

# English Isn't German: An Answer to the Challenge of Teaching Language Arts in English

By Jennifer Militzer-Kopperl

Waldorf education is based on Rudolf Steiner's indications; however, Steiner spoke German, not English. When it comes to teaching language arts, how much does it matter?

The answer: quite a bit. A fair amount of what Steiner recommends applies to German but does not apply to English, either in whole or in part. Furthermore, there are gaps in Steiner's indications. On many topics of concern to English-speaking teachers, Steiner is completely silent. English is very different than German, and the differences affect instruction in reading, spelling, and grammar.

## Reading

German is more phonetically regular than English. This fact explains why Steiner spends so much time telling teachers how to teach the alphabet but gives almost no indications on what to do afterward: he did not need to. After one year of instruction, the vast majority of German students can read common German words. However, it takes the vast majority of English-speaking students several years of instruction to get to this same level of proficiency with common English words. The reason is simple: English has many combinations of letters that stand for sounds (i.e., *ei* in *weigh*, *ai* in *wait*, *ow* in *snow* and *pow*, etc.). These combinations are traditionally taught in phonics instruction.

Waldorf teachers who speak English have a lot more to teach than their German peers. The alphabet is only the first step. There is a multitude of additional information to teach before students can read common English words, and it is necessary to look beyond Steiner's indications to find it.

## Spelling

To teach spelling, Steiner emphasizes the importance of speech work and good pronunciation. He is right to do so, but good pronunciation can only go so far in English. It works well enough for phonetic words such as *grip*, but what happens when the word becomes *gripped*? It sounds like it should be spelled *gript*, but it is a past tense version of *grip* and thus has an -ed on the end, plus a doubled P to avoid making the vowel sound long. What happens when a word is mostly silent letters (e.g., *weigh*) or has no connection between the letters and their spoken sounds at all (e.g., *who*)? What happens when students spell homophones such as *knight/night* and *their/there/they're*? English-speaking students need to develop their visual memories for letters (i.e., symbol imagery) just as much as they need to develop their auditory memories, and they need to consider the meaning of the word.

Focusing on the importance of speech is true, but it is only a fraction of what English-speaking students need to be able to spell. Furthermore, the traditional Waldorf practices to sharpen visual memory (e.g., Eraser Gnome and other visual memory games) are not the most effective way to teach visual memory for letters (i.e., symbol imagery). Waldorf teachers need a different approach, one that teaches students to use all three approaches: auditory, visual, and meaning.

### **Grammar**

When it comes to teaching grammar, Steiner recommends that teachers help students make conscious what the students are doing unconsciously. He also recommends that teachers preserve the plasticity in the language and make sure the students do not use fixed word order. This advice does not make sense, unless you realize how German and English grammar differ.

German is an inflected language, but English is not. This means that German words (or their articles) change form depending on how they are used in a sentence. For example, the sentence *The dog bit the man* could be *Der Hund biss den Mann*, while the sentence *The man bit the dog* could be *Der Mann biss den Hund*. Note that the German articles change depending on whether the noun is the subject or the direct object (i.e., *der/dis* while the English article *the* always remains the same, no matter how the noun is used). That means that German speakers can change the word order in their sentences because the articles indicate which word is the subject and which the object.

Fixed word order is anathema in German, but it is mandatory in English—it is how English shows grammatical relationships (e.g., *The dog bit the man. The man bit the dog.*). Word order is the only way to determine who bit whom.

It is quite easy to make students conscious of grammar when you teach an inflected language. It is another matter entirely when the inflection is gone. A Waldorf approach for English is needed, one that emphasizes fixed word order and examines words in context because that is often the only way to determine which part of speech they have.

### **Conclusion**

It is critical for Waldorf students to master language arts skills such as reading, spelling, and grammar, but Steiner's indications are often inadequate for preparing their teachers for the job. The indications either do not provide all the information English-speaking teachers need (e.g., not giving any indications for what to teach after the alphabet or how to develop symbol imagery for spelling), or they only apply to German (e.g., avoid teaching fixed word order and strive to maintain the plasticity of the language).

Fortunately, there is a solution: *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1–3* by Janet Langley and Jennifer Miltzer-Kopperl. At 606 pages, this book tackles the differences between English and German. It shows teachers when—and how—

to go beyond Steiner's indications to handle the complexities of English is a way that is true to the spirit of Waldorf education. It covers reading, spelling, and grammar, as well as 12 other aspects of language arts. It discusses how to teach, plan lessons, assess, and remediate. English is not German. It is time to evaluate language arts instruction in that light. *The Roadmap to Literacy* can help.