAJ: I do continue with this method, in slightly modified ways, until class 7, or the beginning of class 8. I don't always tell the full story, or the full chapter of a reader, but just a little bit so that it is easier for them to get into the story. Sometimes I also try to raise their interest by addressing the general topic the text deals with or by using pictures. There are different ways of introducing texts, but in grades 4, 5 and 6, I would definitely tell the story.

PL & MR: What shifts between grade 4 and grade 5?

SAJ: Well, the content of the story and the text level are different. And I think the children in class 5 have got used to reading longer texts than before.

PL & MR: And also texts they are not familiar with?

SAJ: Yes, I would say in class 5 they have arrived in the world of the written word.

PL & MR: Before you read that day, are you still telling them the story, or what they are going to read that day?

SAJ: Yes, but differently. In class 5, there are maybe pictures in the readers, which I use. So even if they haven't read their first page yet, they look at the picture and we enter into a conversation. And based on this conversation, I might tell them a bit of the story. In class 4 I would rarely do that. I would just tell the story. Here I can use the material in the book already.

PL & MR: Do you read Robin Hood?

SAJ: I did read Robin Hood in class 6 and 7. But I found there's a bit of a discrepancy: The actual story is appropriate for class 6 and 7 whereas the language of the reader is sometimes very difficult to understand.

PL & MR: What do you read in class 5?

SAJ: I tend to read Ghosts at the Castle at the end of class 5. And those Frog and Toad stories.

PL & MR: Do you start to work on grammar as a separate subject in grade 5?

SAJ: Yes, it’s a separate subject. I would never work with grammar related to the reading material or poetry that I work with.

PL & MR: Can you give us an idea of how you work on grammar?

SAJ: I always try to create a kind of a situation in which the children are encouraged to use a particular grammatical structure without knowing that they are working on grammar. It is all done in a playful way. Maybe it's just a little game. And afterwards, they would be using the structures in various little exercises without knowing that they are doing grammar. And after having done that for a while, I would make them think about it and ask them what we have been doing. Now they have the opportunity to look at language and to discover the rules themselves. As a teacher you can guide them by asking the right questions without giving away the grammar rules. So, it all starts in a very playful way. They're using and practising the structure, but then it is important that we give them the chance to become aware of the grammatical structure to discover the rules and to formulate them in their own words. In short, they experience the grammatical phenomenon, but then also reflect upon it.

PL & MR: Having first gone through that playful process and then talking about it, they then only get the rules at the end?

SAJ: Well, that last step of discovering the actual rule can be a bit painful because the students feel that they can already use the structure perfectly well and they don’t see any reason why

they should find and formulate the rules. I am convinced that the very process of having them discover the rules themselves is of enormous educational value. Rudolf Steiner once said that "doing grammar" in the right way helps the student to develop self-awareness. Grammar has these two aspects: One aspect of grammar is that you learn to speak the language more accurately by understanding, remembering and applying the rules. But, on the other hand, this process of discovering the rules is important in itself because it contributes to the child's personal development. It enables the children to develop self-awareness in a non-egotistical way. You encourage them to start thinking about what they are doing,

PL & MR: Why do you call this non-egotistical?

SAJ: Because it's a general rule, a general truth which they discover, by activating their own thinking capacities.

PL & MR: Have you found any ways of teaching grammar in conjunction with different kinds of activities, so that their experience and use of English grammar becomes more embodied? I know that this is often done, for instance, with prepositions of space and having pupils stand under the table, beside the table, run around the table etc. That's an easy one, do you have any other examples?

SAJ: First of all there is this element of surprise. When you confront them with grammar, you bring up something and they don't even know that they're doing grammar. I'll give you an example, for class 7 or 8 I have a jumbled dialogue in which the lines are not arranged in the right order. And the first thing they have to do is to figure out what comes first and what comes next and recreate the proper dialogue. The next activity is that they act it out. They speak to each other and get familiar with the structure by practising this little dialogue. Shall I give you a concrete example?

PL & MR: Yes, please do.

SAJ (finds her notes): I have it already correctly re-arranged in front of me:

> What happened to you?
> I broke my arm.
> How did it happen?
> I was skiing, and I fell.
> Did it hurt?
> You bet.
> Are you feeling better now?
> Yes, much better. Thanks.[2]

[2] An exercise found in: Gerngross, G., Puchta, H., & Thornbury, S. (2006). *Teaching Grammar Creatively.* Helbling Languages.

In this little dialogue, as you have probably noticed, I was focusing on 'I was skiing', and 'I fell'. So, after practising this dialogue, they will also perform it in front of the class, and that is the playful element in it. And then afterwards, I would make them think of a different situation, a person with a bandage on their finger for example. And they will just have to change the lines. And the next step is for them to come up with similar examples. 'I was smoking a cigarette when my mother came into the room.' or 'She was standing in front of the shop when the taxi arrived.' I would give them cards with sentences like 'I was playing tennis and it started to rain' and they would have to act it out. The wonderful thing about it is that they use the language without knowing the rule.

PL & MR: And then at the end of that process, how do they get the rule?

SAJ: At the end of the process, I will ask them, what's the difference between 'I was skiing' and 'I fell'? Why do I use the progressive form in 'I was skiing'? And why do I use the simple past tense in the second part of the sentence? And then I will have them discover the rule and write it on the blackboard.

PL & MR: What's the difference between only doing all that on paper and this process of performing it in front of the class?

SAJ: Well, just doing that on paper has nothing to do with life, does it? There is no resonance when you are working with grammar in this way because it has nothing to do with them. There is resonance when they imagine the situation and then perform it. Of course, you never run a risk of losing control when they just do it by writing it down, by having them complete a number of exercises. When you have students perform things, you never know what will happen and just have to trust it will work.

PL & MR: You probably have experienced a wide spectrum of abilities when they perform. How do the pupils react in that moment when they are asked to act out a scene?

SAJ: They are very keen on doing that. I mean, they love this kind of activity and they also love to be seen by everybody else. You know the acting process is the most interesting, the most important part for them, compared to discovering of the rules later on. But *this* part, acting in front of the class, is very, very popular.

PL & MR: How do you manage that? I think there are teachers who would say that this wouldn't necessarily be popular in their classes. Do you think that this is something that can happen in every class?

SAJ: I think it's something that can happen in every class, it depends on the teacher. The teacher can be a good role model by acting out things himself/herself and this will inspire

them to try it as well. If you set an example, they will follow. And they love this. They thoroughly enjoy acting and learning as well as playing and learning at the same time. That's the point, I think.

PL & MR: I think this is probably the case if they do this regularly in their language lessons. If, right from the beginning, they assume that performing and enacting is part of learning a language, then they will just get better at it.

SAJ: Yes, they will. And they feel much more at ease, I think, because they feel 'this is my world', 'this is the world I'm living in' - 'I was playing tennis when it started to rain,' 'I was having a shower when the telephone rang' - these are everyday situations. It's not just a grammar example from a book about Susan and Peter or other people you don't know.

PL & MR: We are getting a picture of how you work in the first part of the middle school, grades 4-6. What changes when pupils begin to enter puberty in 7th and 8th grade? What shifts in your teaching?

SAJ: I think the biggest challenge is to find good literature, especially for classes 7 and 8, so that they feel addressed. There's always one question that I ask myself before choosing a reader, or before choosing a topic and this is the question: What has this got to do with the world we live in? And what has this got to do with the students? How would they feel about it? How would I feel about if I were a student? Would I like it? I try to put myself in their shoes and look at it from their perspective. You don't do that so much in the early years, in classes 4 and 5 and 6, because you've got these wonderful stories like Robin Hood and King Arthur, they're always interested in that. That changes in classes 7 and 8. You need good reading material. Something that, on the one hand, offers them the opportunity to improve their language skills, but on the other hand with regards to the content, meets their interest and contributes to their personal development.

PL & MR: Can you give us some examples of the kinds of books you've worked with?

SAJ: Well, for example, books by Michael Morpurgo. At the end of class 6, or the beginning of class 7 the book Cool is a very, very nice book. It tells a story they can well relate to and it raises a number of profound questions that some of them might have already had as well, for instance, why did their parents get divorced, or the question of what is it like to be in coma, to have this 'locked-in syndrome'. These are very fundamental questions. In addition, it also deals with football…

PL & MR: Are there any other books that you can recommend?

SAJ: Well, The Butterfly Lion, another book by Michael Morpurgo. And then later on for class 9 his Private Peaceful. It's a book about World War I and a very moving story. Morpurgo wrote this book to help young people experience what it was like to have lived through this, and he addresses this age group, very professionally and very properly.

PL & MR: Are there any other authors or books you could recommend for this age?

SAJ: I also recommend Stone Fox by John Reynolds Gardner for class 7.

PL & MR: Can you tell us how you work with these books?

SAJ: Well, I have very different approaches; sometimes I tell a little bit of the story and have them anticipate how the story could go on before they read the text. Sometimes after reading a text, they act it out or create “frozen pictures”.

PL & MR: How does that work?

SAJ: Let's assume they have read chapter two of Stone Fox. I would then put them in groups, or just have them work in pairs and I would ask them now to act it out. They go to different places in the room, and I go from group to group to check that they are working. And after 15 or 20 minutes, I will call them back and they then give a short presentation of what they have worked on. In case they have created a “frozen picture” I ask them to show their picture which then is described in detail by the other students.

PL & MR: Does every group get to perform at that point?

SAJ: Sometimes we are a bit short of time, but then they get the chance in the next lesson, most of them really insist on presenting.

PL & MR: And what do you think changes when they get to do that?

SAJ: Well, it's there - how can I say that? They bring this whole thing to life. It's not just a story, but they develop more empathy for the characters and that's what makes it so authentic, that they step into the shoes of the characters. And it's not too difficult because they have the story. They have some guidelines, and sometimes there's lots of direct speech which they can use.

A more difficult task, for example, in Stone Fox is to imagine that Little Willie goes to the bank to get a loan because his grandfather has debts. I once had a class 7 and I just gave them the task: Imagine you are Little Willie and you go to Mr. Foster, the bank manager, and ask for a loan. I also told Mr. Foster to ask Willie a few questions and so Little Willie goes to the bank and then they really have to improvise, because most of this conversation can’t be found in the book.

PL & MR: You have them practice it in groups first, and then they do it for each other?

SAJ: Well, I did this scene at the bank last year. I just asked for two people – one acting Mr Foster at the desk and the other Little Willie coming into the bank. They had no preparation time, but it went quite well.

PL & MR: We are getting a sense of how you use performative methods in teaching literature as part of your regular lessons. Do you ever work on a larger project, for instance, performing a play?

SAJ: No, not really. I haven't got that much time I can use. I use these techniques and a scene is performed and presented, but not on a larger scale, like doing a whole play. No, I'm afraid I haven't got the time to do that. I once did the theatre version of Ghosts in the Castle in class 6. But the three lessons a week were not enough. We needed the afternoons as well.

PL & MR: How did that go?

SAJ: It was great! And, of course it's different if you have a role that you have to learn, and a character that grows with you and you grow with the character. It's different. Unfortunately, we don't have that much time.

PL & MR: Let’s look at the larger picture - the middle grades 4 to 8, possibly including grade 9, by that time, they are 14 to 15 years old. What do you hope to have achieved by then?

SAJ: Well, the first wish I would like to express is that I hope they will love the language and appreciate its beauty. I would be glad if they could greatly benefit from the fact that they are given the chance to view the world from a different perspective when using a foreign language. What I would of course also like to achieve is that they understand the language well and kind of speak it fluently. I know that they might not always speak accurately but I think for me, it's a lot more important that they speak fluently and that they dare to express what they want to say, even though sometimes they may lack the words.

PL & MR: Looking at what you have said from the perspective of teacher education, what do you think we need to focus on in teacher education, to help teachers to be able to reach these kinds of goals?

SAJ: Well, there's one thing we haven't addressed yet. I feel it's about creating relationships. And this is what teachers sometimes tend to neglect or are not aware of that first of all, you have to create a proper relationship with the students. Maybe it’s more realistic to say that you prepare the grounds on which the students in very individual ways can relate to you and trust you.

PL & MR: How does one go about doing that?

SAJ: Well, for example, let's go back to the beginning when we talked about storytelling. Does the teacher perceive the students and change his or her strategies accordingly? Or does he just do what he has planned? Are you aware of who's in front of you, and taking that seriously? Or when planning a lesson, do we have in mind that we address all abilities and therefore also find activities weaker students can participate in?

PL & MR: When you look at young teachers, they're often so overwhelmed by all the things they have to do. How can we help prepare them for all the different challenges of teaching?

SAJ: You are asking me profound questions, and hope for answers. I think sometimes it's the little things that matter, for instance, in establishing relationships, shaking hands with each pupil at the door – at least before Corona when we were allowed to do that. You know, using this opportunity to look at them and say something nice, for instance, if you see that they're wearing a new jumper, or that they've got new shoes. Or just ask them what they did yesterday, be interested, not only in a learner, but in a human being. And this is what young teachers, I think, are not fully aware of. One can't always do that, but sometimes we can really grab the opportunity. Then this opens lots of windows.

PL & MR: One final question: We've been talking about many different things related to performance. Can you try to put into a nutshell what performative means to you?

SAJ: Well, performative for me means everything that addresses the whole human being, that means the body, the mind and the soul. And that does not necessarily only have to be drama, it could also be painting and drawing. It could also be writing poetry. The whole issue of addressing multiple intelligences comes into play as well. It's everything you do, when you involve the whole human being in an authentic way, when you create some resonance between the learner and the content: it's not just taking things in, but it's resonance that you want to make possible.