Foreign Language Learning in Elementary Immersion Programs

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Pädagogische Hochschule Weingarten

- fundamental change of educational policy in German preschools since the early 1990s (e.g. Fhtenakis, 2003).

- stronger focus on *education* („Bildung")

- definition of content areas in new curricula

- special undergraduate and graduate programs for preschool teachers („Studiengang Elementarbildung")

- preschools as the ideal place for a playful introduction to foreign languages

- a strong increase of preschool language-programs

> language courses with one hour per week and bilingual preschools with daily contact to the L2 (cf. http://www.fmks-online.de/adressen.html)

- European Policy: European Commission Action Plan 2004-2006

  „Early foreign language learning gives pupils a head start with languages, may lead to greater proficiency and accuracy in speaking, reading, writing and understanding and develops meta-linguistic skills which are the foundations for easier language learning in later life. Children also benefit from non-language-specific courses that make them aware of the variety of sounds and structures of other languages, and similarities with their own tongue."

  (http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/pdf/doc308_en.pdf p.8)

- European citizens should know at least two foreign languages!

> learning a L2 at a very early age seems to be easier, requires less (conscious) effort,

> L2 pronunciation tends to be more target like („the earlier the better"),

> early L2 learning is likely to lead to more cognitive flexibility,

> positive attitudes towards other languages and other cultures,

> more time to learn languages.

Bilingual Preschools

▊ Program differences (L2, amount of L2-input, group organization)

▊ **Principles:**

> *One Person-One Language* Principle (Döpke 1992): One preschool teachers uses only the L2, the other one only the L1.

> The L2 is used as the means of communication in the daily preschools routines and activities.

Early Language Learning: Rationales

■ **Preschool children**

➢ **learn a L2 like they learn their L1: by observing and listening and while *doing* things in/with the L2,**

➢ **learn the L2 implicitly, as a „by-product",**

➢ **are not able to consciously organize the learning process (the brain *constructs* the language),**

➢ **love to sing along, to play with language, to imitate**

• **The L2 grammar „emerges" ! (Subconscious process)**

Early Immersion: Teaching Principles

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Comprehensible Input

■ The Teacher needs to *contextualize* the L2

> non-verbally via gestures, facial expressions, body language, pantomime,

> verbally via „reference language": deictic terms, „ear catchers" like „Oh, look at this!", stress and intonation

> with media: realia, pictures, films

The relation between the language and the situation has to be clearly VISIBLE at all times!

Method: "silent movie-technique"

(e.g. Snow 1990, Weber & Tardif [2]1990, Burmeister 2006a,b,c, forthcoming, Burmeister & Steinlen 2008)
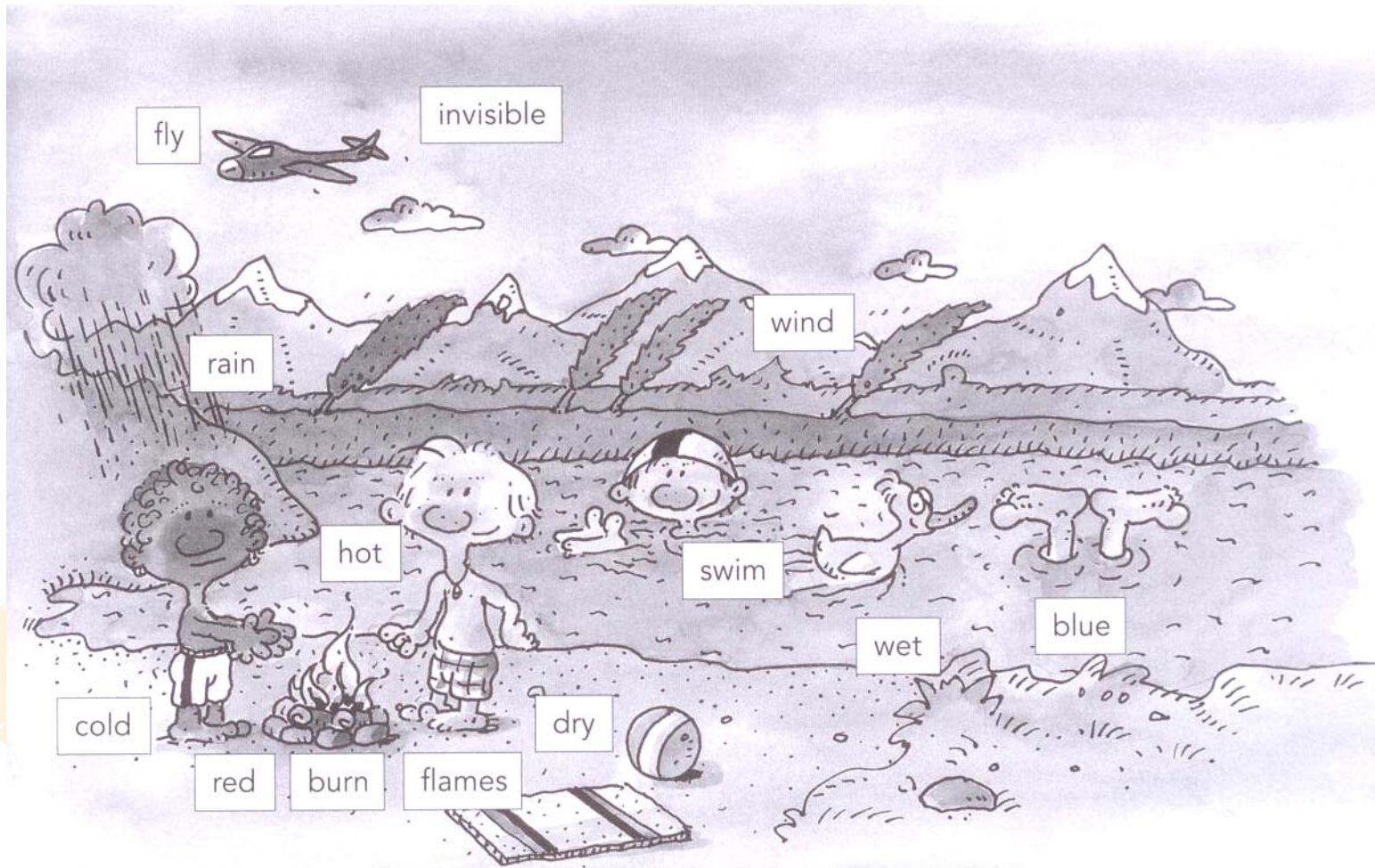
Illustrations have to be clear!

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from: Burmeister, P. (2007). Gibt es schwierige Wörter? *Take Off*, 3/2007, S. 44.

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from: Littlejohn, A. & Hammesfahr-Schofield, H. (2005). *First Choice, Natural Forces, Activity Book.* Zürich: Lehrmittelverlag des Kantons Zürich, S. 3 (illustration in black & white)
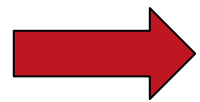
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Language becomes more meaningful in activities which enable children to

➡️ explore the content

➡️ grasp the concepts

➡️ apply their knowledge and skills

🔴 Provision of *Learning Centers* with interesting experiments etc.

🔴 The children can demonstrate that they have understood the concept (also non-verbally)!

Comprehensible Output: Negotiation of Meaning

The teacher should provide the children with ample opportunity

> to interact verbally (L1 and L2)

> to express themselves (verbally and non-verbally)

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Language Scaffolds

The teacher needs to provide scaffolds to support the children's learning:

■ Organizational scaffolds, e.g.:

> daily routines (weather, tidy-up-time, morning circle)

> bells, pictures, symbols as signals

■ Language scaffolds

> formulaic expressions

> songs, rhymes as signals

A ‚Best Practice' Example

Early Immersion Teaching Principles

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The L2-native speaker teacher:

- uses the L2 only,

- talks *constantly* (language and actions belong together),

- does not „simplify" the L2, but provides lexically and structurally rich input,

- speaks more slowly at times to emphasize an utterance,

- does not translate the L2 into the L1,

- but translates the child's L1 utterance into the L2

- *models*, *expands*, *paraphrases* the children's L2 utterances (Tardif 1994),

- *recasts*, that is, she takes up the child's utterance and provides a correct model),

- encourages the children to sing along, to use the L2 but she never „forces" them.

The children

- are able to understand what is going on provided the input is comprehensible (contextualized),

- are able to identify single words or phrases in the respective context,

- are used to not understand every single word,

- answer in their L1 during the first year,

- sing along in the L2 very soon,

- need some time before they creatively produce language,

- ‚*code-mix*' (Gib' mir mal die *milk*.), make errors and do not bother with corrections.

Most of the mistakes are examples of systematic learner errors (e.g. *he *wented*) and show that the children are on the right track.

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The Development of the L2-English in German Preschools   18

■ **The children:**

- „understand" what is going on already after a few days,

- use first words / short phrases after approx. three months (apart from songs and rhymes),

- at the end of the year, they might produce first „own" sentences ,

● **Inter- and intraindividual Variation is high due to different activity-preferences and varying L2 contact-time.**

● **So far, no differences between girls and boys with regard to language development have been observed.**

● **The comprehension of words and of grammatical elements lexicon grow significantly (comprehension preceeds production).**

■ **The parents**

> are enthusiastic about Immersion and believe in the program,

> take interest in what the child tells them about the program,

> take part in preschool activities,

> read to their children in the L1 on a regular basis,

> (verbally) interact with their children,

> encourage their child to use the L2, but do not make him/her produce the L2 for friends etc.,

> work together with the preschool teachers.

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Thank you very much for your attention!

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