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English in town - Background Information

Finding inscriptions and English language fragments - considering the task with the child's perspective in mind

Teachers know only too well that English, at one time very definitely a foreign language, has become a common element in everyday culture (cf. Hans Hunfeld's catch-phrase "Normalität des Fremden"). This means that children might overlook English written language in their environment, or reply that a certain expression is not English but German, e.g. e-mail). When teaching material was prepared in Hamburg, Ottfried Börner from the education authority became aware of this phenomenon. For the teacher this was a meaningful task but the children found it rather odd.

This is the first reason why a strategy needs to be employed to raise their awareness, possibly in a way that appeals to their inquisitive and imaginative minds. Secondly, children will not associate the places they are to search for traces of English with linguistics but with solid reality: they go to McDonald's for the food, not for the American words, they visit the animals in the Hanover Zoo and do not consciously register the sign "Beware of crocodiles" put up by the zoo management to create an authentic atmosphere. Children's perspective is very different from that of professional language teachers.

The skills and abilities needed by a child in order to perform the task:

- motivation
- visual competence
- awareness for written language

If we assume that the learners are motivated because they enjoy experiential learning outside the classroom and because they are given a kind of detective task, we still need to consider the visual competence and language awareness aspect. The child has developed his sense of perception and has formed classifications and interpretations of human beings, objects, images and places. Interactive role-plays from the age of four onwards have helped the child to develop the ability to decontextualise and separate word and object, a prerequisite for language awareness. From the age of seven onwards a child is able to reflect on his thinking and problem-solving (cf. Helga Andresen: "Spiel, Interaktion und Dekontextualisierung von Sprache vor Schulbeginn." In: Der Deutschunterricht LIV (2002), H. 3, 39946).

When children learned to read and write, they gained a new key to the world. Through various exercises, the teacher has presented different types of letters (handwriting, texts in books, changing shapes of texts with simple computer programmes). Usually, during the primary years,

there is a project on different languages and writing systems of the world, where the children imitate Native American sign language or copy some Chinese letters etc., and learn traffic signs. Teachers know that the children will show a heightened interest in other languages, secret languages, and are curious to find out the origin of certain words. We hope the project presented in this suggestion will create such fruitful moments as well.

The children are sent outside to identify and draw English language shop signs or slogans of advertisements on billboards. The subskills trained in this task are similar to skills trained in aesthetic education:

- they look carefully and perceive things more intensively
- they focus on written information whereas usually their attention is absorbed by pictorial impressions
- they differentiate foreground and background (the shop signs against the background of the wall, for example)
- they look at language as if it were a picture (Sprache als Bild)
- they find language by moving through space (the city, a room in their home)
- what happens can be termed “halb Seh-Erlebnis, halb Denken” (Ludwig Wittgenstein) – an aesthetic experience as well as language awareness.