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# DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

## **“Alternative Education and ELT: The SchülerInnen Schule”**

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

**Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)**

Wien, 2009

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 190 344 347

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:

Anglistik

Betreuerin:

Univ.- Prof. Dr. Christiane Dalton-Puffer

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# **1. Introduction**

I decided to write my diploma thesis about alternative education and ELT – i.e. English Language Teaching - for various reasons. First of all, since my early childhood I have wanted to become a teacher. That I would become a language teacher was clear after prolonged sojourns in Great Britain and France. Second, the memories I have of my own school days in a traditional school are not really pleasant. Even though I was a good pupil, I did not really enjoy going to school, feeling put under too much pressure and bored all at the same time. Third, from my experience as a language learning tutor I know that there exist many intelligent and interested pupils who fail in school, simply because the rigid traditional school system is not able to provide for a learning environment appropriate for their individual needs. Hence, my interest in progressive education and my wish to incorporate aspects of alternative learning methods in my own teaching. A fourth reason which made me dedicate my diploma thesis to the research of forms of progressive education is my disappointment about how negligently this topic is treated at the departments I studied at. That traditional teaching methods are obsolete and that there exists an urgent need for a rethinking of education in general is a certainty which cannot be denied. Facts such as the ever-increasing number of pupils in need of costly tutoring lessons, the low number of university graduates in Austria, or the unpleasant results of the PISA – i.e. Programme for International Student Assessment carried out by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development - study 2005 leave no doubt about the Austrian school system being in need of radical changes. Despite the problematic condition of the Austrian school system, none of the three departments I conducted my studies at found it necessary to inform their students and prospective teachers about alternatives to the existing traditional teaching methods. Thus, I used the writing of my diploma thesis for the investigation of this missing aspect of my educational training.

This diploma thesis is dedicated to the investigation of renowned trends in alternative education and to the analysis of one applied approach to progressive

education in particular, namely the teaching methods of the Viennese alternative school *SchülerInnen Schule*. Moreover, it is concerned with the examination of similarities between the above mentioned form of progressive education and latest trends in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) didactics which, similarly to reformist educational theories, feature progressive educational aspects, such as child-centredness, autonomy and authenticity of learning situations. The first part of this paper provides a summary of those aspects of the traditional school which are the most criticised by educational reformists (chapter two). Additionally, it includes a depiction of those progressive educational theories which influenced the *SchülerInnen Schule* (chapter three), and gives insight into the methodology of the school by enumerating those aspects which the school has taken over from the educational reformists treated in the preceding chapter (chapter four). The second part is dedicated to the scrutiny of three different approaches to language teaching. The first approach, Open Learning, is the preferred teaching method of the English teacher at the *SchülerInnen Schule* (chapter five). The two other approaches, Learner Autonomy and Task-based Learning, are the most progressive educational trends in SLA didactics (chapters six and seven). Finally, the aim of the third part of this thesis is to analyse in how far the three before mentioned approaches to language teaching are mirrored in the English lessons at the *SchülerInnen Schule* (chapter eight).

## **2. Progressive versus traditional education**

Before I proceed to illustrate what many educational reformists, scholars and scientists animadvert the traditional school system for, I need to define what is meant by progressive education.

### **2.1. Defining progressive education**

Blankertz (1982), Blättner (1973) and Brunner and Zeltner (1980) see the roots of progressive education in cultural criticism. Blättner argues that the generations between 1770 and 1830 had to rethink the meaning and purpose of education, because the moral guidance of the church was not sufficient any more for the industrialising society (cf. Blättner 1973: 263). In unison with Blättner Blankertz claims the following about the German-speaking society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Von sehr unterschiedlichen Positionen aus und auf ebenso unterschiedlichem Niveau ausgeführt, kamen immer mehr Kritiker zu dem Ergebnis, daß das gegenwärtige und zukünftige Leben der Vergangenheit geopfert werde, die Originalität und Kreativität des Menschen den Konventionen, die inneren Werte den äußeren, die geistigen den ökonomischen.  
(Blankertz 1982: 213)

Brunner and Zeltner see the development of progressive educational concepts as a counter movement to growing industrialisation, bureaucracy, intellectualism and rationalism, as well as as to authoritarian structures in schools and families which made the evolvment of creativity, autonomy or spontaneity in children impossible (cf. Brunner and Zeltner 1980: 180). According to Blättner many of the educational reformists of that time regarded the institutions in power – i.e. the church, the state, the sciences, and the economy – as torturers of mankind in form of the child. They criticised the traditional educational system for its dogmatism, as well as for the fact that it did not provide for a context in which children could develop freely and autonomously. The reformists' theories about

how to achieve a change in educational matters varied greatly. They were united, though, by the goal they wanted to achieve. What they called for was a pedagogy which emanated from the child, a pedagogy which catered for an environment in which “das Kind aus sich selbst lebe, sich aus sich selbst vollende” (Blättner 1982: 281).

There are a number of similarities in the educational ideologies of the reformists I came across doing the literature research for my paper (see chapter three of this paper). In mostly all of the progressive educational concepts I analysed the key terms are freedom, autonomy, self-guided learning, absence of a marking system, democratic lifestyle and self-determination (cf. Freinet, Glocksee school, Holt, Montessori, Neill, Piaget, Sudbury Valley school, Wild). Thus, the above mentioned are important terms by means of which a progressive educational concept may be defined. What these terms imply will be the topic of the following chapter.

## **2.2. Critique on traditional schools**

As different as their pedagogical ideologies may sometimes be, all of the educational reformists I had the joy to work on in the course of my research share the same opinion when it comes to the purpose and aim of education. They share the conviction that the aim of education is not to teach children as much facts as possible in as little time as possible, but to enable them to develop freely in an environment void of pressure as well as fear of failure. They see the goal of schools in helping children to develop into adults who are able to take over full responsibility for their lives and lead a self-conducted, fulfilled and happy life. In contrast to most adherents to the traditional educational system the pedagogical reformists I encountered during my studies do not measure the success or failure of a pedagogical concept in the amount of knowledge a pupil has acquired when they leave school, but they concentrate on the child's – and the later adult's – ability to live a happy existence in which they are able to act out their individual potential (cf. Oswald and Schulz-Benesch 1967: 42; Patzke: 37; Wild 1992: 34; Vester 1988: 73).



A second aspect which educational reformists criticise traditional schools for is that they are based on obedience and authoritarian structures. Instead of enabling learners to get in contact with and act out democracy, traditional schools demand from pupils to obey to rules which they have no possibility to codetermine. Additionally, whereas progressive educational concepts aim at arousing self-responsibility, individuality and the ability to learn autonomously in pupils, traditional schools regard conformance and obedience to the existing system as more important. They await from students to give up all control over the pace, the rhythm and the content of their studying as soon as they begin their school career. Thus, instead of catering for an environment which allows the students to follow own interests and to develop autonomy, as well as self-confidence in their learning techniques, regular school settings tend to annihilate all motivation for independent studying and make the development of creativity and self-determination impossible. In this context, many educational reformists criticise the fact that in school the accumulation of knowledge based on bad textbooks is still preferred over the development of initiative and ingenuity (cf. Oswald and Schulz-Benesch 1967: 27-34; Piaget 1972: 102-03; Wild 1992: 29-30).

A third problem of the traditional school system is that it is based on pressure and hierarchy. In the traditional system which is based on grades, there exists success or failure and not much in between. The problem with this system is that 'success' and 'failure' are terms which are based on an adult logic, and which are forced upon learners. Young children serve as a good example of how learning naturally happens before pupils learn to divide their actions in successful and failed activities. Young children who have not been intrigued yet by the adults' logic of gratification of success and punishment of failure are still able to engage in activities demanding a high level of concentration for the sheer pleasure of it. On this topic John Holt (2004), an American teacher and educational reformist, states that children who tackle something do not think in terms of success and failure, but regard new experiences as adventures for which they are willing to take pains. Only when they realise how important it is to please adults, they begin to understand the difference between success and failure. Moreover, Holt argues that it is impossible to convey to pupils the

pleasure of succeeding without at the same time teaching them the fear of failing and, thus, subjecting them to the constant pressure which the belief of not being allowed to fail brings about (cf. Holt 2004: 63-64). In harmony with Jean Piaget (1972), a Swiss developmental psychologist, emphasises that the system of scores, and the pressure it puts on pupils, can be harmful to their development. As he puts it:

[D]urch dieses System können die begabtesten und für die Gesellschaft wertvollsten Individuen Monate oder gar Jahre in genau dem Alter verlieren, in dem sich in ihnen die für ihre künftige Laufbahn bestimmenden neuen Ideen bilden.  
(Piaget 1972: 103)

A fourth problematic aspect of the traditional school system is that it is based on the belief that pupils would not learn anything, if they were not forced to do so by putting them under pressure with the help of a marking system. The observation of small children's handling of failure, and of learning in general, contradicts the prevalent belief that pupils can only learn under pressure, or that they would refuse to learn otherwise. According to Holt the conviction that children would not learn without the concepts of rewards and punishment is dangerous, because it normally develops into a self-fulfilling prophecy. When adults treat children long enough as if they were unwilling to learn, eventually the children will start to behave accordingly (cf. Holt 2004: 102). In Holt's viewpoint not only the idea that children would not learn anything without being forced to is dangerous, but also the belief that teachers could actually teach their pupils. Holt argues that teaching does not equal learning. Teachers may teach, but they cannot really influence whether their students learn something or not. Eventually, it lies in the pupil's responsibility to learn. In the course of his own teaching career Holt made the painful experience that teachers are not able to teach anybody anything. All they can do is to provide for an environment free of fear in which pupils are enabled to find out how to learn independently. We are able to give other human beings terms, names and lists, but we cannot convey them our mental structures. These they need to build themselves (cf. Holt 2004: 128). As Holt puts it

[...] für die Intelligenz gilt wie für alle anderen Schulfächer, dass Lehren - "ich weiß etwas, das ihr wissen solltet, und ich bringe es euch jetzt bei" - vor allem Lernen *verhindert*. Wir müssen Menschen nicht intelligent *machen*. Sie sind mit Intelligenz geboren. Wir müssen bloß die Dinge *unterlassen*, die sie dumm machen. (Holt 2004: 141).

Montessori (1967) criticises the traditional school for a fifth facet. According to her the regular school system continuously neglects learners' intrinsic needs. This would provoke various developmental troubles in pupils, such as lack of concentration, lack of orderliness, absent-mindedness, shyness, hurried uncoordinated movements which endanger others, dependence on adults, inability to make decisions, boredom, lack of interest, caprices or lying. Thus, in Montessori's viewpoint many behaviours which adults tend to regard as habitual for children are in reality indices for unfulfilled needs. Penalties and threats are only a way of handling the symptoms. The actual root of the problem is that in traditional schools the learning environment is not appropriate for the pupils' development (cf. Oswald and Schulz-Benesch 1967: 32). In harmony with Montessori Holt is convinced that there is no such thing as intelligent or ignorant pupils. He is convinced that fear and an inappropriate learning environment are the main reasons for learning difficulties. Once Holt had an experience with a young girl who started crying when the teacher told the class the spelling of the word 'once'. The spelling of this word simply contradicted everything the girl so far had learnt about orthography. This incident is a good example of a pupil who has learnt to think in terms of personal success or failure. Instead of accepting that some words of the English language simply have a crazy spelling, she took her not understanding as her personal failure (cf. Holt 2004: 118-19). According to Montessori and Holt pupils in alternative learning environments, which are enabled to follow their individual interests, will not develop learning difficulties or acquire learning avoidance strategies, such as wild guessing, reading the answer from the teacher's body language, or tricking the teacher into providing the correct answer themselves. According to Holt pupils who teach themselves reading (as many do) do not break into tears each time they come on a word which sounds different than their orthography makes them believe. Children who teach themselves something which they are really interested in do not get

excited each time they come across something unusual and strange. Only when adults try to control their learning and enforce their understanding, they begin to worry when they make a mistake, because they know that this mistake sooner or later will cause their having troubles with these adults (cf. Holt 2004: 119).

What is more, Frederic Vester (1988), a German biochemist, is convinced that no real learning takes place in traditional learning environments based on fear of failure. He states that real learning – i.e. learning which involves the cortex and not only the reptilian brain which is activated when the organism senses danger and which stores knowledge only shortly - can only take place in an enjoyable learning environment. This is so because the storage and retrieval of knowledge are facilitated by positive hormonal reactions. In addition, the more enjoyable the learning environment is, the more happiness hormones are produced, the greater is the learning motivation, the more channels are involved in the transportation of the information and, thus, the better is the processing of the knowledge (cf. Vester 1988: 51-56). Joseph Chilton Pearce (2006), an American scholar, teacher and scientist who stands in close contact to international neuroscientists and biologists, translating their newest findings from technical terminology into comprehensible language, approves Vester's findings. Pearce distinguishes two kinds of learning, namely true learning and conditioning. True learning – i.e. learning which enables learners to actively as well as creatively implement acquired knowledge – can only take place in a positive affective environment free of fear in which pupils find enough opportunities to engage in self-induced activities. Nevertheless, the form of learning our traditional educational system is based on is conditioning (for a more detailed discussion of this problem see the section on supportive learning environment in chapter three) (cf. Pearce 2006: 26-31). Pearce and Vester agree on the fact that no real learning takes place at traditional schools. And according to Vester the consequences of this fact are wide and tragic. Vester is convinced that the reason for the increased national debt of most of the world's countries and the ever growing environmental pollution lies in the governments' and the industrial managers' lack of the ability of networked thinking. In Vester's opinion people tend to think in linear functional chains and are used to regard the areas of finance, technology, ecology and sociology, for example, as rigid,

isolated, deterministic systems. The world, however, is a complex of networked, living, dynamic systems which interact following certain regularities and in which a change in one aspect of an area influences all other parts of the systems. Nature created only systems which are capable of self-regulation, which function without producing surplus or waste material. Humanity, in contrast, created systems - for example factories, cities, forests, lakes and administrative institutions - without embedding them in the natural processes, without caring for self-regulation or caring for the complexities of the interaction of one system with another (cf. Vester 1988: 8-17). Vester sees the reason for the late discovery of the importance of these interactional regularities in the way our schools and universities present the world:

Als eine heterogene Menge getrennter Komponenten, die wir zwar alle einzeln kennen, bis zum Exzeß studieren, ohne jedoch die Beziehungen und das Wechselspiel zwischen ihnen zu erfassen. Ein System, dessen Verhaltensmuster wir somit weitgehend ignorieren, weil es die Fachdisziplinen und Ressortkompetenzen überschreitet, und das deshalb in unseren Hörsälen und Forschungsstätten keinen Platz findet. Damit findet aber auch dort die Realität, wie sie ist, im Grunde keinen Platz.

(Vester 1988: 13)

The reason why most persons do not possess the ability of networked thinking lies, according to Vester, in the forms of learning featured by the traditional school system. All creatures naturally use a great deal of their time and energy for the exchange of information with their environment. One of the most important operations in the course of the processing of the information is learning, the aim of which is to assure that the creature interprets the information in such a way as to best adapt its behaviour to the environment. With the development of the traditional school system, which has its roots in the monasteries of the Middle Ages where the main function of education was to ascertain the continuity of doctrinaire Christian beliefs, learning increasingly became a singularly mental activity, disconnected from any real physical experience of and interaction with the environment. This purely mental form of learning, which over the centuries derived into the simple learning by heart of incoherent facts, is against the human nature, against the human organism. Vester states that the human brain is unable to function in abstraction alone.

When learning does not take place holistically – i.e. incorporating all senses - but as a mental task only, the organism's activity is restricted to the neuronal fields of the cognitive-logic part of the brain, while other parts of the brain wither. The brain, thus, becomes the store of theoretical formulas lacking the link to the concrete world. According to these formulas we, then, act, create our environment and manipulate the complex systems of our world without really understanding them. In addition, Vester argues that since learning is one of the most elementary interplays which take place between a person and its environment, it is evident that the relation between a human being and its environment will be defective when the learning happened apart from the concrete environment (cf. Vester 1988: 44-60).

### **2.3. Deschooling of society**

A range of further major problems of the traditional school system are criticised by Ivan Illich (1972), an Austrian-American philosopher and priest. In his opinion the traditional school system is highly uneconomical, unfair and inefficient. It is improvident to finance a system where teachers are meant to embody the functions of wardens, tutors, adjudicators and managers of the curriculum. The amalgamation of these functions in one makes the school a costly institution. The cost of comprehensive education already exceeds the budget of most rich nations and developing countries have no chance of financing an educational system as we know it (cf. Illich 1972: 20-29). Furthermore, Illich (1995) declares the believe that schools would provide their pupils with equality of chances a myth. In his opinion schools are institutions based on a hierarchical principal dedicated to sort out good from bad pupils. And their actual function is to help ensuring the adherence to an existing hierarchical societal system. However, instead of providing for equality of chances, the educational system only monopolised their assignation. Therefore, Illich demands that individuals ought to be protected against discrimination on the basis of their school education. He strongly disapproves of the fact that on the employment market the amount of time one spent in educational institutions gets increasingly important, and more important than the actual skills one acquired. (cf. Illich 1995: 29-31). Thus, Illich

argues that as long as knowledge and its transmission remain in the responsibility of an institution, it can only be considered a commodity which is not equally easily accessible by all members of society. In order to overcome the gap between learning and real life, everyone would have to regain their responsibility for their individual learning (cf. Illich 1995: 176). Moreover, in Illich's opinion the traditional school system is inefficient in that it steals its pupils' autonomy instead of fostering it. According to him all over the world schools have an effect on society which is hostile to education, because they have the exclusive right to education. They are acknowledged as institutions which are specialised in learning and, thereby, discourage people from taking over responsibility for their education. Since school education is regarded as indispensable basis of knowledge and art of living, politics, leisure time, as well as professional and private life depend on schools, instead of themselves becoming tools of education. Additionally, in Illich's opinion it is a myth that learning is the result of teaching as it takes place in schools. Most people acquire most of their knowledge outside of school. The assumption that learning could only happen in school is due to the fact that in rich countries people tend to spend increasingly long periods of their lives in schools (cf. Illich 1995: 25-31).

Illich (1995) proposes that a possible alternative to the conventional educational system could be a network or service which would allow for the exchange of concerns, knowledge and skills. One could establish networks which record telephone numbers and topics of interest of individuals in order to facilitate their getting into contact with each other. In his idea education would, then, no more be dependent on educational institutions, but everyone possessing special knowledge or skills could teach them to interested persons in exchange for their knowledge and abilities (cf. Illich 1995: 37-40). In order to realise Illich's idea of self-induced, self-responsible learning independent of schools one would have to change the existing system in four major aspects. First of all, not only members of schools, universities or other educational facilities ought to be given access to matters of education. The access to these needs to be accorded to every member of society regardless of whether or not they own school certificates or diplomas. Teaching material, libraries, laboratories, museums, but

also factories and companies need to be made available to all members of society as space where education can take place in a natural way, as opposed to the artificial learning situations in schools which are withdrawn from real life context (cf. Illich 1995: 113-122). Secondly, a kind of exchange market of skills which would enable people who want to acquire a skill to get in contact with people able to teach them would have to be established. Since there would be no need for graduated pedagogues in an educational system free of coercion, any skilful person could teach another person. In the system Illich proposes there would be no need for graduated specialists of education. Illich sees the sole reason why skilled people need to possess a diploma certifying them as pedagogues in the fact that they have to teach individuals who are forced to learn things which they have no real interest in. As he puts it:

[D]as Verlangen, das geschickte Menschen, ehe sie ihre Fertigkeiten vorführen dürfen als Pädagogen diplomiert sein müssen, rührt daher, daß Menschen entweder lernen sollen, was sie garnicht wissen wollen, oder daß alle Menschen [...] zu einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt ihres Lebens und möglichst unter festgelegten Begleitumständen gewisse Dinge lernen müssen.  
(Illich 1995: 124).

More radical even would be the creation of a bank for the exchange of skills. Every person would get the same credit with which to acquire skills. By teaching others, no matter if in special centres or at the playground, one could gain more credit (cf. Illich 1995: 124-27). Thirdly, according to Illich's theory ideal would be an educational system which allows for the interaction and co-operation of persons with the same interests as opposed to the traditional system where children of the same age are put in the same room and forced to engage in subjects which they are told to be interested in. In order to establish a service for the placement of partners for projects it would suffice to create a database in which a person searching for a partner would enter their names, addresses and interest. The computer would give them the names of all persons who are currently interested in the same topic (cf. Illich 1995: 128-134). And last, in Illich's educational system pedagogues would not disappear, but their role and responsibilities would change. They would become mentors giving advice and helping people to find the fastest way to achieve their goal. For example, when a person wants to learn Chinese from their neighbour, the pedagogue would



evaluate their knowledge and help them find the appropriate textbook. The pedagogue's frustrating duties, such as the surveillance of classes, the preparation of lessons and the need to grade their pupils would cease to exist and the teacher could concentrate on helping persons fixate a new learning target, discuss difficulties, or give advice on which learning method was appropriate (cf. Illich 1995: 134-143).

### **3. History of progressive education**

The following chapter does by no means try to be a complete depiction of the history of alternative education worldwide. However, it contains an illustration of the pedagogical beliefs of those educational reformists which influenced the pedagogical history of the *SchülerInnen Schule* and those alternative schools which served the *SchülerInnen Schule* as model schools. It needs to be noted though that the ideas of the educational reformists enumerated below were not taken over one-to-one by the alternative school. In an interview the headmaster of the *SchülerInnen Schule* stressed the fact that the school has always tried to develop its own concept of working with pupils. Thus, the method of the teachers of the *SchülerInnen Schule* has always been to select the best of those reformist pedagogical concepts which corresponded with their own ideology and practical experience. The educational reformists and schools important for the pedagogical concept of the *SchülerInnen Schule* are Alexander Sutherland Neill and his 'Summerhill School', Célestin Freinet, the 'Glocksee-Schule', Maria Montessori as well as Rebeca und Mauricio Wild and their 'Pestalozzi School'. An outline of the educational concepts of these reformists will be provided on the subsequent pages.

#### **3.1. Alexander Sutherland Neill and his Summerhill school**

Alexander Sutherland Neill can be regarded as belonging to the anti-authoritarian educational flow. He was born in Scotland in 1883. After his graduation from University as Master of Arts, as well as Master of Education, Neill worked as teacher on numerous state schools and, later, alternative schools. During various sojourns in Austria and Germany he dealt with psycho-analytic questions - i.e. Freud and Reich. In 1921 he founded the Summerhill school in Lyme Regis. Later the school was relocated to Leiston in Suffolk. Alexander Sutherland Neill died in Summerhill in 1973. One of Neill's principal beliefs was that children are born as fundamentally candid human beings and that adults need to give them the freedom to evolve their full potential. He saw

the ultimate goal of life not only in knowledge, but also in bliss. Therefore, his demand on education was to create a school in which the pupils were free to find their very individual realisation of bliss (cf. Potthoff: 103-09). The key concepts of Neill's pedagogical ideology will be depicted in greater detail in the following sections.

### **3.1.1. Bliss**

Neill's (1969) definition of bliss is to enable human beings to evolve to fully fledged personalities in a context of maximum individual freedom and equal rights for everybody. For Neill to give a child freedom and bliss means to let them live their own lives. He sees the reason for humanity's misfortune in outer constraints of any kind. Love and appreciation, however, would foster the child's bliss (cf. Potthoff: 104-05). For Neill being successful means knowing how to lead a blissful, happy life. And he is convinced that it is the duty of the schools to enable pupils to find interest and satisfaction in whatever profession pupils choose for their careers, no matter if they become doctors or truck drivers (cf. Neill 1969: 45-47). As Neill puts it: "Nach meiner Überzeugung besteht das Ziel des Lebens darin, glücklich zu werden, das heißt Interesse zu finden. Erziehung muss eine Vorbereitung aufs Leben sein" (Neill 1969: 41).

### **3.1.2. Freedom**

According to Neill freedom is humanity's most valuable property. Neill arguments that freedom is necessary for a child, because only in freedom they can develop well, namely naturally. What a learning environment full of pressure and constraints can do to a child's development, Neill experiences every time new students from traditional schools attend his school. He describes them as devious personalities of dishonest politeness and dissembling manners. Habitually, it takes them six months until they lose their falseness. After these six months they also lose their compliance to what they regard as authority and begin to behave naturally (cf. Neill 1969: 119-20). Based on his own

experiences with pupils Neill is convinced that children should be allowed to live their lives in harmony with their inner urges, without being hindered by outer authorities. Otherwise they do not have any chance to evolve their true potential and become truly happy and successful adults. The often very radical educational reformist movement of the sixties interpreted Neill's theories rather too partial, mistaking Neill's definition of freedom for anarchy. Neill, however, clearly differentiated between freedom and outrageousness (cf. Potthoff: 103-09). In Neill's terms allowing children the freedom they need to develop is not to be equalled with ceding them all the rights, but rather do pupils, parents and educators share the same rights. In a community based on equality the child's right naturally ends where it impairs the freedom of the others and by experiencing this fact children automatically develop self-discipline (cf. Neill 1969: 113-25).

### **3.1.3. Discipline**

Neill depreciates discipline which is based on the fear of punishment and favours discipline which naturally arouses in people when they co-operate to reach a common goal. This distinction between a discipline which is demanded by an authority and a self-intended discipline can be found with many educational reformists, such as Freinet, Montessori, or Wild, for example. As already mentioned above Neill's conviction is that in a community based on equality there is no need for authority of any kind. To the contrary, Neill emphasizes that authoritarian behaviour is harmful for any community, be it a school or a state, because obedience should never be a matter of fear, but rather a matter of respect and appreciation of the other's rights (cf. Neill 1969: 157-63).

### **3.1.4. The lessons**

There exists a schedule of lessons in Summerhill, but only for the teachers. Every morning the teachers give lessons according to their specialist areas. The

chemistry teacher, for example, teaches class A on Monday and class B on Tuesday and so forth. The geography teacher teaches according to a similar plan. The pupils, however, are free to attend the lessons or to stay away from them. There are no punishments for not attending any lessons. It is the pupil's own decision whether they wish to spend months in a row playing, painting or not doing anything at all. Especially pupils who come to Summerhill from very strict and conservative schools sometimes need months before they begin to engage in any form of genuine studying or working. The way this educational system functions serves as a valuable example of the interplay of freedom and discipline in Summerhill. What I mean is the following. The pupils are free to refrain from the lessons. Nevertheless, if a student attends the English lesson on Monday and, then, does not attend any English lesson until Friday the following week, it is very probable that the other pupils of the English class accuse them of hindering the forthcoming of the group and, thus, banish them from the class (cf. Neill 1969: 30-33).

### **3.1.5. Democratic self-determination**

Neill argues that true freedom exists only where the pupils are allowed to regulate and decide over their community life themselves. In Summerhill all issues concerning the whole school are discussed and resolved upon by a weekly school assembly. In these assemblies all school members, teachers and pupils alike, have one vote each. In Summerhill teachers were continuously outvoted, which Neill always interpreted as the proof that the democratic self-regulation system was a success. The school assembly terminates the school laws and avenges violations of the rules. All forms of punishments are decided over by the school assembly, with fines being the most often imposed penalty. Every week another pupil presides over the assembly and appoints the president of the following week. However, even in Summerhill self-determination has its limits as the school's headmaster hires new teachers and deals with the school's financial and alimentary affairs (cf. Potthoff: 106-07).

### **3.1.6. Free play**

In Neill's opinion learning is important. Nevertheless, the wild and free play children naturally engage in is of even greater importance:

Ich habe nichts gegen das Lernen, aber Spielen ist nach meiner Ansicht wichtiger. Die Schularbeit sollte auch nicht, damit sie den Kinder schmeckt, bewußt mit Spiel gewürzt werden.  
(Neill 1969: 43)

Neill argues that playing - i.e. the imaginative, wild play following no rules which is children's natural form of playing – is children's, and sometimes even adolescents', most important instrument for developing into self-confident, autonomous and happy individuals. During his lifetime he criticised that adults stole their offspring's childhood by regarding them as small adults and wanting to form them according to their convictions. In his school Neill experienced that free children spent most of their time playing. However, if a pupil decided to pass the state exam in order to be admitted to University, they easily managed to learn all the subject matters for which a drilled pupil needed eight years within the time span of a bit more than two years (cf. Neill 1969: 76-79).

### **3.2. Célestin Freinet**

Célestin Freinet, who is known as passionate teacher, educational reformist and political struggler, was born as son of a farmer in a small village in the south of France in 1896. His own school career which Freinet experienced as agony incited him to become a teacher. During the first World War Freinet was severely wounded and released from service. In 1920 he began working as elementary school teacher and publishing texts on pedagogical and political matters, staying in close contact to German and French educational reformists. His major educational aims were, first of all, to create an environment for pupils in which they would be able to fully evolve their personalities. And secondly, he wanted to bring into being a 'school for the people' as a means of reorganising society in a socialistic way in order to free the working classes. In 1924 Freinet

and like-minded colleagues founded the 'Cooperative de l'Enseignement Laïc', an organisation working for the reshaping of the 'old school' – i.e. the traditional school – from within. Because of his political commitment and his new teaching methods Freinet was suspended from office in 1933. One year later Freinet founded his own educational institution in Vence. There he realised his educational ideologies and practised international solidarity admitting Jewish orphans from fascist Germany and Spain to his school. Due to his open criticism of the fascist movements in Europe he was sent to internment camps several times around 1939, was leader of the Résistance in the region of Hautes-Alpes and lurked until 1945 when he could reopen his school in Vence. Célestin Freinet died in 1966 (cf. Dietrich 1995: 13-20; Eichelberger 2003: 14-16 and Potthoff 2003: 128-36). Which ideological principles Freinet's pedagogy features will be the topic of the subsequent paragraphs.

### **3.2.1. Freedom**

Freinet is convinced that pupils know exactly what is best for their learning and their development. Working as a teacher, he discovered very early that there existed as many learner types as pupils and that it was simply impossible to await from a teacher to press the learning needs and stages of a whole class of different learner types into one educational method. According to Freinet awaiting from pupils to passively absorb what the teacher regards best for their development equals steeling their autonomy, their trust in their individual competences, as well as their innate wisdom of how to lead fulfilled lives. In order for real learning to take place pupils have to get active themselves. As Freinet states:

Um sich zu bilden, genügt es nicht, dass das Kind jeden Stoff in sich hineinfrisst, den man ihm mehr oder weniger spannend serviert: es muss handeln, selbst schöpferisch sein.  
(Freinet 1980: 25)

Freinet emphasises that true learning cannot happen solely through the acquisition of abstract knowledge. According to him abstract knowledge is the

consequence of experience, practice and work (cf. Freinet 1980: 21-22). Therefore, in Freinet-classes pupils are free to set the focus of their work themselves. The pupils learn and work individually, in pairs or small groups and are allowed to move freely in the classroom. To facilitate self-initiated work, experimentation and studying the classroom is separated into different areas of activity – i.e. 'ateliers'. The classroom contains, for example, a carpentry and handicrafts corner, an area for group work and discussion, a reading corner, a space for role plays and presentations, a desk with one or more computers, as well as a corner for individual work with the help of prepared study material, file cards and books or various documents. The most important aspect of the Freinet classroom, though, is that the classroom needs to be organised according to the pupils' needs and the arrangement of the ateliers needs to stay flexible. In addition to autonomous, individual work Freinet finds it important that pupils seek the regular contact to the 'real world'. Thus, as many excursions as possible are made in order to cater for a wide range of authentic experiences (cf. Eichelberger 2003: 18-33).

### **3.2.2. Freinet's printing plant**

A central aspect of Freinet-classes is free expression on all levels – i.e. verbal, visual, physical and musical. Freinet found that pupils enjoyed writing down experiences, or ideas about topics of their interest, and continued to do so as long as they were not forced to do so. In their writing the pupils are given full freedom to express their opinion. Since work in the Freinet-pedagogy is oriented towards authentic experience, the writing is always directed at another person. Thus, the texts the pupils produce are gathered for the class's newspaper and printed in the school's own printing plant. Additionally, the minute work the printing requires, the rereading and correction of the proof copy induces the pupils to work exact (cf. Dietrich 1995: 17 and Potthoff 2003: 131-32). Freinet is convinced that children get never tired of expressing their inner self verbally, visually or musically, if only they are given the freedom to do so. Since he wanted to give his pupils the opportunity to express themselves freely and in authentic correspondence with their fellow pupils, he began to use



printing plants as tools of free expression in his school. According to Freinet “[D]ie Druckerei in der Schule hat ein sicheres und dauerhaftes psychologisches und pädagogisches Fundament: den Ausdruck und das Leben der Kinder” (Freinet 1980: 31).

### **3.2.3. Responsibility and democratic self-determination**

The Freinet pupils enjoy the freedom to select their topic of interest individually. However, this means that they have to take over responsibility of their learning progress, too. Working plans, learning diaries and class meetings help them to organise their learning. Additionally, learners are given responsibility over matters concerning the whole class. All matters of community life are discussed in a weekly meeting. Moreover, every pupil bears the responsibility for a certain area of the school routine. There are, for example, a president who leads the weekly meetings, a secretary who notes the decisions, several appointees responsible for the material, several librarians responsible for the working library, several gardeners responsible for the plants, and so forth. These responsibilities are fixed in the weekly meetings and remain until they are changed in a later meeting. None of these responsibilities exists as a service for the teacher, but they are necessary to keep the Freinet-class functioning. Matters of the daily life, such as conflicts and study or excursion proposals, for instance, are discussed during the daily morning gatherings. However, these morning meetings do not only have an organisational character, but are meant to give teachers and pupils the opportunity for personal exchanges (cf. Potthoff 2003: 132).

### **3.2.4. Discipline**

Freinet experienced that pupils who are free to engage in activities which are in accordance with their physical and mental needs are always disciplined. As he observed the pupils of his school were very much able to pursue difficult or exhausting activities without being prompted to do so. According to Freinet real

discipline cannot be taught by means of authoritarian behaviour. Real self-discipline arouses in a child when it is motivated to reach a self-chosen goal. As Freinet puts it: "Das einzige Kriterium unserer Disziplin heißt also nicht: sind die Kinder brav, gehorsam und ruhig, sondern: *arbeiten sie mit Begeisterung und Schwung?*" (Freinet 1980: 47).

### **3.2.5. 'Tastendes Versuchen'**

Freinet claims that at the bottom of all human actions there exists a reflexive behaviour which he calls 'fumbling sampling'. The small child uses this behaviour to react to and interact with their environment. On the basis of this fumbling sampling the child gains experience which slowly but gradually turns into intelligent, intentional behaviour and, then, into practices of the everyday life. Thus, our behaviour stems from the gradual systematisation of successful experiments which, eventually, become part of our natural predisposition, of our character (cf. Freinet 1980: 57). Consequently, according to Freinet all human beings' learning evolves from a natural, subconscious into a conscious, self-determined process. On the basis of this proposition Freinet criticises traditional schools which are consumed by the delusion that they could lead children on a direct way to wisdom and vitality. He animadverts the traditional school's belief in the pupil's inability which he expresses in the following manner: Science has already found the answers to the world's important problems. So, why have the next generation gain their own experiences in an autonomous interaction with the world and allow them to possibly err, when letting a teacher tell them all they have to know is much more economic? For Freinet the behaviour of the traditional school is comparable to forbidding a child to learn to walk, based on the belief that knowing how to drive a car was sufficient for the child's well-being. Such a child would be able to handle a car, but in the long run they would be helpless when confronted with the unlimited range of obstacles life has in store for them (cf. Freinet 1980: 54-78). In consequence, Freinet defines really living as the state of being able to autonomously gain one's individual experiences. It is in harmony with this principle that he thinks all schools should be organised, simply because passively absorbing other peoples' experiences –

i.e. the experiences of teachers', or experiences of famous names found in the educational canon – does not lead either to learning, nor to preparation for a self-determined life. As a result, in Freinet's opinion all educational institutions should enable their pupils to gain their very individual experiences on the basis of their inner needs, instead of filling them with knowledge which, in most cases, is neither interesting nor important for their development (cf. Freinet 1980: 54-78 and Potthoff 2003: 133).

### **3.2.6. Work and play**

Freinet sees in work the possibility to live one's individual potential. For Freinet self-induced work which is not only beneficial for oneself but as well the social context one is embedded in, is a source of uttermost joy and satisfaction. As far as children are concerned Freinet does not differentiate between work and play. He sees in the free, imaginative and wild play of children the developmental work children naturally need to engage in. Most adults would put play on the same level as amusement. Freinet, however, argues that for children, there exists no difference between play and work as long as they grow up in an appropriate environment which caters for their need of authentic experience on a wide range of levels – i.e. mental, physical, emotional. Furthermore, Freinet argues that initially children's free play is creative and dynamic, in harmony with their developmental needs and, therefore always goal-oriented and showing characteristics of work. Only when children do not find an appropriate environment for their development, their play would change its function and help them create another universe to flee to (cf. Freinet 1980: 79-90). Freinet states that there exists

ein «funktionelles» Spiel, [...]. Es hat seine Wurzeln in den archaischen Tiefen der menschlichen Entstehungsgeschichte und ist, wenn auch vielleicht nur indirekt, Relikt einer tiefverwurzelten Vorbereitung auf das Leben, eine Erziehung, die sich geheimnisvoll vollzieht, instinktiv, nicht analytisch-vernünftig im Sinne einer schulischen Dogmatik funktioniert, sondern deren Geist, Logik und Ablauf der besonderen Natur des Kindes zu entsprechen scheint.  
(Freinet 1980: 79)

### **3.3. The Glocksee-Schule**

The name of the Glocksee-Schule Hanover derives from the first location of the school which was in the Glockseestraße. The school is a child of the sixties. Its alternative and progressive potentials are rooted in the political movements of the year 1968. Thus, the founders of the Glocksee-Schule were inspired by Marxist ideas, critical psychoanalysis, socialistic pedagogy and by foreign educational pilot projects. The roots of the German alternative schools, upon others the Glocksee-Schule Hanover, go back to the 'Kinderladenbewegung' of the sixties, a Germany-wide parental initiative which was created to build a passage from an education within the families to kindergarten and pre school as well as an alternative to existing kindergartens. The members of the Kinderladenbewegung created an educational environment which allowed for the parents' involvement in decision-taking processes and their direct collaboration with the educators (cf. Richter 2000: 55-57). In 1971 parents, teachers and scientists from the initiative 'Aktion kleine Klasse' decided to create an anti-authoritarian school which started with four years of school attendance, 75 pupils and five teachers in 1972. The motivation to create an alternative school was rooted, first of all, in the parents' refusal to expose their children to the achievement principle ruling in traditional schools, and secondly, in the teachers' disappointment about their inability to realise their pedagogical believes in the traditional school. The school started out as an elementary school pilot project appreciated and supported by the municipality of Hanover. In 1979 when it became an all-day school the Glocksee had increased its number of pupils to 140 and its number of school attendance years to six. In 1981 the school was enlarged by four more classes and, simultaneously obtained the right to write out leaving certificates. 22 years after its foundation the Glocksee-Schule became an official state school in 1994 (cf. Köhler and Krammling-Jöhrens 2000: 21-24 and Lehrergemeinschaft 1979: 41-44). Today 220 pupils attend the classes one to ten at the Glocksee-Schule which describes itself as a public alternative school with a special pedagogical focus (cf. [www.glocksee.de/phpwcm/index.php?id=70,43,0,0,1,0](http://www.glocksee.de/phpwcm/index.php?id=70,43,0,0,1,0) 2008-09-25).

Within the 26 years of its existence the Glocksee-Schule has undergone a

number of ideological and organisational changes. However, the *SchülerInnen Schule* which was founded in 1980 took over the syllabus of the pilot project Glocksee-Schule when the latter was still in its early stages. Therefore, I will focus on the first eight years of the existence of the Glocksee in my analysis of its educational principles. Thus, the following illustration of the pedagogical key concepts of the Glocksee does not give a current image of the school, but has to be seen as a historical depiction.

### **3.3.1. Parental involvement**

The intensive co-operation of parents and teachers is a premise for the success of the educational concept of the school. The pupils' parents are involved in meetings, discussions and decision-taking as far as allows their professional life. Additionally, parents are free to participate at the school routine, observe learning processes and propose study workshops themselves. To fully involve the parents in the school routines and decisions is not always easy for the teachers. Miscommunication, misunderstandings, as well as the parents inability to be present continually lead to tensions and conflicts in the teacher-parent relationship (cf. Lehrerergemeinschaft 1979: 56-62).

### **3.3.2. Self-regulation**

All founding members of the Glocksee-Schule share the pedagogical belief that children want to learn and that they are able to organise their learning processes themselves, in harmony with their developmental needs (Lehrergemeinschaft 1979: 44). In 1972 the founding initiative of the Glocksee-Schule formulated their ideas concerning the self-regulation of learning. They agreed that the most important aspects of an education based on self-regulation are the following:

1. Self-regulated learning is not to be confused with 'Laisser-faire'.
2. Self-regulation means that the child is able to express and follow their needs and interests freely.

3. Self-regulation can only take place in a supporting environment free of pressure, manipulation and fear.
4. The educator has to be free of fears and doubts, needs to fully accept the child and needs to avoid punishment as well as the deprivation of love.
5. The educators need to be independent of the wish for the pupils' acknowledgement and gratitude (cf. Köhler and Krammling-Jöhrens 2000: 36-37).

### **3.3.3. The lessons**

There exists no lesson plan in the Glocksee-Schule. As already mentioned above, the adults' belief in the pupils' ability to self-regulate their learning processes is the basis of all work and studying taking place at the school. There exists an organisation of the pupils into different classes based on their years of learning in the Glocksee-Schule. Nevertheless, the pupils learn and co-work in age-heterogeneous classes. Moreover, there exist class teachers, namely two for each class, as well as specialist subject teachers, mainly for the elder learners from the sixth class onwards. The teachers' function is to closely observe and reflect on the learners' activities in order to be able to anticipate many of their interests and cater for appropriate material. On the basis of their observations, as well as the pupils' interventions, the teachers propose study projects which the learners are free, but not obliged, to attend. Participation at these study projects takes place in age-heterogeneous groups and is regulated by the pupils' spontaneous and voluntary decisions to take part. The rest of the time the pupils work individually with the help of study material, or they create own projects (cf. Köhler and Krammling-Jöhrens 2000: 21-24). The interrelation of the pupils' planning of learning matters and the teachers' furtherance can take the following form: Some boys spent days in a row tinkering paper planes and creating ever more complicated models. The teacher suggested to build planes out of other materials but her proposition was answered with lack of interest. Nonetheless, the following day the teacher brought along a book about model aircrafts and some polystyrene and the boys who before had refused her

suggestion immediately began to tinker polystyrene planes. Many other pupils who had not been interested in the paper planes joined the group and so, a study project on aircrafts was born (cf. Lehrerergemeinschaft 1979: 52).

Half an hour before the start of the school day the Glocksee-teachers and, occasionally, helping parents meet in order to discuss the planned projects for the day. In the lower grades pupils, teachers and the present parents meet for the morning gathering at the beginning of each day. In the course of these meetings the offered courses are communicated to the pupils which are free to choose some, or none, of the suggested projects. Nevertheless, during the day the pupils are free to revise their decisions, the more so as all doors are open and the pupils are free to join or leave study groups as they please. Additionally, the morning gatherings are an opportunity for teachers and pupils to speak out on conflicts, discuss the learners' interests and the teachers' project suggestions and simply chat about personal concerns (cf. Köhler and Krammling-Jöhrens 2000: 21-24 and [www.glocksee.de/phpwcms/index.php?id=70,43,0,0,1,0](http://www.glocksee.de/phpwcms/index.php?id=70,43,0,0,1,0) 2008-09-25).

### **3.3.4. Freedom**

The pupils of the Glocksee-Schule enjoy uttermost freedom on all levels of the school life. First of all, the learners are allowed to dispose freely of their time and the school's premises. Secondly, there exist no punishments for the misuse of learning material, such as the usage of pencils for pencil-combats, or the misuse of drawing paper for the making of a bonfire. Those adults who regard such behaviour as wastefulness are opposed by adults convinced that forbidding the misuse of material would perturb the children's creative involvement, hinder their living out of inner mental processes and would teach them dependence on material things. Thirdly, it is the adult's duty to clear the chaos which the pupils left behind. This is so in order to avoid that pupils limit their creative powers in fear of subsequent cleaning works and to avert any power struggles between the generations over cleaning matters (cf. Köhler and Krammling-Jöhrens 2000: 23). Fourthly, the Glocksee-teachers do not interfere

in the pupils' mutual relationships. They tolerate social behaviour as much as unsocial behaviour. The dictation of social behaviour by the adults would maybe circumvent unsocial behaviour in the pupils, but at the same time it would limit their opportunities of becoming aware of social techniques and of working on them autonomously. Therefore, teachers are not allowed to intervene as judgemental instances in the learners' conflicts. The adults' role is limited to reflecting any anti-social behaviour with the pupils without trying to influence them (cf. Lehrergemeinschaft 1979: 45-49).

### **3.3.5. The Glocksee curriculum**

As already mentioned in the second chapter of this paper the fundamental goal of all progressive educational schools is to give children the freedom they need to develop into fully-fledged, independent personalities and happy, socially competent, as well as successful adults. The aim of the Glocksee-Schule is the same as can be seen from the introductory phrases of the Glocksee curriculum as it was fixed by the founding members of the school:

Es ist unser Anliegen, Kindern mit unterschiedlichen individuellen und sozialen Voraussetzungen die Möglichkeit und Hilfe zu geben, sich zu mündigen, kritikfähigen, leistungs- und genußfähigen, ihrer selbst bewußten, emanzipierten und solidarischen, politisch verantwortlichen und tätigen Menschen zu entwickeln.

([http://www.schuelerinnenschule.at/attachments/041\\_Der%20Glockseelehrplan.pdf](http://www.schuelerinnenschule.at/attachments/041_Der%20Glockseelehrplan.pdf) 2008-11-30)

Lessons in the Glocksee curriculum are divided into four areas of study: society, language, aesthetics and nature. Within the scope of these four domains the teachers offer to treat certain topic areas. Important for the didactic planning is not the amount of factual knowledge the pupils are to acquire, but the anticipation of the students' interests, needs, fantasies and questions. The more so as in the Glocksee curriculum there exist no grades, but teacher and learners co-operatively work on an evaluation of the pupils' learning and developmental progress. The scheme of the teaching project needs to stay flexible. That means, it has to be adjustable to changing learning situations and



altering learner needs (cf. [http://www.schuelerinnenschule.at/attachments/041\\_Der%20Glockseelehrplan.pdf](http://www.schuelerinnenschule.at/attachments/041_Der%20Glockseelehrplan.pdf) 2008-11-30).

The learning processes involved in the study area society comprise the creation of moments of insight into the world, as well as critical reflection on the world in order to awake political awareness in the pupils, such as, the ability of reflecting on apparently isolated societal, international and political circumstances and recognising their interrelations. The teaching should cater for both learning moments which arise from the students' horizon of experience and new experiences in order to give the learners the opportunity to deal with surprise, doubt, suspense and contradiction. The second study area of the Glocksee curriculum - i.e. language - has to be understood as an element of the educational process of building political awareness in students. For pupils language mainly is a medium with the help of which they define experiences and which they need for interpersonal communication. Therefore, in the context of the Glocksee curriculum language teaching is meant to teach pupils to individually and self-dependently make sense of the world, to raise awareness of the manipulative aspect of language use and to enable them to use language as a means to express themselves freely and creatively. The study area aesthetics gives students the opportunity to appropriate the world in a receptive, as well as a productive way. Aesthetics permits the pupils to experience the world using all their senses and is meant to show them creative ways of expressing themselves. The focus of aesthetics lies, first of all, on self-perception and self-display, secondly, on portrayal and analysis of the world and, thirdly, on the active creation and change of the world. The fourth study area defined in the Glocksee curriculum is nature. The study area nature comprises experience, analysis and the handling of the representational reality. Pupils are meant to come to know reality in an empirical, an analytical and a practical dimension. Important in this study area is that the students get opportunities to do handicrafts, get in contact with technics, learn mathematics in a practical way and do school-practical work (cf. [http://www.schuelerinnenschule.at/attachments/041\\_Der%20Glockseelehrplan.pdf](http://www.schuelerinnenschule.at/attachments/041_Der%20Glockseelehrplan.pdf) 2008-11-30).

### **3.4. Maria Montessori**

Maria Montessori was born as daughter of rich parents and granddaughter of the famous natural scientist Antonio Stoppani in 1870 in the province of Ancona, Italy. Maria Montessori attended a scientific-technical secondary school and was the first girl in Italy to study medicine specialising in paediatrics. Alongside her work as doctor Montessori studied pedagogy, anthropology and psychology and travelled through Europe giving lectures on emancipation and a necessary reform of the educational system. Already during her own school career Montessori questioned the traditional teaching methods grounded on studying by heart. As adult she dedicated herself to the further development of an education based on the training of all senses with the help of stimulating didactic material as discovered by the French doctors Itard and Séguin. In 1907 Montessori opened the first “Casa dei Bambini” in a poor district of Rome, wanting to open disadvantaged children the gate to a good education. In her work with handicapped children she advanced the sensory stimulating didactic material she had developed based on the findings of Itard and Séguin. During the second half of her life Montessori's didactic material, as well as her belief in the importance of freedom and autonomy for the child's successful development became famous around the world, leading to the foundation of various Montessori schools. Maria Montessori died in 1951 (cf. Martin 2007: 16-20). Maria Montessori's pedagogical findings are based on her work with young children mainly – i.e. children of kindergarten and elementary school age. Nevertheless, Montessori formulated some educational ideas which are valid for learners of all ages. On these more general educational believes I will concentrate in my illustration of the main aspects of Montessori pedagogy.

#### **3.4.1. Free choice**

Maria Montessori is convinced that there exists an inner building plan in harmony with which children develop, when adults can manage to give them the necessary freedom to do so. Thus, according to her only children themselves know what is best for their development. Children would automatically and

naturally act in harmony with their inner needs, if they found an appropriate environment and were not hindered or manipulated by outer stimuli. Consequently, she argues that only through a self-initiated, self-chosen activity the child can enter the state of deep concentration which is one elementary source of satisfaction for the child and vital for the young person's inner growth. Montessori's observations lead her to the conclusion that children who were not interrupted by outer stimuli and experienced phases of deep concentration while working were not tired after having fulfilled strenuous activities but were rested and pleased with themselves. Imposed activities, however, disrupt the child's inner balance as well as their development (cf. Oswald und Schulz-Benesch 1967: 27-34). Thus, in schools based on Montessori pedagogy the pupils work freely and independently with material the teachers provide. Like many other educational reformists, such as Wild, Freinet and Neill for example, Montessori critiques the teaching method of the traditional school. According to her true learning can only take place when it happens in accordance with the child's developmental needs, in an appropriate environment full of stimulating material and when all of the child's senses are involved. Furthermore, Montessori argues that true learning is anticipated by the passive reception of prepared knowledge, because this kind of learning operates on the mental level only and ignores the physical and emotional levels (cf. Montessori 1958: 92-104). As Montessori states

[E]in heftiger äußerer Reiz kann wohl die Aufmerksamkeit des Kindes auf sich ziehen, aber dies bleibt ein Zwischenfall ohne Beziehung zu dem tieferen, formenden Teil des kindlichen Geistes, der zu seinem Innenleben gehört.  
(Montessori 1958: 102)

Additionally, Montessori opines that in order to assure children's best development adults have to trust in the young learner's ability to autonomously fulfil their developmental needs. Manipulating children's learning and development equals stealing their autonomy, as well as disrupting their innate knowledge about their developmental needs. And continuously neglecting the child's needs invariably leads to the creation of various developmental troubles. Thus, according to Montessori behaviour which adults tend to regard as

habitual for children are in reality indices for unfulfilled needs: lack of concentration, absent-mindedness, shyness, hurried uncoordinated movements which endanger others, lack of initiative, boredom, lack of interest, caprices or lying (cf. Oswald und Schulz-Benesch 1967: 32).

### **3.4.2. Appropriate environment**

In Montessori's definition an appropriate learning environment for children is an environment lacking oppression and manipulation through adults in which pupils are enabled to gain autonomous experiences using all their senses, following their individual urges and rhythm. In Montessori's appropriate environment the teacher's role is to assist the pupils in finding their autonomy, in Montessori's words their function is to 'help the pupils do it themselves'. In order to have the pupils gain authentic experiences the teacher caters for 'scientific' material which engages the pupils in all their senses and enables them to self-correct in order to avoid a system of rewards and punishment (cf. Montessori 1958: 191-99 and Becker-Textor:148-52).

### **3.5. Rebeca and Mauricio Wild**

Rebeca Wild was born in 1932 in Germany where she met her later husband Mauricio Wild during her studies of German philology. Mauricio, son of Swiss parents and of the same age as Rebeca, was born in Ecuador where he spent his childhood before he was sent to Switzerland to complete his education. After graduating from high school Mauricio travelled extensively within Europe and met Rebeca on a journey through Germany. Very soon in their lives Rebeca and Mauricio Wild developed the desire to live a fulfilled life which was not centred around success in their professions or material wealth. Since they thought their wish of a free life could be best fulfilled outside of Europe, they settled in Mauricio's country of birth. When their first child was born, they began to feel a rising interest in pedagogy and especially the works of Maria Montessori. They began to see their duty in creating an educational environment for children in

which they would find the freedom to develop without authority and fear and in which they would be respected as full personalities. So, in 1979 they founded the 'Pestalozzi School' in Ecuador. They called the educational method they invented 'active education' and do not want it to be confounded with what in Europe is called 'anti-authoritarian education' (cf. Wild 1992: 7-20). Even though the Pestalozzi School was a great success, the Wilds decided to close it down in 2005 in order to dedicate themselves to a new project, the creation of a living community in which children and adults alike could live out their potentials in freedom. The community is named 'Leon dormido' and is situated in Ecuador (cf. <http://www.tags.ch/interaktiv/rmwild/tsintra6.html> 2008-09-09).

The Wilds' educational convictions are closely linked to those of Maria Montessori. Moreover, they are based on newer findings in neurology as well as their own observations at the Pestalozzi School. Similarly to Montessori the Wilds' interest lies mainly with the inner processes taking place in young learners. Therefore, I will concentrate on those pedagogical aspects of the Wilds which are reflected in the didactic concept of the *SchülerInnen Schule*.

### **3.5.1. Learner autonomy**

One of the fundamental premises in the Wilds' work with pupils is learner autonomy. The Wilds argue that working with young people in order to help them to fully develop their personality in a way which is non-restrictive to their needs, adults cannot count on immediate, observable results. If they really wish to support their children (and pupils), they have to trust in their knowing themselves what is best for their development. And they have to attach more importance to the child's inner creative urges which want to be unfolded than in observable results. By subtly manipulating children one can get them to behave wisely, to learn an incredible amount of things in a short period of time, to get rid of their 'blemishes' and to acquire conformity to what adults would call 'culture'. However, by using our love, friendship, or appreciation as a means to manipulate children in order to transmute them into little adults we hinder their natural, healthy development. According to the Wilds traditional teaching

approaches manipulate individuals in the above described way. As many advantages as the traditional educational method may have for adults, it decreases the young persons' opportunities for experiences with autonomous processes of decision-finding, complex interactions, as well as networked thinking and, consequently, leads to increased dependence on teachers' and adults' guidance. For an organism's development it is, first of all, necessary that there are stimuli to which it can respond. However, for its physical, emotional and intellectual functions to fully develop it is important that these interactions are steered by inner impulses and not by outer impressions. If this autonomous interaction between a child's inner impulses and outer stimuli is not given, but restricted by other persons, the organism protects itself. In this situation the natural development is compensated for by an emergency plan which circumvents an injury of the child's inner state of being, but, at the same time, hinders its full evolvment into an independent individual (cf. Wild 2002: 41-46).

### **3.5.2. Supportive learning environment**

Explaining their educational conviction the Wilds often refer to the work of Joseph Chilton Pearce, an American scholar, teacher and scientist. Pearce (2006) distinguishes between two kinds of learning, namely true learning and conditioning. True learning is learning that involves the higher frontal lobes of the brain – i.e the creative and intellectual brain. It can only take place when the pupil finds all their developmental needs catered for and when they are given opportunities for self-induced activity. Conditioning, however, is the form of learning which takes place in our traditional school system based on grades. In a learning environment full of anger and fear of failure the older, reptilian brain comes into function. This brain is the reflexive, the survival brain which automatically operates when the organism is confronted with hostility, anger, or anxiety. Real learning, however, can only take place in a positive, supportive environment, because at the first sight of anxiety the brain's functions are shunted from the pre-frontal lobes to the old defences of the reptilian brain. Moreover, Pearce explains that studies conducted by British researchers disproved the belief according to which the genetic structuring of the human

organism was immutably fixed. The studies showed that the human DNA is strongly affected by the environment a child grows up in, particularly by the emotional environment. However, not only do the genetic structures of the human organism – including the brain - continue to change after conception and even after birth, but additionally around the age of eleven or twelve the brain undergoes a fine tuning and begins to decide what it can get rid of. In the course of this process the brain disposes of those neural connections which are the least in use, in either the ancient survival brain or in the new intellectual brain. What is removed depends upon the child's life situations at that time. Thus, the question of whether they feel safe and loved, or whether they feel like they must protect themselves against a hostile world has a profound effect on the child's intelligence – i.e. the way they use their neural connection as well as which part of the brain they use most (cf. Pearce 2006: 26-31).

The conclusion one can draw from the above mentioned discoveries in neuroscience is that a positive and supporting environment in which pupils are able to take over responsibility for their learning and are allowed to gain experiences based on self-initiated activities is vital for the full evolvement of a human being's potential and their happiness.

### **3.5.3. Democratic self-determination**

In the Wilds' Pestalozzi School all school regarding affairs were discussed and presided over by a weekly meeting of the entire school community. In the course of these weekly meetings rules and limits were discussed and fixed over and over again. The Wilds found that the pupils got never tired of debating rules, abatements and punishments for the sheer sake of discussing. These meetings served the pupils as a ground for testing their skills, express their interests, propose new projects or excursions and simply live democracy. Additionally, it was a necessary routine as it assured the smooth course of the school routine and the trouble-free living side-by-side of the school members (cf. Wild 2003: 163-65).

The above-mentioned educational reformists and alternative schools influenced and still continue to effect the pedagogical ideology of the *SchülerInnen Schule*. On the following pages I will proceed to present two more pedagogical concepts which have a special effect on the studying of English in the *SchülerInnen Schule*. There is, first of all, the 'Sudbury School' which the English teacher attended as a pupil and the educational concept of which, therefore, influences her didactics. Additionally, in chapter four I will present 'independent studying' – i.e. an approach to learning which is known under the term 'open learning' in the German-speaking world -, because it is the English teacher's preferred pedagogical method.

### **3.6. The Sudbury Valley School**

The first Sudbury School was founded in 1968 in Sudbury Valley, Massachusetts, USA, in order to create an environment for children in which they were able to live up to their potentials in total freedom. The official homepage of the various international Sudbury Schools features the following fundamental pedagogical premises:

that all people are curious by nature; that the most efficient, long-lasting, and profound learning takes place when started and pursued by the learner; that all people are creative if they are allowed to develop their unique talents; that age-mixing among students promotes growth in all members of the group; and that freedom is essential to the development of personal responsibility.

([http://www.sudval.org/01\\_abou\\_01.html](http://www.sudval.org/01_abou_01.html) 2008-10-07)

In the Sudbury Valley School pupils are trusted to take over total responsibility over their learning. However, learning does not happen for the sake of learning, but as a by-product of the various activities pupils can pursue in this school which range from studying French to the making and selling of pizza in order to raise the funds for new equipment. All activities are student-initiated, staff and equipment are consulted when the need arises. The fact that self-motivation is the basis for all activities raises the pupils' trust in their abilities, as well as their self-confidence. The school describes itself as “a community in which students



are exposed to the complexities of life in the framework of a participatory democracy” (cf. [http://www.sudval.org/01\\_abou\\_01.html](http://www.sudval.org/01_abou_01.html) 2008-10-07) Thus, adults and children have the same rights treating each other as equals and with respect, handling all the school-regarding affairs together in a weekly meeting which concedes staff and pupils one vote each. In summary, the basic educational principles of the Sudbury School are independent, self-motivated activities, learning as a result of real-life experiences, equality of adults and children, as well as democratic governance (cf. [http://www.sudval.org/01\\_abou\\_01.html](http://www.sudval.org/01_abou_01.html) 2008-10-07).

### **3.6.1. Rethinking education**

Daniel Greenberg, one of the founding members of the Sudbury Valley School, states that creating the Sudbury School it was not enough for the founding members to change a few aspects of the current school system, or to undergo a curriculum reform. They are convinced that “the whole traditional way of looking at education is wrong” ([http://www.sudval.org/01\\_abou\\_01.html](http://www.sudval.org/01_abou_01.html) 2008-10-07). Therefore, they started from scratch rethinking what was really wanted from education. In this context, Greenberg distinguishes two different goals which all educational systems around the world share, an educational goal and a socio-political goal. The educational goal is to have children develop into productive adults able to care for themselves, found families, etc. The socio-political purpose is to create good citizens, that is “people who function effectively in the socio-political environment that the culture wishes to propagate” (cf. [http://www.sudval.org/01\\_abou\\_01.html](http://www.sudval.org/01_abou_01.html) 2008-10-07). Discussing the educational goal as it applies to the US they came to a conclusion which nowadays is shared by most businesses and institutions, namely that an adult who could be defined productive and enriching for the American society possessed the following abilities: initiative, creativity, imagination, alertness, curiosity, self-responsibility, self-confidence and the ability to take decisions autonomously. Out of their own experience of working with children Greenberg and the other founding members of the Sudbury Valley school concluded that all of the above-mentioned abilities were already abundantly existent in children

and not things which one had to teach them. Children are very curious. If permitted, they take initiative all the time and have no difficulties coping with the result of their decision-taking (cf. [http://www.sudval.org/05\\_underlying\\_ideas.html](http://www.sudval.org/05_underlying_ideas.html) 2008-10-09). According to Greenberg the best way of helping children to grow into happy adults is to not to get into their way. He states that

the raw material is there. All the elements that we want for effective adulthood in the 21st century are there in the child. This is where the paradigm shift comes in. What it means for education and for schooling is that we just have to let these elements ripen and mature. The best service we can render a child in making the transition from childhood to adulthood is not to get in the way.  
([http://www.sudval.org/01\\_about\\_01.html](http://www.sudval.org/01_about_01.html) 2008-10-09)

Moreover Greenberg criticises the fact that most pupils grow into adults in schools based on authority, oppression and constraint and are, nonetheless, awaited to turn into effective citizens of a democracy as soon as they leave school. Thus, for Greenberg and the other founders of the Sudbury Valley School creating a school based on equality and democratic rights was one of the fundamental aims on their way to a new, truly child-centred education. Today every member of the Sudbury Schools share equal rights regardless their age or function in the school. At the weekly administrative meetings, for instance, four year old pupils have the same right to decide over school affairs than do older pupils or the staff (cf. ([http://www.sudval.org/01\\_about\\_01.html](http://www.sudval.org/01_about_01.html) 2008-10-09).

### **3.6.2. Freedom and responsibility**

Michelle Patzke, teacher at the Chicago Sudbury School, defines the Sudbury School as a place where adults trusts in the pupils' abilities to grow and to learn, a place where young personalities are allowed to make decisions and take over responsibility for the consequences of their actions in order to develop into responsible adults. Patzke is confident about the fact that successful learning is inevitable, if it results from the pupils' own initiative. Pupils in the Chicago Sudbury School choose their activities freely and bear the responsibility for their

actions, their education and their future life. They manage to cope with the weight of that responsibility, because, first of all, they are trusted to achieve anything they set their mind to, and, secondly, at the Chicago Sudbury School failure is not punished but regarded as even more valuable for the learning process than success. Consequently, the pupils of the Chicago Sudbury School develop unalterable confidence in their actions and decisions (cf. Patzke 2006: 38-39).

## 4. The SchülerInnen Schule

Müller (1996) outlined a number of fundamental pedagogical principles which hold true for the great majority of free progressive schools. With the help of these principles I will try to create as precise a picture of the *SchülerInnen Schule* as possible. The principles are:

1. Equal priority is given to social, emotional and cognitive learning.
2. Equal importance of manual and mental activities.
3. Learning through experiencing.
4. Description of the individual learning progress.
5. Studying in courses and projects, or workshops.
6. Voluntary participation at the courses offered.
7. Flexible time management of lessons.
8. Lessons in small groups.
9. Modified roles of learners, teachers and parents. All have the right to take part in everything.
10. Organisation of school members into "Stammgruppen" (heterogeneous age groups).
11. Pupils' and parents' involvement in organisation and administration of the school.
12. Parental work (cf. Müller 1996: 52).

Before I proceed, I need to describe the *SchülerInnen Schule* in more general terms. The *SchülerInnen Schule* is a free, private, democratic, full-time comprehensive school with 'Öffentlichkeitsrecht'. The term free refers to the fact that the school has its own curriculum - i.e. the Glocksee curriculum – as well as its own teaching methods differing from those of most traditional schools in Austria. Private means that the pupils' parents finance the school with a monthly fee. However, some text and grammar books are provided by the Austrian state. The school is democratic, because pupils and teachers possess the same right to decide over school-relevant affairs. The term 'Öffentlichkeitsrecht' refers to the fact that the *SchülerInnen Schule* is a private institution which, nevertheless,

is recognised by the state. Pupils attending the *SchülerInnen Schule* can complete their nine years of compulsory education at this school or continue their education at a traditional school after the fourth year without having to pass any further examinations (with the exception of some secondary schools which devised entry examinations for pupils from private schools). The school is a comprehensive school until the ninth year of learning and comprises a 'Werkcollege' which students can attend in order to prepare for an 'Externistenmatura', the 'Studienzulassungsprüfung' or any other continuing education. In contrast to most other Austrian schools, at the *SchülerInnen Schule* the school day starts at 9 am and ends at 5 pm. The *SchülerInnen Schule* was founded in 1979 and since 1982 has been located in the WUK, a meeting place for artists, musicians and various social institutions in the ninth Viennese district. The roots of the school go back to the Viennese political movement of the seventies known under the term 'Arenabesetzung'.

#### **4.1. The learning**

Ad 1.: As can be seen from table 1 below, at the *SchülerInnen Schule* a variety of courses are offered which are not part of the traditional Austrian curriculum. The fact that courses such as 'Zirkus', 'Rollenspiel/Präsentation', 'teatro wukolino', 'men/women in (e)motion' and 'Mediation' are an integral part of the school's curriculum shows that great value is attached to social and emotional learning. In courses such as 'Zirkus', 'Rollenspiel/Präsentation' and 'teatro wukolino' the pupils find opportunities to live out their creativity, spontaneity and play instinct and can develop self-confidence, as well as trust in their abilities and their appearance. In the 'Mediation' course learners engage in ways of peaceful conflict resolution. And in the project 'men/women in (e)motion' which takes place every Friday girls and boys have the opportunity to engage in activities or discuss gender issues and topics of their interest in separated boys and girls groups. Moreover, in the regular plenary and 'Stammgruppen'-meetings the students can try out discussion strategies.

Ad 2.: There are plenty of opportunities for the pupils to engage in physical

action, handicrafts or arts. Courses like 'Sports', 'Kunsttechniken' and 'Werkstatt' enable the learners to improve their manual skills. Moreover the preparation of the pupils for an apprenticeship in a technical area is a main focus of the *SchülerInnen Schule*. According to the headmaster half of the *SchülerInnen Schule*'s pupils continue their schooling in a 'Lehre'. Thus, it can be stated that cognitive and manual activities are of equal importance in the *SchülerInnen Schule*, because the students need to be prepared for their apprenticeships.

Ad 3.: Learning through experiencing plays an important role in the *SchülerInnen Schule*. Excursions, work-placements and the realisation of self-chosen projects are an integral part of the learners' school careers. During the initial years of the existence of the *SchülerInnen Schule* learning through experiencing used to be practised even more directly. The school day was not organised into a series of lessons, but the learners engaged in open learning (see chapter five) which was more easily comparable to the approaches of Montessori, Neill or the Glocksee Schule and the Sudbury Valley School. Gradually the teaching and learning methods at the *SchülerInnen Schule* needed to become increasingly structured, as more and more pupils from traditional schools entered the alternative school. That was due to the fact that students coming from traditional schools were not able to cope with the freedom of choice and the responsibility for their own learning which they were handed over at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. The above mentioned is a good example of how a private school is able to adapt to changed realities. A similar change of structure would be extremely difficult to accomplish for a state school.

Ad 4.: Except for those pupils who need a school leaving certificate and who are, therefore, graded by the teachers, the pupils of the *SchülerInnen Schule* self-evaluate their competences. With the help of a detailed manual the pupils write their own evaluations towards the end of the school year. The manual includes questions such as 'What have we done?', 'What have I learnt in the course of the activity?', 'Am I satisfied with myself?', 'How were the learning matters transmitted?', 'How did I like the subject?', and so forth. In addition, every pupil receives written feedback on their abilities from every teacher who they took courses with. What's more, in the *SchülerInnen Schule* the pupils give

their teachers written feedback, too.

## 4.2. The lessons

Ad 5.: The pupils of the *SchülerInnen Schule* organise their own lesson plans. They attend the courses of their own choice on a regular basis and, furthermore, participate at periodic excursions, teacher- or learner-initiated projects and other initiatives, such as public competitions or exhibitions, for instance. Similarly to the convictions of Freinet, Montessori, Neill and Wild, who were of the opinion that real learning takes place only through real-life experiences stimulating all senses, the *SchülerInnen Schule* attaches great importance to enabling the students to gain experiences outside the school routine. Therefore, students of the *SchülerInnen Schule* have to take part in practical trainings in the course of their school career in order to gain work experience, and they have to engage in the realisation of self-chosen, individual projects the outcome of which can take the form of a paper, a work of art, a piece of clothing, etc.

Ad 6. and 7.: The seven teachers who work at the *SchülerInnen Schule* offer various courses in the study areas: society, language, aesthetics and nature. These study areas were taken over from the Glocksee curriculum (see chapter three). One of the teachers works solely as speech therapist with individual students. Every teacher offers courses in their field of expertise (see table 1 below). Together the teachers design a time table with the help of which the pupils, then, create their individual lesson plans. For those pupils who need a school leaving certificate after the eighth grade, because they want to continue their school career at a public secondary school, attendance at the main subjects is obligatory. However, pupils who do not need a certificate could possibly decide not to attend any English lessons, but to concentrate on Arts instead. Even if those pupils who need a school leaving certificate have to attend a range of obligatory lessons, the freedom of organising their own lesson plan according to their individual preferences is an important detail. As I was able to experience on numerous occasions this freedom of choice as well as the

fact that not all lessons are obligatory strongly enhances the pupils' motivation for active participation at the courses. Although some of the reformists mentioned in chapter three, for example Neill, the Glocksee Schule, Wild, or the Sudbury Valley School, offered courses (mainly called projects, or workshops) which their pupils were free to attend, the system of the *SchülerInnen Schule* is above all comparable to the American high school system. At the *SchülerInnen Schule* every teacher has their own classroom and pupils move from one classroom to the next attending the courses of their choice.

Teacher	Courses
Claudia G.	Schreibwerkstatt, Deutsch-Übung, Deutsch-College, Lesewerkstatt, Deutsch I, II and III, Geschichte I and II, Tutoring + P, Musik, Klavier, Women in (e)motion, English-Grammar, Politische Bildung
Claudia D.	Italienisch I and II, Förderung, Mathe basics and intermediate, Mathe Übung, Mathe/Förderung, Musik, Sport & Spiel, GEO
Annika	Mathe College I and II, Mathe/ GZ, Mathe repeat, GZ, Mathe-Projekt/GZ, Spanisch, Rollenspiel/Präsentation
Lynn	Literature, open english, green book and yellow book – i.e. grammar for beginners and intermediate learners-, reading beginners, biology beginners and advanced, democracies, computer, Tutoring
Alex	Zirkus, Rollenspiel/Präsentation, teatro wukolino, Sport & Spiel, Gitarre, Gitarre/Percussion, Mediation, men in (e)motion, Elektrotechnik, Politische Bildung
Sigrid	Edelsteinkunde, Französisch, Kunstcafé, Kunsttechniken, Werkstatt

Table 1 *Lessons offered at the SchülerInnen Schule*

Ad 8.: In harmony with the principles of the alternative schools enumerated in the chapter on the history of progressive education, at the *SchülerInnen Schule* the lessons take place in groups of ten pupils on average. This allows the teacher to respond to the particular needs of each pupil and gives them the possibility to dedicate their full attention to each pupil personally, if necessary. The only case in which group numbers exceed the dozen is when one of the teachers falls ill, because then, the pupils attend the other teachers' courses.



### 4.3. The organisation of the school

Ad 9.: The *SchülerInnen Schule* is a democratic school. That means that all school-relevant decisions are made by the collectivity of all school members. Teachers and pupils alike have one vote each in the accords. In Neill's Summerhill School pupils and teachers meet once a week in a school assembly to discuss school-relevant issues, the same was practised in the Wilds' Pestalozzi School before it was closed in 2005. The *SchülerInnen Schule* has taken over this habit. The whole school meets in a weekly plenum of fifty minutes in the course of which conflicts are discussed, the purchase of new material is talked over, new projects or excursions are proposed, and decisions are made. It is the pupils, for example, who decide over the admittance of new teachers or pupils to the school. Moreover, it is always two pupils who preside in these assemblies deciding over the order in which topics are discussed and according the speakers their right to talk. The tone of conversation between teachers and pupils is amicable and joking. Teachers at the *SchülerInnen Schule* can do without authoritative behaviour, threats, or pressurising learners. Since for most pupils there exist no grades, menacing pupils with extra tests or bad marks does not lead anywhere. That does not mean, however, that there exists no set of clear rules which organise the school routine. Rules organising the living together of about 50 students and seven teachers are scrutinised, discussed and renewed continuously. Transgressions of the fixed rules are punished with fees or a day's or week's expulsion from school, depending on how grave the transgression is. In the worst case a pupil can be expelled from school forever with the support of the 'Stadtschulrat'. In 2008 a school council was created which functions as a mediating instance between the 50 pupils as well as between pupils and teachers. Members of the council are exclusively pupils who have been at the *SchülerInnen Schule* for at least two years. The council is composed of one president, one vice-president, one secretary, and a number of substitutes. The main aim of the school council is to shorten the time span needed for the weekly plenum by helping to solve conflicts which otherwise would have had to be discussed during these weekly meetings.

Ad 10.: In Neill's Summerhill School, in the Sudbury Valley School and in the

Glocksee Schule it is a habit to begin most of the school days with friendly chats in small groups (see chapter three). In the course of these short but daily meetings teachers and pupils get the chance to exchange on a personal level. By meeting regularly within the same group a level of intimacy and confidence is established between the group members which allows to discuss even delicate topics. The *SchülerInnen Schule* has taken over this habit. Three mornings a week the teachers and pupils meet in their 'Stammgruppen'. Each 'Stammgruppe' consists of two teachers and seven to ten pupils. Sometimes there are issues to discuss but most of the time the group members simply have breakfast together, chat and laugh. The atmosphere during these meetings is characterised by friendliness and joviality.

Ad 11.: Similarly to pupils at the Summerhill School, at the Glocksee Schule, at Freinet schools, as well as pupils from the Pestalozzi School, at the *SchülerInnen Schule* learners are actively engaged in the organisation and administration of the school routines. Groups of pupils have responsibilities such as the cleaning and keeping orderly of the classrooms and the school's facilities. In addition, once every week a group of several pupils is responsible for cooking lunch as well as cleaning the kitchen afterwards. The remaining days of the week it is the pupils' parents who prepare the lunch. It is the pupils and the teachers who decide over all of the school-relevant topics. The parents have no possibility to directly take part in the decision-taking processes of the school. But, they are informed about ongoing conflicts or decisions in the course of parent-teacher conferences which are organised on a regular basis. Also, they are free to participate in the lessons whenever they wish to, or to offer courses and activities themselves. It is a fact, however, that the teachers would wish for a more continuous attendance of the parents at these conferences and for a better co-operation of the parents in school affairs in general.

Ad 12.: In addition to the providing food for all members of school the parents are responsible for all renovation and repair work the school needs. Beyond these obligatory tasks, the parents are free to attend the weekly plenary meetings and propose workshops, excursions or other activities to the pupils.

## 5. Open Learning

The term 'open learning' is not easy to define. It is used to refer to pedagogical approaches as used by educational reformists from Pestalozzi, Freinet, Neill and Montessori to more recent ones like Wild, for example. In the German-speaking world it is known under the notions 'Freiarbeit', 'Freiarbeitsphasen', 'Wochen- und Tagesplan', 'Stationenbetrieb', 'Projektlernen', 'projektorientiertes Lernen' and even 'Neue Lernkultur' and most often used in the context of primary education. The term refers to what is called 'open education', or 'informal education', in Great Britain and 'open classroom' in the US. However, in my thesis I will focus on open learning in the European context. Thus, on the approach which has come to be known as 'Offenes Lernen' in the German-speaking world. The notions designating open learning are as varied as the beliefs about their practical implementation. Therefore, many experts in the field of open learning define the term in contrast to traditional teaching methods as a means to open up the traditional classroom. This can be seen in Wallrabenstein's (1991) definition, for instance, who defines open learning as a

Sammelbegriff für unterschiedliche Reformansätze in vielfältigen Formen inhaltlicher, methodischer und organisatorischer Öffnung mit dem Ziel eines veränderten Umgangs mit dem Kind auf der Grundlage eines veränderten Lernbegriffs.  
(Wallrabenstein 1991: 54)

In greater detail, the opening of the traditional classroom refers to an opening in three dimensions, a content, a methodological and an organisational dimension. In other words, in open learning settings, first of all, room is made for contents and experiences out of the children's immediate environment. Secondly, possibilities are created for the introduction of new forms of learning, as well as the reconstruction of the lessons with the help of the pupils. And thirdly, the school is opened up for radical changes of teaching and learning processes, such as the introduction of independent studying, project work or week plans (cf. Wallrabenstein 1991: 54-55).

## **5.1. Three dimensions of open learning**

In accordance with Wallrabenstein Müller-Naendrup (2008) and Schweighofer (1993) argue that there are too many different conceptions of open learning to find an all-embracing definition for them and that open learning tends to be defined in opposition to traditional teaching methods based on instruction. They propose three dimensions which help to identify an open learning environment. First of all, an open learning setting is open for the pupils' individualities and differences. It is, thus, open in the sense of a methodical-organisational dimension. That means, in an open classroom the pupils are more than mere recipients of pre-cast packets of knowledge. They need to be the agents of their individual learning and their learning should be based on concrete experiences as well as the accomplishment of real life situations. Second, the open classroom is open for the pupils' individual worlds of experiences and believes. It opens up in the dimensions of didactics and content for a constructivist approach to learning according to which it is the learners themselves who are responsible for their development and not the teacher. Third, open learning refers to an opening of the classroom in the sense of a pedagogic-institutional dimension, allowing the learners a share of the responsibility in decision taking processes in order to awaken autonomy in them. Moreover, the opening of education in a pedagogic-institutional dimension requires the schools to open up for extracurricular experiences as well as critique and change (cf. Müller-Naendrup 2008: 52-55 and Schweighofer 1993: 10-12).

Gruschka (2008) agrees with Wallrabenstein's (1991), Schweighofer's (1993) and Müller-Naendrup's (2008) definition of open learning. In his opinion open learning is no distinct, coherent teaching method, but stands for methodological peculiarities as well as for a widespread reformatory movement. Open learning is more a pedagogical conviction than a teaching method. It is a conviction which focusses on arranging the contact with pupils in such an openness as is best for their development. According to Gruschka the term open learning is a banner in the name of which those pedagogues unite who are against everything which is connected to the traditional school. In this context the traditional, enclosed school (as opposed to the open school) stands for learner

passivity, lack of freedom, lack of enjoyment, and the pupils' subjection to the constraints of an inflexible institution. Nevertheless, most adherents to the open learning movement do not like their pedagogical approach to be put on a level with didactic *laissez-faire* – i.e. an approach to learning without rules or restrictions where adults do not interfere in the children's development. In the open classroom pupils are not given the right to do whatever they want. To the contrary, in the context of open learning openness refers to the facilitation of flexibility, spontaneity, and creativity. A further unifying motive of the open learning movement is that pupils may be enabled to deal independently and autonomously with stimulating material (cf. Gruschka 2008: 9-18).

## **5.2. The principles of open learning settings**

Kernig (1997) and Gruschka (2008) established a more detailed definition of open learning summarising various principles which hold true for the majority of approaches to open learning. In accordance with the above given definitions Kernig refers to open learning as the total of various activities which take place in an environment organised in such a way as to ensure that every child can take full advantage of time, space, materials and help of a competent adult in order to develop freely using their individual learning styles to follow personal interests (cf. Kernig 1997: 42). In an attempt to bring some kind of structure into the seemingly endless variety of different definitions of open learning Kernig listed several general principles which hold true for all open learning settings:

1. An education which fosters the pupils' intellectual, social, emotional and moral development in equal amounts.
2. The child is seen as an active learner who tries to understand their environment.
3. The teacher's role is that of a well-informed observer whose main concern is the fostering of the pupils' interests and not the teaching of predetermined skills.
4. An environment has to be created which does not only facilitate learning but also incites the pupils to establish sensitivity for the aesthetic quality

of life.

5. Learning takes place with the help of experiences at first hand and with the help of a wide range of materials.
6. The learning environment allows for real interaction and communication in order for social and emotional development to take place (cf. Kernig 1997: 42).

Gruschka (2008) listed a number of definitive aspects of open learning settings which will help to draw an even more detailed image of open learning environments. Open learning (based on Gruschka 2008):

- includes slightly or strongly prepared activities and offers;
- incorporates individual as well as group activities which are interdisciplinary or related to one specific subject;
- learning has an open beginning and an open end;
- takes the form of short-term activities or year-long projects;
- focuses on the development of independence and personal responsibility;
- wants to get pupils in contact with problems in order to foster their handling of phenomena;
- regards as important the fostering of especially talented as well as less able pupils;
- sees social learning as fundamental for the pupils' development;
- wants to cater for an environment which is flexible and seeks for a great diversity as regards content and methodology;
- is open for impulses from outside the school and seeks the contact with the outside world;
- breaks open the strict learning in time intervals and the organisation of learning into subjects;
- is willing to stay flexible and avoid routines;
- and sees the way as the goal (cf. Gruschka 2008: 10-11).

### **5.3. Prominent forms of open learning**

The following is a short depiction of the best-known forms of open learning as based on Krause-Hotopp (1996). According to him the following forms of open learning are the most often applied in schools

#### **5.3.1. Tagesplanarbeit**

According to Krause-Hotopp (1996) learning following daily or weekly schedules derives from the conviction that learning is a strongly individual activity. He is convinced that it is impossible for pupils to acquire the same learning matters at the same time and pace as their classmates. Therefore, the daily work schedule comprises a range of obligatory and voluntary activities choosing from which the pupils plan their learning for the day. In addition, the pupils decide over the moment they engage in the activity, as well as the time span they spend working on it and the social form in which they fulfil the task. The learning material allows either for self-correction, or the teacher evaluates it at the end of the day. Habitually the daily work schedule is established during the morning meetings, but it can as well be planned beforehand for the whole week in the form of a weekly task schedule (cf. Krause-Hotopp 1996:18-19).

#### **5.3.2. Wochenplanarbeit**

The weekly task schedule includes obligatory activities which the pupils are meant to fulfil within the time span of one school week. Moreover it comprises indications of further free activities, suggestions for practice, new offers, materials and ideas for projects. The pupils and the teacher together decide over the weekly task schedule. Krause-Hotopp suggests class meetings at the end of each school week as an opportunity to reflect on the outcome of the past week as well as means to gather propositions for the following week's work plan cf. Krause-Hotopp 1996: 19-20).

### **5.3.3. Freiarbeit**

The most important aspect of free work is that pupils autonomously chose the content, goal and organisation of their learning. Very often free work is integrated into open learning settings in the form of free working phases as an addition to work schedules. Pupils use the phases of free work to achieve goals which they have set themselves. Moreover, in this context free means that the students individually chose the content of their learning, as well as the time, possible partners, materials and eventual outcomes. During free working phases learners habitually work either with self-chosen materials, or they try to find solutions to problems, or they engage in self-initiated projects. In the course of free working phases the pupils' creativity is enhanced and they can find out about individual abilities, can test and increase their aptitudes and develop new interests. In order for students to successfully engage in free work a great variety of appropriate material has to be at their disposition. During free working phases or in learning settings focussing on free work the teacher's function is to keep an overview over the pupils' individual learning needs as well as to keep an eye on their learning strategies. The teacher offers their help but they do not impose themselves on their students (cf. Krause-Hotopp 1996: 21-22).

### **5.3.4. Projektunterricht**

Learning in the form of projects can be embedded in both traditional and open learning settings. Ideally it is the pupils who initiate it and decide over its content. In the open classroom, for example, it happens that a problem arises in the course of the morning meeting which, then, becomes the basis for a project. Planning, organisation and accomplishment of the project are discussed by the pupils and the teacher together. Often projects are cross-disciplinary in order to allow pupils to approach the topic from several different angles. A project always ends with some kind of material outcome which is published inside or out of school. A further important aspect of project learning is that it should be action-oriented. Thus, a project should enable pupils to work using all their senses, not only their mental skills. Furthermore, the pupils should decide over the



devolution of the project. And the outcome of the project should have some practical value (cf. Krause-Hotopp 1996: 22-26).

#### **5.4. The goals of open learning**

Generally speaking, open learning settings have the goal of enabling pupils to develop into self-directed and self-responsible life-long learners who are aware of their learning needs, know how and where to acquire skills as well as knowledge and, additionally, are able to self-assess their proficiency. In an attempt to make these goals more explicit Schweighofer (1993) identified seven main goals which open classrooms wish to achieve (based on Schweighofer 1993):

##### *Goal 1: Free arrangement of work*

Human beings vary in their dispositions, interests, learning styles and learning rhythm. Thus, in fact it is paradoxical to expect pupils to follow a rigid teaching program. The open classroom tries to cater for its learners individual needs in that they are not forced to work at the same pace but have a certain freedom of choice regarding learning speed, materials and possible partners.

##### *Goal 2: Self-directed learning*

Ideally open classrooms give learners the possibility to learn about their learning. In the open classroom pupils have the freedom to try out different learning strategies and to confront their individual learning strengths as well as weaknesses in the course of doing so. While testing their abilities the pupils are meant to gain acceptance of failure and the self-confidence to try new ways. Open learning settings enable pupils to set their individual learning goals in respect of their abilities. Consequently, by aiming to achieve self-chosen rather than externally determined goals learners' motivation and willingness to work hard increase automatically. Moreover, in the course of setting and accomplishing their individual learning objectives students are meant to realise that they learn for themselves and for life and not in order to please teachers or parents.

### Goal 3: *Discipline*

In the open classroom it is necessary that students take over the full responsibility of their learning. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss with the pupils the questions of why and for who they learn. Pupils need to be made aware that they learn for themselves, in order to meet their own interests and expectations and not those of a teacher or parent.

### Goal 4: *Self-correction*

As regards error-correction in open learning settings the teacher's role changes in that they do not control their pupils' work themselves but act as facilitators of self-correction by ensuring that the pupils learn how to handle the number of self-correction techniques used. It is important to provide for a great variety of self-correction techniques ranging from simple to more abstract methods of self-control in order to cater for the pupils' different learning types and abilities.

### Goal 5: *Responsibility*

One especially important goal of open education is to engage students as much as possible in decision-taking processes. The learners are asked to actively involve in the planning, accomplishment and evaluation of the lessons. Pupils are meant to co-decide not only over methods and materials to be used, but as well over topics and long term goals.

### Goal 6: *Social competence*

In the open classroom there should be enough freedom for the pupils to gain experience in regard to themselves as individuals as well as their being part of a community. Pupils need to learn to work individually and to co-operate in small or large groups. The aim of the learning process clearly is to train the students in the giving and accepting of critique, in their respecting different opinions as well as their asserting themselves, in their taking over responsibility for themselves and the group, as well as abiding by collectively defined rules. In open learning settings there is room for individual as well as group work and co-operative work and social learning arises automatically from the collective planning, accomplishment, and evaluation of the lesson as well as the collective reflection on interpersonal relationships, or problems.

### Goal 7: *Learning to learn*

A central focus of open education is to foster the students' autonomy and independence. Therefore, the pupils are urged to engage in their individual

learning processes and to discretely take advantage of the variety of material and the time they need to accomplish their tasks. Additionally, learners should be encouraged to self-assess the outcome of their learning and to always search for new, creative approaches to problems (cf. Schweighofer 1993: 23-26).

## **5.5. Interest and motivation**

Adherers to the open learning movement criticise the traditional classroom for its lack of opportunities for self-determined learning. According to them traditional teaching methods are characterised by the external control of learning which would automatically force students into passivity. Moreover, they see in the fact that pupils are not allowed to autonomously decide over the content of their learning the reason for the dependence of the traditional school on drill and pressure to perform. They argue that only forms of teaching providing for a context in which pupils can pursue their individual interests would lead to successful learning, because only they can count on arousing the students intrinsic motivation. Studies proved that intrinsic motivation is independent of external factors. On the contrary, competence and self-determination are the key factors responsible for the creation of intrinsic motivation. Therefore, a feeling of real intrinsic gratification can arouse only, if the individual has the impression of having achieved a goal by acting autonomously and free of external control (cf. Jürgens 1996: 71-77). Thus, a central aspect of open learning is the opening of the lesson for the pupils' individual interests. Adherers of the open learning movement see in learning which is guided by the pupil's personal interest the first step towards the realisation of autonomous, self-directed learning. Studies investigating the effect of interest on learning performance were summarised by Jürgens (1996). The studies showed that interest had a profound impact on the learner's motivation, their learning strategies, the effectiveness of learning, their concentration, their experiencing the flow-feeling, and their emotional condition. As regards motivation it was found that students who are deeply interested in the subject they study enjoy learning for the sheer sake of it, act following their inner

conviction and tend to see themselves more as independent agents of their learning than students whose interest in the topic is less pronounced. Concerning learning techniques the research made clear that highly interested students use a wider range of elaborative learning strategies than less interested students. Techniques which interested learners used by far more often than less interested students were, for example, creating image representations, asking themselves questions, summarising with their own words, or establishing references to other subject areas. Regarding the effectiveness of learning researchers found that interested students worked more goal-oriented and with more security than less interested students. Additionally, more interested learners were by far more capable of using the acquired knowledge creatively. Studies on the connection of interest and concentration proved that the learning of interested students took place in a less exhausting, faster, and more effective way, because they spontaneously entered a state of unintentional, deep concentration which only slightly interested students did not attain. Moreover, deeply interested students more often experienced what experts call the 'flow'-condition. When learners reach this condition they are in such a deep state of concentration that they become totally unaffected by external distracting stimuli. In addition, the person experiencing the flow-condition forgets about time, enjoys what they are doing, and feels in control of all possible exigencies the situation may require. As a matter of course, interest influences the learner's emotional condition. Students who are truly interested in their study area enjoy increasing their knowledge on the subject. Consequently, the emotions accompanying their learning are positive and a positive affective condition of the learner is a prerequisite for the successful handling of complex learning matters. Moreover, students being in a positive affective condition while learning are more willing to follow new trains of thought and are more capable of finding creative problem solving strategies (cf. Jürgens 1996: 78-91).

## **5.6. Effectiveness of open learning**

Even though the effectiveness of the open learning approach will not be part of my investigation, I decided to include this section into my thesis in order to round off the topic and because I found the outcome of the studies depicted below interesting. The studies which have been conducted so far on the topic of the effectiveness of open learning can be organised into three main areas of interest. There have been inquiries concerning the different dimensions of the learners' personality, such as autonomy, curiosity, fearfulness, motivation, willingness to co-operate, etc. Second, there have been a range of studies on the effective utilisation of study time. And third, inquiries have been conducted as regards the learning gains of learners in open classrooms as compared to learners in traditional classrooms. In the first area of interest which examined what can be called the learners' social skills the outcome of the various studies undertaken has been the most consistent. As regards the learners' personality and social skills pupils from open learning settings are predominant to students from traditional classrooms. However, there have been contradictory conclusions concerning the effect of open learning on especially strong and particular weak learners as well as concerning its effect on motivation and fearfulness. Studies comparing the effective use of study time of students from open learning environments and learners from traditional classrooms showed that in the traditional classrooms more time is spent on activities than in open learning settings. Nevertheless, the contradictions in this area of inquiry are great. Concerning the learning gains of pupils some studies show that traditional learners acquire more knowledge than learners from open classrooms. However, other research projects found that pupils from open classrooms were not handicapped in this respect. Additionally, newer studies tend to prove positive learning gains for particularly strong and weak learners in open learning environments (cf. Müller-Naendrup 2008: 59-61).

Older studies undertaken during the 1980s and summarised by Jürgens (1996) led many researchers to the conclusion that most efficient for an increase in learning gains were lessons which were characterised by, first, an especially strong focus on learning matters, second, a highly structured, teacher-led

proceeding of the lesson based on instruction, third, clarity of the depicted learning matters, and fourth, a positive affective learner-teacher relationship. In summary, the studies tended to support the importance for positive learning gains of such aspects of the traditional classroom which more progressive teachers sought to ban from their lessons. Especially weak learners seemed to be overstrained by forms of open learning. As regards the increase in learning gains they profited most of teaching methods focussing on the intensive use of the study time available and of lessons in which extra time was spent on helping and counselling the learners, as well as clarifying and explaining learning matters in an easily understandable way. But stronger pupils' learning interest and motivation were negatively influenced by too strong a focus on structure and intensive use of study time. However, the informative value of the studies summarised by Jürgens stays unclear. Adherers of the open education movement never accepted the outcome of the studies anyway claiming that the two teaching approaches were not comparable in that way, because their underlying aims and intentions were completely divergent (cf. Jürgens 1996: 57-61).

In summary it can be said that whereas in the 1980s studies investigating the positive learning gains of students of traditional as compared to open classrooms tended to show traditional classrooms in a better light, they highlighted the positive influence of open learning settings on the pupils social competences. Research exploring the behaviour of problematic and hyperactive pupils in open classrooms yielded that their troublesome behaviour decreased quickly. The freedom the open classroom provided for undoubtedly helped the hyperactive pupils to cope with emotional and social problems. Thus, it can be argued that open learning settings generate forms of interaction and communication which help pupils develop and stabilise their emotional and social behaviour (cf. Jürgens 1996: 62-63).

## 6. Learner autonomy

Whereas theories on open learning are applied in more general teaching contexts and mainly in primary education, learner autonomy is a concept which stems from research on foreign language acquisition. As Phil Benson (2006) from the Hong Kong Institute of Education states first pedagogical experiments on learner autonomy go back to the political tumults and 'counter-cultures' in Europe in the late 60s. A strong focus on self-directed learning aroused in the language teaching context, which led to the development of self-access centres and learner training strategies. For a long time the idea of learner autonomy was equalled with a radical change in language pedagogy, as well as a rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of completely new learning settings into the language acquisition context (cf. Benson 2006: 22). Benson (2008) identified two main fractions in the theories on learner autonomy. Adherers to the the first fraction apply the wider, rather philosophical conception of personal autonomy as the freedom of external constraints and the ability to freely manage one's own life to the concept of learner autonomy in the foreign language learning context. They – i.e. Dickinson (1977), Wall (2003), Young (1986), and more - regard educational institutions as imposing constraints on learners and violating their autonomy. In their opinion real learner autonomy is the upper limit of self-directed learning and develops naturally, through processes of self-directed investigation and discovery outside the school or other educational institutions (cf. Benson 2008: 17-25). The second and more recent fraction believes that learner autonomy in the context of foreign language learning is something that can and needs to be taught in educational institutions. For experts in the field of foreign language learner autonomy, such as Henri Holec (1997) (who was the first to define learner autonomy as the 'capacity to take charge of one's own learning'), David Little (1999), and David Crabbe (1999), learner autonomy refers to metalinguistic awareness and the ability to take over responsibility for one's own learning. Crabbe states that

[T]he focus of the learner autonomy movement is on the ability to take over charge of one's own learning [...]. The heart of the concern is decision-making in the learning process. [...] The challenge for the

learner autonomy movement is to take greater account of learners' ability to set learning goals and to organise their own learning activity.  
(Crabbe 1999: 3)

David Little from the Trinity College in Dublin defines learner autonomy in harmony with Crabbe when he describes it as the “*capacity* – for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action” (Little 1991: 4). Elaborating on Crabbe's definition he states that

the basis of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning; the development of learner autonomy depends on the exercise of that responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degree of success; and the effect of learner autonomy is to remove the barriers that so easily erect themselves between formal learning and the wider environment in which the learner lives.  
(Little 1999: 11)

As can be seen from the definitions above the most important aspects of learner autonomy are, first, the ability to take over the responsibility for one's own learning, second, the capacity to set self-chosen goals, and third, the competence to critically reflect on the learning strategies used to reach these goals. Little adds an interesting facet to Crabbe's definition, when in the last three lines of the citation above he argues that the effect of learner autonomy is to enable learners to follow own interests independently outside of educational institutions.

## **6.1. The autonomous classroom**

Dam and Legenhausen (1999) expanded the above cited definitions of learner autonomy by comparing the traditional classroom, where the focus is more on teaching procedures than on learning processes, to autonomous classrooms, where the acquisition of and reflection on learning strategies is of main importance. Comparing the traditional to the autonomous classroom they see the main differences between the two, first of all, in who decides over learning objectives and material to be used, secondly, in the forms of evaluation of learning processes, and thirdly, in the activities provided. They describe the



traditional classroom as a learning environment in which the learning objectives are typically decided upon by the teacher and the textbook serves as main source for study material, as well as activities. In contrast to the traditional classroom in the autonomous classroom it is essential that the students are enabled to evolve an awareness of the goals and processes of learning and develop the ability to critically reflect on them. Therefore, in an autonomous learning environment pupils have to determine their own objectives within the curricular guidelines, and have to independently choose relevant materials and activities. An essential aspect of the autonomous classroom is self-evaluation. Whereas in the traditional classroom assessment of learning success or failure is mainly considered the teacher's business and is carried out by means of tests, in the autonomous classroom learners are required to self-evaluate the outcome of their learning. The evaluation of the ongoing learning processes is, thus, a part of the teaching/learning cycle in autonomous classrooms. Regarding activities, as well as classroom discourse Dam and Legenhausen point out the importance of the authenticity of these, because the form of the activity would highly influence the students' performance. As studies by Dam and Legenhausen comparing traditional to autonomous learners showed, the first group of learners was outperformed by autonomous learners in several ways. The vocabulary uttered by the autonomous learners contained a considerable amount of words not included in frequency lists for teaching. Moreover, it mirrored the learners' individual interests, as well as their authentic communicative needs. Unlike autonomous learners, traditional learners engaging in a textbook-based communicative activity depended solely on the textbook vocabulary. In addition, in spontaneous recall activities autonomous learners clearly outperformed traditional learners, because the first showed great risk-taking willingness, whereas the second tried to interact by recalling textbook phrases and tried to utter perfect sentences only. The reason for the better performance of autonomous learners in the above mentioned activities lies, according to Dam and Legenhausen, in the fact that in an autonomous classroom students are systematically exposed to authentic materials not designed for teaching purposes which, therefore, include many unknown structures and words. In addition, autonomous learners are from the very beginning required to develop strategies for coping with an uncertainty and

ambiguity not existent in carefully graded textbooks (cf. Dam and Legenhausen 1999: 91-93).

Little (1991) highlights, first of all, the function of the autonomous language classroom as an environment in which “learning proceeds by negotiation, interaction, and problem-solving rather than by telling and showing” (Little 1991: 48). Concerning the organisation of learning this means that teacher and learners co-operate in finding appropriate materials, as well as activities. In the autonomous classroom this collaboration is important, because, on the one hand, only the learners can know their individual needs, on the other hand, however, it is the teacher who has the expertise to cater for these needs, be it by helping the learners to find useful learning material or proposing learning methods to them. Therefore, the content of learning should be negotiated and re-examined on a regular basis (cf. Little 1991: 48-51).

As Little (1991) states outside formal educational contexts natural learning happens in harmony with the individual's inner agenda in order to fulfil some need of the learner. Thus, natural learning happens autonomously. Nevertheless, this form of learning takes place unconsciously most of the time, as only few learners are aware of their autonomy, or able to critically reflect on learning processes. Thus, the second important aspect of the autonomous classroom which Little highlights are learning strategies (these will be further discussed in section 6.2. below). According to Little within the context of formal education it is essential to autonomous learning that the learner “should develop a capacity to reflect critically on the learning process, evaluate his progress, and if necessary make adjustments to his learning strategies” (Little 1991: 52). In this context Little distinguishes between behavioural learning strategies and analytic learning strategies. The first are “kinds of linguistic or communicative behaviour likely to promote unconscious learning as the target language is used” (Little 1991: 53). Analytic strategies, on the other hand, are “techniques for organizing and remembering things one is conscious of wanting to learn” (Little 1991: 53). The teacher should implement both learning strategies in the classroom. Behavioural learning strategies give the students as much opportunities to use the target language as possible and get them into contact

with a wide range of different discourse roles. As a means of fostering the capacity of critical reflection Little argues that the learners should be encouraged to contemplate on their behaviour as they use the target language, mediating on the circumstances in which difficulties arise, as well as why they might arise (cf. Little 1991: 53). Analytical strategies focus on discrete items of the target language – i.e. words and phrases – and the rules concerning their correct use. Regarding the acquisition of vocabulary, for example, it is helpful not only to write the words into a vocabulary log, but to additionally organise them in semantic fields or thematic clusters. Moreover, learners should be asked to regularly reflect on the development of their word pool, asking themselves why they have difficulties actively using some words and not others. The learning of grammatical rules should be based on the investigation of language in use. Thus, learners should be invited to explore those grammatical rules which arise out of their individual communicative needs. Again, Little argues for the usefulness of having the students reflect on the errors they make, as well as the reasons why they make them. Inviting the students to correct one another's work can be conducive, too. In both vocabulary and grammar learning pupils may be encouraged to make use of their already existing knowledge of other languages, especially their L1. As Little states “[C]omparing patterns of regularity in the target language with patterns of regularity in the mother tongue can be one of the most effective routes to understanding “ (Little 1991: 53). Finally, learners need to be made aware that there exist more than one possible learning style and that they can be helped finding their individual style which best suits their needs (cf. Little 1991: 51-57).

## **6.2. Language learning strategies**

Little (1991) is not the only researcher highlighting the importance of learning strategies for learner autonomy. According to Cohen (1999) the term language learning strategies refers to the actions and steps taken by learners to improve their learning of a foreign language. Moreover, language learning strategies explicitly aim at helping learners to improve their knowledge in a target language (cf. Cohen 1999: 61). Whereas Cohen defines language learning

strategies from the learners' perspective, Nunan, Lai and Keobke (1999) define learner strategy training as the means teachers use to “involve language learners in their own learning processes” (Nunan, Lai and Keobke 1999: 69). The ways in which learner strategy training is realised are as numerous as are the teachers and researchers working with them. Some interesting cases of how teachers implemented language learning strategy training in their foreign language courses shall be depicted in the following paragraphs.

In order to promote learner autonomy in the traditional educational system Little (1991) argues for a highly communicative approach to language teaching, very much similar to the task-based learning (TBL) approach which will be the topic of the subsequent chapter of this paper. According to Little the target language should be the medium through which learners acquire the language and not the content of the learning. Thus, Little sees in communication in the target language the goal as well as the channel of learning (cf. Little 1991: 27-29). Moreover, in accordance with Dam and Legenhausen (1999) Little (1999) highlights the importance of the use of authentic material in the classroom for communicative activities. These authentic material and activities can, then, serve as the basis for a focus on linguistic form, as well as on learning strategies. As the students get acquainted with the target language in written and spoken form, the teacher can start to work with their learners on learning processes in general, such as the management of learning in relation to set goals, as well as on particular methods for the acquisition of a foreign language. The purpose of activities inciting students to critically reflect on their interlanguage - i.e. metalinguistic awareness-raising tasks - should always be to enable learners to “explore the ways in which the target language mediates meaning and gradually to expand their communicative capacity” (Little 1999: 10). In Little's view group work is an essential aspect of the raising of metalinguistic awareness in learners, because

[W]henver two or more people collaborate in the performance of a task, they must necessarily engage in negotiation and make explicit to one another aspects of task performance that might remain implicit if they were working alone.  
(Little 1999: 10)

Thus, as Little sees it, since learning naturally happens in the form of interactive processes between the learner and their environment, learner autonomy does not imply learner isolation, but, on the contrary, can be built through collaboration (cf. Little 1999: 8-11).

Cotterall and Crabbe (2008) argue for a problem-solution framework as a means to teach students how to consciously reflect on their learning strategies, problems and possible solutions. In their approach the teacher becomes the facilitator, adviser and counsellor of their pupils' learning. They created a kind of dialogue "that might uncover the diversity of learners' experiences of the task of learning a language" (Cotterall and Crabbe 2008: 126). Thus, the focus of their problem-solution framework lies on individual teacher-learner conversation to raise metalinguistic awareness in the learners. The dialogue follows four main steps: the sensing of a difficulty, the analysis of the difficulty, the clarification of goals and the identification of solutions (cf. Cotterall and Crabbe 2008: 125-129).

Nunan, Lai and Keobke (1999) investigated the influence of learner strategy training on language learners in the course of three projects. Nunan designed a guided journal for learners to complete at the end of every week of a twelve week period. The journal included incomplete sentences, such as 'This week I studied:', for example, for the students to complete. Lai made her students work with a self-report questionnaire on learning listening skills, a guided listening journal and a guided learner diary. And Keobke used computer assisted instruction to raise metalinguistic awareness in his students (cf. Nunan, Lai and Keobke 1999: 69-77). Nunan, Lai and Keobke found that autonomy is increased when learners are:

- encouraged to self-monitor and self-assess;
- encouraged to reflect critically on their learning process;
- given opportunities to select content and learning tasks and also when they are provided with opportunities to evaluate their own progress;
- encouraged to find their own language data and create their own learning tasks;
- actively involved in productive use of the target language, rather than

merely reproducing language models provided by the teacher or the textbook;

- systematically incorporating strategies training into the learning process (Nunan, Lai and Keobke 1999: 77).

In order to cater for the needs of a particularly difficult pupil Leni Dam (1999) introduced learner initiated and directed activities into her English lessons. Her ideal was to create a learning environment facilitating learning and giving space to the individual student to develop personally as well as linguistically. Thus, she wanted to create a learning environment in which her pupils would develop into autonomous learners “capable of taking charge of their own learning in the service of their individual needs and purposes” (Dam 1999: 14). Therefore, Dam designed a plan for a learning period including three phases. An initial phase with teacher initiated activities promoting awareness raising as regarded the learning environment, responsibilities, interpreting, expressing and the learners' evaluation of teacher initiated activities. A second phase with learner initiated and directed activities. And a final phase with shared activities. Due to the autonomous learning environment Dam's weak student learnt to estimate his language competence and developed an awareness of his own role as well as of the roles of his classmates and the teacher. Dam sees the reasons for her student's progress in the following aspects. The autonomous learning environment catered for a setting

- where expectations and demands were explicitly stated;
- where there was a well-defined freedom of choice e.g. of activities, partners, homework;
- where he was required to make a choice and was made responsible for this choice;
- which catered for individual differences and at the same time built upon peer-to-peer co-operation and support (Dam 1999: 25).

### **6.3. Autonomy beyond the classroom**

As already mentioned above the idea of learner autonomy found its first application in self-access centres. And although the main focus shifted from self-access centres to the implementation of self-directed learning into the traditional classroom in the 1990s, self-access remained a central focus of

attention in learner autonomy research. Self-access centres and other forms of self-directed learning, which started out as radical alternatives to the classroom, today have found their way into institutionalised language learning. Learning methods which initially were forms of autonomy beyond the classroom are the following, for example (based on Benson 2006):

1. Self-access centres: Beginning in the early 90s there has been a gradual shift from the organisation of independent centres to the involvement of self-access learning in in-class studying within the last years.
2. Computer assisted language learning (CALL): CALL found its way into traditional classrooms very quickly.
3. Distance learning: It has begun to fuse with CALL through concepts such as 'online learning' and 'cyberschools'.
4. Tandem learning: Since the raise of the Internet the co-learning and helping each other of two learners with different L1s has been of increased interest in the language learning field. Europe, Japan, Russia and the USA have initiated tandem learning projects.
5. Study abroad: Today language learning programmes frequently arrange for periods to spend in the target language communities.
6. Out-of-class learning: Out-of-class learning refers to the efforts students undertake to improve their target language proficiency in settings outside the classroom. Recent studies prove that learners engage in out-of-class learning situations more often than their teachers believe.
7. Self-instruction: Learners who use self-instruction learn a language without the aid of a teacher, but with the help of printed or broadcast self-study material (cf. Benson 2006: 25-27).

What the above mentioned methods of self-directed learning have in common is that initially they were forms of learning taking place without teacher support. Since their initiation, however, there have been controversies concerning the question whether these learning facilities foster learner autonomy, or actually demand for an already existing capacity of self-directed learning in students. So, recently one of the most prominent topics in the literature on this area has been the apparent need for teacher support to guide learners towards forms of self-directed learning (cf. Benson 2006: 28).

## 6.4. Autonomous learning material

Holec (1997) stresses the importance of creating appropriate language learning resources in order to foster learner autonomy. He enumerates a list of features describing material for self-directed learning. As a matter of fact they are different to resources required for teacher-directed learning. First of all, self-directed learning material are not pre-adapted to the learners – i.e. the learners' needs, their specific levels, or particular learner types. Second, as the material has to be available through self-access, they have to be “*self-sufficient*, ie they contain all the information, or give access to the information, which the learner may need to be able to use them” (Holec 1997: 28). Third, they need to be adaptable to the learners individual needs and objectives. And last, they need to be usable under the learning conditions the student has chosen (cf. Holec 1997: 27-28). Holec divides self-directed learning material into two main categories, pre-constructed but not pre-adapted materials and materials to be developed by learners. The first category of materials consists of resources designed with particular acquisition objectives in mind which the learners can access freely to realise the acquisition objectives which they have set themselves. The second category consists of material without any instruction for use. These materials can be adapted by learners to create their own learning instruments (cf. Holec 1997: 31). Summarising the outcome of a series of international projects on learner autonomy, initiated by the European Council and directed by Henri Holec, Irma Huttunen (1997) created a list of resources useful in the context of self-directed learning:

- 'Authentic materials', such as novels, newspapers and periodicals, maps, charts, brochures, advertisements, video tapes, audio tapes, etc.
- Materials for other subject areas in the target language, such as texts on history and cultural studies, for example.
- Internet, interactive multimedia, CD-ROMs, e-mail-based communication.
- Exchange of information, reports, questionnaires, letters, etc. via ordinary mail (cf. Huttunen 1997: 40-41).



In addition she mentions out-of-school contacts and school exchanges as a valuable resource in the self-directed learning context (cf. Huttunen 1997: 45).

## **6.5. Self-evaluation**

The capacity for self-evaluation of learning processes is an important aspect in the context of learner autonomy. As Dam and Legenhausen (1999) point out evaluation has always been an integral part of any educational context, but rather in the form of external assessment by the teacher than learner self-evaluation. In an autonomous classroom, however, "it is viewed as the pivot of a good learning/teaching cycle" (Dam and Legenhausen 1999: 90). In this context, evaluation carried out by the students and the teacher can be seen as a continuous learning activity in itself. According to Dam and Legenhausen it is valuable in especially two ways, as it incites the learner to reflect on previous learning processes and allows them to articulate plans for future action on the basis of their conclusions. Dam and Legenhausen list five main questions which are asked regularly (by the learners as well as by the teacher) in the course of the evaluation process:

- × What are we doing?
- × Why are we doing it?
- × How are we doing it and with what result?
- × What can it be used for?
- × What next?

(Dam and Legenhausen 1999: 90)

In Dam and Legenhausen's autonomous classroom the above enlisted questions serve as a basis for dialogues between the learners or the teacher and learners. These evaluative dialogues are performed as informal discussions or on the basis of answers to questionnaires including questions in the kind of the above mentioned designed to help the students reflect on their learning. The conclusions drawn from these reflections are, then, put on classroom posters or written into diaries kept by the students and the teacher (cf. Dam and Legenhausen 1999: 89-90). Although self-evaluation of strengths, weaknesses and progress in the four skills takes place on a regular basis in the autonomous

classroom described above, Dam and Legenhausen decided to additionally elicit special sets of self-evaluation from more advanced autonomous learners in order to clarify in how far their self-evaluation would be similar, or different to the teacher's evaluation. Sixth and seventh year students of learning English autonomously were given a scale between 1 and 10 divided into three sections (1-3: below average, 4-7: average, 8-10 above average) with the help of which they had to locate their abilities regarding the four skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking). Moreover, they had to comment on their ratings. In Dam and Legenhausen's autonomous classroom the students used the following yardsticks to evaluate their abilities. They compared their performance, first of all, with their individual goals and expectations, secondly, with the proficiency levels of members of the same learning group, and thirdly, with the extent to which they successfully managed the target language during the classroom activities and interactions. External assessment of the learners' proficiency levels was done by the teacher in the case of the sixth grade students. The seventh grade students took part in a test of writing ability. The outcome of this study was that the correlation between the learners' self-evaluation and the external assessment by the teacher or the test was strikingly high. Thus, Dam and Legenhausen's study seems to indicate that teacher or test assessment are no more valid than the self-evaluations of autonomous learners (cf. Dam and Legenhausen 1999: 93-98).

Teija Natri (2007) from the University of Jyväskylä in Finland has been using continuous self- and peer-evaluation to promote learner autonomy in her French courses since 2001. Beginning the learner autonomy training her basic assumption was that her students would automatically become more responsible about their learning, if part of the grading was done by themselves. Natri's approach to learner autonomy training is characterised by a strong focus on the five linguistic skills introduced by the Council of Europe in the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) – i.e. listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing. Natri identified a range of benefits of self-evaluation for the learners as well as the teacher. First, self-evaluation can help students to detect their individual strengths and weaknesses. Second, it helps them realise that language learning consists of the training of several

skills and that they can be weak in one skill, but still strong in another skill. Third, the detailed depiction of the levels of linguistic proficiency in the CEFR helps the students to specify clear starting and target levels for the five skills. Finally, the strong focus on self-evaluation lets the students take the first steps towards self-directed learning and goal determination. The teacher, too, benefits from the self-evaluation of their students, as it provides them with information about their learning histories, their general skills and proficiency levels, as well as their preferred learning methods, and so, helps the teacher to adapt the course to the group's specific needs. In order to guide her learners towards a more self-directed kind of learning, Natri had her students write down their language learning histories at the beginning of the course. As a follow-up step she asked her learners to identify their proficiency levels for every skill with the help of the CEFR, and to determine a target level for each skill. Additionally, Natri made them produce a list of suitable learning methods for every skill. During the course she used face-to-face peer evaluation after a number of spoken interaction activities. At the end of the course Natri had her students review the self-evaluation grid they had filled in at the beginning of the course asking them to verify whether they achieved their goals or not. From her students' oral and written feedback to the self-evaluation processes they were engaged in during the course Natri inferred that the learners actually started to develop the abilities to determine their proficiency levels, to identify those skills they needed to work on harder, and to come up with strategies to improve their skills. Moreover, she found that since she began to integrate self-evaluation into her courses several of her students engaged more willingly in additional out-of-class work, because they found it necessary to achieve their individual goals fixed at the beginning of the course. Some of Natri's students even started to make plans for their further studies or for life-long learning. Nevertheless, Natri found that, especially for those learners who had little prior experiences with self-evaluation, the limited practice during her course was not enough. Some of her students did not show any progress in their self-directed learning, even though they completed all the different evaluation tasks (cf. Natri 2007: 108-19).

## **7. Task-based learning**

Since the 1960ies intensified research in the domain of language pedagogy and didactics has been conducted under the name of Second Language Acquisition research (SLA). The latest trend in SLA is Task-based Learning (TBL) research in which started in the 1990ies. In TBL the focus lies with creating a rather authentic context in which learners have to use their individual second language (L2) knowledge in real-time communication in order to achieve a common goal.

### **7.1. Definition of task**

Ur (1996) defines a task in the context of TBL as

essentially goal-oriented: it requires the group, or pair, to achieve an objective that is usually expressed by an observable result, such as brief notes or lists, a rearrangement of jumbled items, a drawing, a spoken summary. This result should be attainable only by interaction between participants [...].  
(Ur 1996: 123-24)

According to Willis (1996) tasks are “activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (Willis 1996: 23). Skehan (1996a) defines a task as

an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome.  
(Skehan 1996a: 38)

Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) agree that definitions of tasks will depend upon the different contexts in which they are used. Their definition of a task in the pragmatic/pedagogic context is “an activity, susceptible to brief or extended intervention, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective” (Bygate, Skehan and Swain 2001: 11). In summary, all of the above mentioned definitions have certain aspects in common. They concur in three aspects especially, describing tasks as

communicative activities which are goal-oriented and have some sort of observable outcome. Whereas Willis' (1996) definition is rather superficial, Skehan (1996a) includes an interesting facet in his depiction. In his opinion tasks feature some connection to the real world – i.e. they need to be authentic. What distinguishes Ur's (1996) definition from the others is that she depicts tasks basically as group or pair activities. The most detailed definition of tasks is provided by Ellis (2003). Based on the definitions given above she established a more complete description of tasks, enlisting six fundamental criteria:

- A task is a workplan for learner activity in the form of teaching materials, or activities which present itself in the course of the lesson. Communication may or may not arise.
- A task focuses primarily on meaning. In order to bring learners to improve their L2 proficiency through pragmatic language use tasks imply some sort of gap, such as an information, opinion, or reasoning gap. This gap incites the learners to use their L2 knowledge to close it. Tasks do not particularise what language the learners should use. A task creates a specific semantic field which learners need to refer to. The final choice, however, is left to the students. And the outcome, thus, is not always predictable.
- Tasks involve learners in the use of authentic language forms found in real-world communication, such as asking and answering questions, or demanding for clarification.
- Tasks incite learners to work with any of the four language skills.
- In order to accomplish a task learners need to employ cognitive processes – i.e. selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information. These processes influence but do not fix the language forms to be used.
- The outcome of tasks are non-linguistic (cf. Ellis 2003: 209-10).

## 7.2. Principles of TBL

Ellis (2003) summarised eight guidelines for efficient task-based language teaching (TBLT). Teachers can orientate along these guidelines when working with a TBL syllabus.

Principle 1: *Make sure the task has an appropriate level of difficulty.*

Teachers can assure an appropriate level of task difficulty by adding pre-task phases, by using the target language adequately, as well as by providing the learners with the necessary strategies to engage in task-based instruction.

Principle 2: *Identify unambiguous goals for each task-based lesson.*

Methodological options can help teachers to clarify the priority of specific language aspects. They can help teachers, for example, to prioritise accuracy versus fluency.

Principle 3: *Assure that your students know why they engage in a task.*

Learners need to regard the tasks they engage in seriously. In this context, post-task focus on form plays a central role in displaying that tasks help learners develop their L2 proficiency.

Principle 4: *Pupils have to be active in task-based lessons.*

Students should be given enough opportunities to engage in spontaneous and meaningful negotiation of meaning. With the help of group or pair work, for example, it can be ensured that learners fully take part in activities.

Principle 5: *Learners need to take risks.*

In order to increase their L2 proficiency students need to be encouraged to experiment with their interlanguage resources. Opportunities for private speech, tasks of an appropriate level of challenge, as well as a supporting classroom atmosphere help to encourage risk taking in pupils.

Principle 6: *Ensure that pupils use the language in order to achieve a goal.*

When students engage in a task, they should be eager to achieve an outcome, not to expose their L2 knowledge. In order to get learners to use their interlanguage only as a tool to achieve a common goal, they have to be motivated to do the task. Learner motivation can be increased by varying the design and setting of task-based lessons.

Principle 7: *Incorporate opportunities for focus on form in the lesson.*

Ellis argues that focus on form in all of the phases of the task cycle can be

beneficial for the pupils' L2 development and need not conflict with principle 6.

Principle 8: *Encourage students to reflect on their L2 development.*

Learners should be enabled to reflect on how they engage in a task, as well as on their overall progress in developing their interlanguage (cf. Ellis 2003: 276-78).

### **7.3. Focus on meaning vs focus on form**

As can be seen from the definitions of tasks given above individual, meaningful learner communication plays a central role in TBL. This focus on learner communication was generated by many teachers' and researchers' discontent with existing linguistic syllabuses based on the instruction of lists of isolated linguistic items (a teaching approach which Long (1991) refers to as 'focus on forms' as opposed to 'focus on form'; for a detailed discussion see the section below). Simultaneously, critique on too strong a focus on the teaching of isolated linguistic items arose by research showing that acquiring the grammar of a language L2 learners followed their individual innate syllabuses. The linguist Stephen Krashen (1989) found that L2 students did not fully acquire a grammatical item and were not able to use it, before being ready to do so, irrespective of error-correction or the amount of drills they engaged in. Additionally, Long and Crookes (1992) criticised forms of instruction which presented grammatical items separately as being inconsistent with findings about L2 acquisition and as negatively interfering with the learners' interlanguage development (cf. Long and Crookes 1992: 30-1). In harmony with Krashen as well as Long and Crookes Ellis (2003) states that the task-based approach to teaching arose out of the realisation that it was not possible to determine in advance what linguistic features students were ready to learn. Therefore, one had to abandon the teaching of pre-selected linguistic items in favour of a form of teaching which focused on holistic units of communication – i.e. tasks (cf. Ellis 2003: 208).

Nevertheless, Ellis and Willis (1996) argue for a focus on fluent and authentic learner communication in TBL without totally abstracting away from focus on

form. Ellis is convinced that students can be helped acquiring a L2 by form-focused instruction:

There is now clear evidence that instruction of the focus-on-form kind can influence the accuracy with which learners use the targeted features, even in unplanned language use.  
(Ellis 2003: 209)

For the incorporation of focus on form into a task-based syllabus Ellis identified two principal paths. First, the teacher can draw their pupils attention to particular properties of the language by means of tasks which have been designed especially for this purpose. Or, second, focus on form can be included in linguistically unfocused tasks – i.e. tasks not incorporating focus on form – by means of giving feedback about a learner error, or by the teacher or student addressing a form which came up in the course of the interaction (cf. Ellis 2003: 230). Willis identified instruction focusing on form as one of the four principle conditions for language learning to take place (the other conditions are exposure to the target language, language use and motivation). In Willis' opinion it is more beneficial for language learners to look at language forms in the course of task-completion as need arises than having them focus on isolated linguistic items. As she states

[A]ctivities aimed at promoting awareness of language form, making students conscious of particular language features and encouraging them to think about them are likely to be more beneficial in the long run than form-focused activities aimed at automating production of a single item.  
(Willis 1996: 16)

Moreover, she is convinced that instruction does not change the learner's developmental sequence. In other words, pupils will not acquire language properties at the moment they are taught but only when they are ready to do so. Additionally, instruction cannot change the sequence in which language features begin to occur in spontaneous learner L2 output. Nevertheless, "given adequate exposure and the right conditions, their language system will develop along similar lines to those of people who acquire the language naturally" (Willis 1996: 15). According to Willis form-focused instruction can help learners recognise particular language items which they have heard before in the input they are



exposed to. In addition, it helps them process grammatical and lexical patterns and to form, verify and alter hypotheses about their use and meaning. In summary, teachers can help their students reflect on language form by providing them with as rich a variety of language as possible, by designing tasks which aim at highlighting specific language properties which occur naturally in their reading and listening texts, and by giving them plenty of opportunities to ask about features they noticed themselves (cf. Willis 1996: 15-16).

#### **7.4. Focus on form vs focus on forms**

Michael H. Long (1991) was the first to use the term 'focus on forms' to refer to traditional syllabi which regard a language as the sum of its isolated linguistic items, teaching and testing them one at a time. He used the term to summarise pervasive teaching methods, such as grammar and vocabulary explanations, display questions, fill-in-the-blanks exercises, dialogue memorisation, drills and error correction (cf. Long 1991: 39-41). He identified three main approaches to L2 teaching, 'focus on forms', 'focus on meaning' and 'focus on form'. In agreement with Willis (1996) and Ellis (2003) who argue against the teaching of isolated linguistic items and are convinced of the existence of a fixed developmental sequence Long criticises forms-focused syllabi for their ineffectiveness. He states that

[O]f the hundreds of studies of interlanguage (IL) now completed, not one shows either tutored or naturalistic learners developing proficiency *[in]* one linguistic item at a time. On the contrary, all reveal complex, gradual and inter-related developmental paths for grammatical subsystems [...]. Moreover, development is not unidirectional; omission/suppliance of forms fluctuates, as does accuracy of suppliance.  
(Long 1991: 44)

Thus, acquiring a L2 learners obviously pass through fixed developmental sequences the passage through which can differ in time from one stage to the next, but whose order appears to be unavoidable. Striking is that according to the above mentioned studies developmental sequences very rarely reflect instructional sequences. What is more, passing through a developmental

sequence learners do not directly move from zero knowledge of a rule to its mastery. Often they pass through stages of targetlike L2 behaviour, only to fall back to non-targetlike use of the L2 directly afterwards. These findings led a small minority of teachers and syllabus designers to turn towards teaching programs which show no overt focus on linguistic forms at all, but have a strong 'focus on meaning'. Their fundamental claim is that learners of all ages would acquire a language best by using it as a medium of communication. Some even maintain that L2 acquisition could happen similarly to the L1 acquisition of young children. That is, incidentally and without awareness while concentrating on something else. However, Long (1998) doubts that adults are able to gain L2 proficiency simply by being exposed to comprehensible target language samples. He supports the idea that instead of forcing an external syllabus on their pupils, teachers should help them unfolding their internal one. Nevertheless, since various studies have shown that adult L2 learners may become fluent but not native-like speakers through extended natural exposure to the target language, he argues against too strong a focus on meaning. Instead, he opts for syllabi allowing for meaningful communication as well as 'focus on form', such as TBL, for example. Focus on form approaches to L2 acquisition see interaction between learners, interaction between learners and native speakers, as well as interaction between learners and elaborated written texts as a crucial site for learning. An important aspect of form-focused teaching is negotiation for meaning (between speakers, as well as between learners and authentic texts) as it increases input comprehensibility without denying learners access to new L2 forms (as do didactically devised texts). Thus, in form-focused approaches tasks are designed in order to cater for the needs of a particular group of learners and without any specific linguistic focus. Possible tasks may be attending a job interview, or making an airline reservation. The fundamental orientation of the task is to meaningful communication, but it is unavoidable that in the course of task completion factors arise which make a focus on form necessary. For instance, while walking around the classroom the teacher may overhear that several of the learner groups working on a problem-solving task come up with the same error. Consequently, they may shortly interrupt the group work in order to draw attention to the problem. Alternatively, the teacher may implement focus on form by providing implicit negative feedback in the form of

recasts – i.e. correct reformulations of the learner utterances (cf. Long 1998: 15-26).

## **7.5. The TBL framework**

TBL is not only about getting students to do a series of tasks, but in order for tasks to cater for the learners constant linguistic development a task is embedded in a larger framework consisting of a pre-task phase, the task cycle and a post-task phase. In the pre-task phase the learners and the teacher plan the task cycle. During the task cycle learners engage in the actual activity. And the post-task phase helps students to focus on language forms and report the outcome of the task (cf. Ellis 2003 and Willis 1996).

### **7.5.1. Pre-task phase**

The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students for the subsequent task in such a way as to promote acquisition and ensure a successful devolution of the task cycle. As Ellis (2003) states the pre-task phase should include strategies for “whetting students' appetites to perform the task” (Ellis 2003: 244). An additional aim of the pre-task phase is to provide learners with the necessary vocabulary for engaging in the task. Willis (1996) gives a list of motivating pre-task activities which at the same time activate existing knowledge on the topic. Such activities are, for example, classifying words and phrases, odd one out, matching phrases to pictures, thinking of questions to ask, and so forth (cf. Willis 1996: 43-44). There are three steps the teacher undergoes during the pre-task phase. First of all, the teacher needs to introduce the topic to the pupils. Secondly, the learners need to be helped recalling and gathering words and phrases helpful for the completion of the task. The purpose of this second step is not to confront learners with large amounts of new vocabulary, but to promote their motivation to engage in the task, as well as their confidence in their ability to handle it. The third step in the pre-task phase is to clarify whether the whole class really understood the task's requirements. In order to ensure that the pupils apprehended the instructions the teacher can have the students read the

instructions by themselves, demonstrate the task with a good student, play an audio or video recording of fluent speakers doing the task, or show the learners what previous classes have achieved (cf. Willis 1996: 42-46).

### **7.5.2. Task cycle**

Regarding the methodological options the teacher has during the task itself Ellis (2003) distinguishes between performance options – i.e. options referring to how the learners are meant to carry out the task which the teacher can plan in advance – and process options – i.e. decisions the teacher and the learners need to make in the course of the task process which cannot be planned in advance. There are three performance options the teacher has to decide on before the students engage in the task. First, the teacher can give the pupils either a limited or an unlimited time span to conduct the task. The teacher's decision will depend upon what they want learners to improve during the task as studies showed that time pressure encouraged fluency in students whereas learners who were allowed to complete an activity in their own time focused more on form and produced language which was more accurate. Second, the teacher has to decide beforehand if they give students access to the input data during the task performance. It was found that students who could use the input data during the task employed more of the target words than pupils who could not. However, the target words were not used in original language but only in sentences taken over one-to-one from the input data. Therefore, it remains unclear whether use of input data really enhances acquisition. The third performance option the teacher needs to think about in advance is whether they want to introduce a surprise element into the task which leads to a greater amount of student talk and often increases intrinsic interest in the task (cf. Ellis 2003: 249-51). Process options relate to all decisions the teacher has to make when the task is already in flow. These decisions principally refer to how the arising discourse is handled. In TBL the discourse which arises in the course of a task ideally is resembling that found in non-pedagogic settings and is different to discourse structures typical for form-focused pedagogy. Some of the main differences between a teacher-centred, form-focused pedagogy and TBL are the

following (based on Ellis 2003):

- In contrast to forms-focused pedagogy where discourse is controlled by the teacher and follows the initiate-respond-feedback structure, in TBL discourse structures are looser and students themselves control the topic development. Thus, in TBL pair and group work play a central role.
- In forms-focused teaching settings learners have the passive role of answering questions the answers to which they habitually have learnt beforehand. Need to negotiate meaning is, therefore, low. In TBL pupils function in both initiating and responding roles and negotiation of meaning is a necessary means to complete the task.
- In forms-based instruction focus on form and error correction are mainly initiated by the teacher and aimed at the correctness of learner utterances. In TBL feedback is more content-focused and meant primarily to enable students to express themselves (cf. Ellis 2003: 253).

Willis (1996) identified three fundamental components of the task cycle, namely task, planning and report. During the task stage learners can try out their L2 proficiency autonomously without the teacher's direct support. After the task stage the lesson proceeds to the planning stage during which the pupils prepare to report to the whole class about how they undertook the task and what was the outcome. Reports can take the form of written, oral, audio or video presentations. Since the report has to be addressed to the whole class or, in some cases, even to a public audience, Willis argues that pupils will want their report to be correct. Thus, "the report stage, then, gives students a natural stimulus to upgrade and improve their language" (Willis 2003: 55). Hence, it is mainly in the planning phase that the need for focus on accuracy arises and should be catered for by the teacher (cf. Willis 2003: 52-58). The report stage constitutes less learning opportunity for the pupils than the other stages, but without it none of the previous stages would be necessary. Time planning is important for this stage. It is best to plan in advance how much time should be spent on each presentation. Another important aspect of this phase of the TBL cycle is to make sure that all pupils and not only the presenting student have to work. During the presentation the other groups can be incited to take notes, for example, or compare results (cf. Willis 2003: 58-61).

### 7.5.3. Post-task phase

According to Ellis (2003) the post-task stage has three major pedagogical goals:

- (1) to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task; (2) to encourage reflection on how the task was performed; and (3) to encourage attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task.  
(Ellis 2003: 258)

Case studies showed that learner L2 performance improved in various ways when a task was repeated. The repeat performance can be carried out under the same, or under changed circumstances. Ellis (2003) indicates that if there is a need to train students in speaking before a broader public, a possibility is to have the pupils repeat the task publicly. A second valuable thing to do is have the learners reflect on the task they have undertaken in order to promote their metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluating. They could be asked whether they are content with their performance of the task, or whether they focused on fluency, accuracy or complexity during the task, how they handled communication problems, what they think they learnt from the task and even how they possibly could improve their performance. In harmony with Willis (1996) Ellis is convinced that the post-task stage presents a good opportunity “to counter the danger that students will develop fluency at the expense of accuracy” (Ellis 2003: 260). Focus on form, however, can occur in any of the three stages of the task cycle. As a means to focus students' attention to form Ellis suggests four strategies, reviewing learner errors, consciousness-raising tasks, production-practice activities and noticing activities. While the pupils engage in the tasks the teacher can move from group to group and take note of any errors they make. Afterwards, in the post-task phase the teacher can work on these errors together with the whole class. Consciousness-raising tasks - i.e. tasks drawing the learners' attention to a particular rule or form - can be easily integrated in the during-task stage, but they can, as well, serve as follow-up activities. Production-practice activities - i.e. drills - are a more traditional form of language practice. They include, for example, repetition, jumbled sentences, transformation drills and dialogues. Even though the value of production-practice activities has been challenged, they may help learners automatise

certain language features. As a fourth strategy to enhance focus on form in the classroom Ellis mentions noticing activities. These can take the form of a dictation, for example, enriched with language features which students have encountered previously (cf. Ellis 2003: 258-262).

## **7.6. Teacher role in TBL**

On the topic of tasks Samuda (2001) is of the opinion that it is important for the task to be meaningful and authentic. Moreover, in TBL the teacher's role is to complement the task by guiding attention towards focus on form. In addition she sees the input data - i.e. the text or script the task is based on – as an important means to support the teacher. In the study she conducted with learners of English the teacher systematically introduced language from the input data in her own speech. Her repeated use of the lexical field from the input data lead to her learners integrating the words into their own speech without being really aware of it. Instead of having her students study vocabulary lists, one could say that the teacher tricked the pupils into acquiring new words simply by continuously repeating it to them. Thus, in addition to providing learners with carefully designed tasks which address students at the level of their L2 proficiency, teachers need to be able to “lead from behind” (Samuda 2001: 137), to support the pupils' learning processes in an unobtrusive way (cf. Samuda 2001: 136-37).

Willis (1996) refers to the teacher in TBL as a facilitator. She states that “[F]acilitating learning involves balancing the amount of exposure and use of language, and ensuring they are both of suitable quality” (Willis 1996: 40). In the course of the task cycle the teacher takes over a variety of different roles. During the pre-task phase the teacher activates existing knowledge and vocabulary on the topic in their students, explains the task outlines and makes sure that the class understood what the task requires (cf. Willis 2003: 38-46). During the task phase the teacher functions mainly as monitor. In the course of this stage teachers need to self-control themselves not to interfere too much and have the pupils manage the task on their own. The teacher ensures that all

groups are doing the right task, encourages the learners to communicate in the L2, forgives learner errors and postpones discussion of these to the post-task phase, makes sure that all students participate and keeps an eye on the time (cf. Willis 2003: 53-54). During the planning stage the teacher's role is that of a language adviser helping the students to express themselves more clearly. In the report stage the teacher acts as chairperson mainly. They introduce the presentations, fix a purpose for listening, decide who presents next and sum up the whole process at the end (cf. Willis 2003: 56-61).



## 8. The English lessons

For the sake of simplicity I will refer to the English teacher using the synonym Ms L. During the half year in the course of which I visited the *SchülerInnen Schule* at least every second week for a day Ms L offered a total of eleven English lessons on Monday and Tuesday plus one tutoring English lesson for the older pupils of the Werkcollege on Thursday. The lessons she offered for the pupils to choose from were open English, literature, biology beginners, biology advanced, democracies, green book, yellow book, reading beginners and computer. During the open English lessons overt focus lay on the acquisition of English as a second language. The lessons yellow book and green book were mainly dedicated to the discussion of grammar. In the course of these lessons Ms L and the pupils together worked through the Cambridge 'English for Schools' workbook. The yellow book was the workbook for first- and the green book the workbook for second year students. However, a few of these lessons were dedicated to other activities, such as letter writing to one of the twin schools of the *SchülerInnen Schule*, for instance. Reading beginners was dedicated to the training of the reading, spelling and pronunciation of simple English texts. And during the literature lessons the pupils silently read English books which they had chosen from Ms L's small library. The books in Ms L's library were selected according to the Austrian AHS curriculum. The courses biology, democracies and computer were content-focused and English served as a working language only. Thus, no attention was paid to the language as such. In my analysis I will pay attention to the language-focused lessons (open English, yellow book, green book, and reading beginners) mainly.

As a pupil Ms L attended the Sudbury Valley School on Hawaii, an alternative school focusing on open learning. Today, Ms L has her pupils engage in self-directed learning too. Her lessons will be depicted in further detail in the section on open learning below. On the following pages I will analyse in how far Ms L's method of teaching shows characteristics of open learning as discussed in chapter five. Furthermore, I will compare Ms L's approach to two of the latest trends in SLA didactics, namely learner autonomy and TBL (see chapters six

and seven).

## 8.1. Open learning

In the chapter on open learning it has been argued that there exist a great variety of forms of open learning and that experts find it problematic to establish a universally valid definition. Therefore, various possible definitions and forms of open learning were presented. In the following sections I will compare Ms L's open classroom to the forms of open learning depicted in the theoretical part of my thesis.

Wallrabenstein (1991), Schweighofer (1993) and Müller-Naendrup (2008) identified the open classroom as being open in especially three aspects. First of all, it is open on a methodical-organisational dimension. Instead of being the mere recipients of precast knowledge, in the open classroom the pupils are the agents of their own learning and are, therefore, solely responsible for their learning. Second, the approach is open in the sense of a didactic-content dimension. The learners are, thus, allowed a vote in decision-making processes in order to develop autonomy and a sense of responsibility. And third, the approach has to be open on a pedagogic-institutional basis, allowing extracurricular experiences, critique and development (for a more detailed depiction see chapter five, section 5.1.). In Ms L's classroom the students were the agents of their own learning. Ms L did not pre-select learning matters for them, the students had to independently chose what they wanted to work on. During the first ten minutes of Ms L's lesson the more organised learners unpacked their things, checked what they had been working on so far and continued their work autonomously, maybe asking Ms L what study material to select. The less autonomous learners often waited for Ms L to help them. A typical conversation would, then, take place by Ms L asking the pupil what they wanted to do or what they had started to do the preceding lesson. Especially to younger learners or new students she, subsequently, proposed different study options and helped them to chose the appropriate material. Pupils who had been at the *SchülerInnen Schule* for a longer time and of whom she knew they

should be able to do without her help often got to hear a simple: “What do you want to do? You need to find something! Get working!”. So, as far as the first aspect is concerned Ms L's classroom was open (methodical-organisational aspect). As regards the second aspect one can say that Ms L's classroom was open, too (pedagogic-institutional aspect). Although she helped her students sorting out possible options, the last decision was always made by the student themselves. Once a student decided to spend the whole lesson doing nothing. Ms L reminded him: “You're fooling around, not working.” However, eventually Ms L decided that the pupil knew his needs better than her and allowed him to continue to do nothing. When I asked her why, she explained that she was convinced that especially with younger learners time spent staring was not necessarily time wasted. She believed that the child's organism needed this time to organise and restructure knowledge. Gruschka (2008) stressed the fact that open learning is not to be equalled with didactic laissez-faire and that the main motive of the open learning movement is to enable pupils to deal independently and autonomously with stimulating material. Both aspects can be found in Ms L's approach to open learning. Even though she allowed her pupils a great deal of freedom, there existed a set of rules which the pupils had to respect. For instance, Ms L did not allow the use of mobile phones during her lessons. Neither did she like her pupils to be late to the courses. Moreover, a certain sound level was not to be crossed. She was strict about those students who absolutely did not want to work having to leave her classroom in order not to distract the others. And she did not allow the pupils to use her classroom as a playground during the breaks. What is more, in Gruschka's definition Ms L's classroom was definitely open as it enabled the learners to deal independently and autonomously with stimulating material. A list of the open learning materials Ms L had her pupils work with is provided below.

### **8.1.1. The open learning material**

I divided the open learning material into categories according to the skill they fostered (reading, listening, speaking, writing), and added one category for grammar activities. Ms L's students had a great variety of reading material at

their disposal. The reading material comprised booklets especially devised for language learners, such as 'Young Detectives' Language School' or 'Englisch lernen mit Krimis', a series of crime stories with integrated vocabulary as well as grammar exercises based on the stories, as well as shortened and simplified versions of novels, such as 'The Last Of The Mohicans', for instance. Furthermore, it contained reading beginners' books, such as 'My First Book of Colors', children's books graded according to their level of difficulty, such as Lewis Carroll's 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', or Astrid Lindgren's 'Ronia, The Robber's Daughter', as well as books for teenagers. Moreover, adults' novels by John Grisham, Joy Fielding, and Oscar Wilde were part of Ms L's small library, too. However, the reading material did not only consist of fiction, but also of booklets on various other topics, such as the sciences, e.g. 'Dinosaurs', geography, e.g. tourist guide booklets on the USA, London, or Hawaii, and various others, e.g. '100 jokes for kids of all ages'. In order to improve their listening skills the pupils could work with one of five language learning CD-Roms, for instance 'Easy English' which focuses on vocabulary, or 'GRIPS' with a focus on vocabulary as well as grammar. In addition, the learners had a collection of not too difficult DVDs, e.g. 'Harry Potter', 'Miss Undercover', 'Forever Young', and audio books at their disposition. Ms L's pupils mostly worked on their speaking skills in the course of playing games. There existed three types of games in Ms L's classroom. Games of the first category were especially designed for language learning purposes, such as Langenscheidt's 'Zauber-Memo Englisch', Noris' 'Englisch für Kinder', or ADL's 'Locker lernen', for instance. The second type comprised traditional games like 'Bingo', 'Memory', or 'Zahlendominos' which were meant to be played in English. And the third category were games in English which Ms L brought from the US, e.g. 'Scrabble', 'Doodle Tales', a game during which the players invent creative stories based on missing parts of a picture and the most creative story gets the highest score, or 'Super Showdown', in the course of which players engage in funny discussions of the kind "Who would win a pillow fight – a leprechaun on stilts or a grandma on roller skates?". There existed no particular materials fostering the learners' writing skills. But Ms L made her pupils answer to letters from students of one of the twin schools of the *SchülerInnen Schule*, and had them write their study plans and summaries of presentations in English.

Additionally, the pupils could make use of a great variety of different textbooks, such as 'Ticket to English', 'English to go', or 'Make Your Way', for instance. And they had forms-focused grammar books at their fingertips to work on isolated linguistic items, e.g. 'Durchstarten in Englisch', 'Smile', and 'Essential Grammar in Use'.

### **8.1.2. The principles of open learning settings**

Establishing a detailed depiction of open learning settings Kernig (1997) and Gruschka (2008) came up with a list of principles and aspects holding true for open learning (see chapter five, section 5.2.). These principles will form the basis of a closer analysis of Ms L's approach to open learning which I will undertake in this section. The first of Kernig's principles describes open learning as an education which fosters the pupils' intellectual, social, emotional and moral development in equal amounts. I can say that Ms L tries to include this principle as much in her teaching as Kernig's fourth principle which refers to the open classroom as environment which does not only facilitate learning but also incites the pupils to establish sensitivity for the aesthetic quality of life. Interpreting Kernig's 'sensitivity for the aesthetic quality of life' as the ability to live a happy, fulfilled life I dare say that this is exactly what Ms L tried to convey to her pupils. In the course of an interesting discussion on the differences between the Austrian and the American school system Ms L complained that the Austrian schools (as well as the parents) tried to turn their pupils into little adults at a very young age already. In her opinion the American school system was far from perfect, but at least it granted its pupils more time to develop at their own pace allowing them to be children as long as they needed to be. Before coming to Austria, Ms L had already worked as a teacher in the US. Working with Austrian pupils she noticed a striking difference between Austrian and American children. When she asked an American pupil under fourteen what they wanted to be when grown up, they answered things like president of the US, astronaut, or Superman. But if she asked an Austrian pupil of the same age, they would say lawyer, bus driver or civil servant. The conclusion she drew from that observation was that American school leavers might possess less

general education than Austrian pupils, but that at least they were happy and self-confident enough to dream and to try to realise their dreams. In Ms L's lessons the atmosphere was very jovial and the tone of conversation playful. Being convinced that laughing and enjoying oneself were premises for learning, Ms L allowed her pupils to make jokes and talk rubbish as long as they did not insult or hurt others. She allowed them to have fun on a scale which I have never seen at any traditional school. Moreover, when a student made a mistake, Ms L's usual comment on it was that it was alright, because they were still learning. By allowing her pupils to be childish, to enjoy themselves while learning and by not expecting them to be perfect from the very beginning Ms L gave her pupils the possibility to be 'only' children for some time longer, thereby decreasing the likelihood that her pupils developed too early into insecure and fearful adults afraid of taking risks because of not daring to make mistakes. In summary, it is Ms L's fundamental intention to give her students the possibility to develop holistically and not only intellectually. Another instance illustrating that social, emotional and moral learning were part of Ms L's lessons is the fact that she repeatedly reminded her pupils to help each other and to ask each other for help. Or when two boys started fighting in her lesson, Ms L took the time to sit down with them and discuss the situation listening to the boys until both of them were satisfied and the problem was solved. From the above mentioned examples it can be seen that Ms L's classroom allowed for real interaction and communication in order for social and emotional development to take place (Kernig's sixth principle).

Kernig's second principle describes the open learner as an active learner who tries to understand their environment. In Ms L's classroom the pupils have to be the active agents of their own learning. I am convinced that in traditional schools where teachers still do a lot of frontal teaching it is far easier for pupils to stay passive than in Ms L's classroom. In contrast to pupils from traditional schools Ms L's students enjoy greater freedom. This freedom, however, is accompanied by the responsibility to take over control of their learning. Ms L acts as a facilitator of their learning, providing for learning material, showing them ways how to study and sometimes pushing them to work harder. Nevertheless, if the students do not get active themselves, determining their individual learning

objectives and selecting the appropriate material to reach them, no learning will take place at all. In principle three Kernig depicts the open teacher as a well-informed observer whose main concern is the fostering of the pupils' interests and not the teaching of predetermined skills. From my observations I dare say that Ms L's primary concern always was to allow her learners to follow their individual interests. However, Ms L found herself caught in between her personal principles regarding learning and some parents' contradictory expectations. Many of the parents did not put their offspring in the *SchülerInnen Schule* because of conviction, but only because it was the last alternative to a special needs school. Those parents did not truly share the teachers' progressive beliefs about education and tended to call for more structure as well as guidance during the lessons. What is more, Ms L taught a number of students who planned to change to a traditional AHS after the *SchülerInnen Schule*. So, Ms L had to find an approach to open learning which allowed her learners as much freedom as possible and at the same time prepared them for aspects which her pupils would be expected to be able to cope with at the traditional school, such as exams and time pressure, for example. As a consequence of the restricting possibilities which the Austrian school system left her and because of being pressured by some parents, Ms L began to spend an increasing amount of time working through textbooks with groups of learners in a rather traditional way. According to Kernig's sixth principle in the open classroom learning takes place with the help of experiences at first hand and with the help of a wide range of materials. As can be seen from the list of Ms L's open learning material above the pupils have enough language learning material at their disposal. In order to give her pupils the opportunity to gain first hand experiences outside the school Ms L took them on excursions regularly. I was not present at any of the excursions, so I know them only from Ms L's and her pupils' accounts. With her biology classes she visited the Technische Universität Wien twice. There they spent a couple of hours in the laboratory. With her English learners Ms L spent an afternoon at Bobby's, a British food store in the fourth Viennese district. She went there with her learners in order to acquaint them with the British food and lifestyle before they visited the Sand school in Great Britain, the *SchülerInnen Schule's* twin school. Furthermore, to prepare them for the trip to Great Britain she went window shopping with the

pupils discussing how the things they saw were called in English. On another instance they did a guided tour in English through the 'Arbeiterkammer' in Vienna and listened to a speech about EU laws which Ms L had asked the tour guide to give in English.

An interesting aspect of open learning which Kernig (1997) did not mention, but which is stated by Gruschka (2008), is that the open classroom regards as important the fostering of especially talented as well as less able pupils. Two mentally as well as physically disabled learners attended Ms L's English lessons. Even though their mental development was behind their physical development, they were treated in the exact same way as all the other students. There simply was no need to give special attention to them. Since they individually fixed their learning objectives like the rest of the class, their progress was measured in regard to those and not in comparison to the other pupils or in regard to how much they were able to fulfil the demands of a curriculum. Except for the disabled boy's speaking difficulties which made him stand out from the rest of the class, one would not have been able to distinguish the two from the rest of the working pupils. Whereas in a traditional classroom the two disabled pupils would probably have slowed down their classmates' progress, they fitted perfectly in the open classroom where everybody worked at their own pace anyway. I was astonished when I realised that compared to the rest of the class their level of English was not bad at all. Their written and oral performance was even better than that of some of their classmates. Especially the boy's competence was striking. He understood everything Ms L said and despite his severe speaking problems, he was able to express himself in English. When I articulated my astonishment about the two pupils' abilities Ms L explained to me that there was nothing to be surprised about. Apparently, in the US pupils with any form of disorder are not as quickly excluded from the traditional school as in Austria. She cited the example of one boy with down syndrome who went through the same school career as his healthy contemporaries and eventually became a university professor. A similar career would be unthinkable in Austria. Ms L's story about the boy with down syndrome mirrors a hypothesis which I came across in John Holt's book "Aus schlauen Kindern werden Schüler". Holt (2004) is convinced that children always develop



according to their parents' expectations. In regard to handicapped children this implies the conviction that handicapped children would not really be handicapped if they were not treated accordingly. Furthermore, that they behave differently than healthy children, only because they have never been given a chance to act 'normally'. From their birth onwards they are expected to behave in a certain manner and are treated in a way which elicits the expected behaviour. Moreover, in Holt's opinion this argument holds true not only for handicapped individuals but for children in general. For instance, children who are treated as if they were stupid, will behave as if they were stupid. Children who are expected not to be able to learn in a certain way, will not be able to learn in that way. In summary, Holt argues that there exists no such thing as handicapped or stupid children. There exists only the environment in which the learner is placed and according to the standards - the expectations and stimuli the child finds – of which the human being develops. This line of argumentation will be the topic of a further discussion in the section on learner autonomy below.

### **8.1.3. Free work**

Comparing Ms L's teaching method to the four most prominent approaches to open learning enumerated in chapter five of this thesis it shows the most similarities to 'Freiarbeit'. In the course of free work the learners autonomously chose the content, goal and organisation of their learning. Furthermore, the pupils individually chose the content of their learning, as well as possible partners, materials, eventual outcomes and the time they spent working with a particular learning material. All of these aspects can be found in Ms L's classroom. The classroom was organised in such a way as to allow for the performance of various activities at the same time. Ms L's desk stood in one corner of the room. In the second corner two couches and three armchairs gave the students the possibility to make themselves comfortable while reading. The third corner comprised a kind of loft bed/cosy corner and a computer which was located below the loft bed. One wall was piled with book shelves. Along the other wall there stood two computers. At the third wall a blackboard was fixed.

And in front of the fourth wall a huge cupboard was placed which was stuffed with games, textbooks, booklets, and other learning material. In the middle of the room six desks were pushed against each other so as to form three work stations. Habitually during the open English and the literature lessons, but sometimes during the grammar lessons (yellow book and green book), too, the learners scattered around the room. Some sat at the desks working on their own with grammar books or writing something. Others played games in groups in the cosy corner. Some pupils read books nestling on the couch. Again others worked on the computers, searching information for a presentation or working with one of Ms L's language learning CD-ROMs. According to Krause-Hotopp (1996) in learning environments based on free work the teacher's function is to keep an overview over the pupils' individual learning needs as well as to keep an eye on their learning strategies. Doing so the teacher offers their help but they do not impose themselves on their students. Ms L's behaviour mirrors Krause-Hotopp's definition. At the beginning of the lesson Ms L trusted those pupils who autonomously engaged in activities and helped those learners who had difficulties to decide for something. She made sure that everybody was busy, but allowed her pupils to make a break when she felt the learner really needed it. During the lesson she continuously walked around the room answering questions and checking whether the pupils were really working.

#### **8.1.4. The goals of open learning**

Schweighofer (1993) listed seven goals which are meant to be achieved in open classrooms. They are free arrangement of work, self-directed learning, discipline, self-correction, responsibility, social competence, and learning to learn. In the following section I will discuss in how far these goals are achieved in Ms L's open classroom. Self-directed learning as well as learning to learn will be the topics of a detailed analysis in the section on learner autonomy. Therefore, they will not be discussed here.

As can be seen from the descriptions of Ms L's classroom which have been given so far, Ms L really tried to accord her learners as much freedom as

possible, even if she found her efforts restricted by some parents and the Austrian school curriculum. She provided for free arrangement of work for those students who were able to cope with it and for those pupils whose parents had enough trust in their children to learn in an open way. Nevertheless, with students who asked for more guidance themselves or whose parents thought they needed it, Ms L worked in a more traditional way. To be honest, I was surprised by how willingly most of the learners returned to the more traditional teaching method and how thankfully they handed the responsibility for their learning to Ms L. Observing this, I realised how great an impact traditional teaching methods really had on very young learners. Entering school at the age of six children automatically have to hand the control over their learning to the teacher. They learn to trust more in the teacher than in their own interests and abilities. Consequently, it is not surprising when pupils forget that they should learn for themselves and not in order to please the teacher. And it is not astonishing either that many pupils unlearn to follow their own interests for the sheer fun of it. What is more, I was shocked by how irreparable these damages done to very young learners seem to be. After a few years of traditional teaching many of the learners entering the *SchülerInnen Schule* had lost all interest in finding out about the world, being concerned only with spending as much time as possible playing or doing nothing. Of course there existed a few exceptions. Some of the pupils managed to get back in contact with their inner needs, their interests and their motivation to learn for themselves. The majority, however, stayed bored and unable to take over responsibility for their learning as well as themselves.

As another goal Schweighofer identified discipline. According to him, in order to develop a disciplined way of approaching learning pupils need to understand that they learn for themselves and nobody else. I observed Ms L discussing this topic with her pupils several times. In the course of these talks Ms L explained to her pupils that she really did not care whether they learnt something or not. And that she was not angry when they decided not to work during the lessons. But that since knowledge was of great value in our society, it was their personal loss, if they refused to learn anything.

Schweighofer's fourth goal is self-correction. Ms L's pupils mainly worked with materials which allowed for self-correction (see the list of open learning material above). However, texts the students wrote were corrected by Ms L. And sometimes she made the learners correct each others' work. In order to get her learners to take over the full responsibility for their learning, setting themselves long-term goals and reflecting on how best to achieve them Ms L had them write detailed study plans several times a year (the study plan will be discussed in greater detail in the section on learner autonomy below). Furthermore, individual talks about the students' self-conception as compared to Ms L's evaluation took place on a regular basis.

Schweighofer (1993) identified the development of social competence as a further goal of open learning. From interviews with Ms L I know that for her the holistic development of her learners as individual personalities was more important than their accumulating knowledge. She would have liked to allow her students even more freedom to try themselves out, to find themselves and to develop autonomously, but found her scope restricted by the parents' beliefs about learning (this topic will be further discussed in the section on self-evaluation below). Additionally, Ms L catered for an environment in which social learning could take place by having the pupils themselves choose the social format of their learning. They were allowed to do all exercises, projects and experiments alone or in collaboration. That her pupils' social learning was of importance to Ms L one could see from her reaction to conflicts. Whenever two pupils argued during the lesson, Ms L did not simply ask them to be quiet but found time to sit down with them and discuss the problem. On one occasion two boys bickered with each other playfully, when suddenly one of the boys started shouting and hitting the other pupil. Ms L made them sit down and asked them what had happened. One boy was nearly crying the other boy seemed confused and said that they were only playing when the second boy suddenly got aggressive. The sobbing student explained that in his old school he was bullied by older pupils and that he became scared when the boy he was playing with tried to push him into a corner. Defending himself the second pupil said that the boy should have told him to stop earlier, because he did not mean to mob the other but was only fooling around. As a result of the discussion Ms L and the

two pupils found that the boy who had been mobbed at his former school needed to learn to set clear limits and to make them explicit to the others. The discussion of problems as well as the respectful interaction with each other were important not only in the English lessons but were fundamental corner stones of the *SchülerInnen Schule* in general. During my first visits at the *SchülerInnen Schule* I was surprised by how much time and effort was spent on the daily morning meetings – i.e. Stammgruppentreffen –, the plenum information on Monday and the plenum discussion Wednesday morning. However, by and by I realised what a positive effect these meetings had on the pupils. Their communicative skills were astonishing. Most of the learners enjoyed stating and defending their opinion, and were able to express their feelings in a skilful way. Moreover they had learnt a fantastic culture of discussion paying attention to each others' words and allowing each speaker to express themselves without being interrupted. What is more, this culture of discussion was not only perceivable during the meetings but also in the pupils' normal interactions. On many occasions I overheard one or the other pupil claiming or defending each others' right to be listened to, saying things such as “Hör mir zu!”, “Lass ihn doch mal ausreden!”, or “Darf ich auch mal was sagen?”.

#### **8.1.5. Interest and motivation**

Jürgens (1996) summarised a series of studies investigating the effect of interest on learning performance. The studies showed that interest had a profound positive impact on the learner's motivation, their learning strategies, the effectiveness of learning, their concentration, their experiencing the flow-feeling, as well as their emotional condition. According to the studies students who chose their learning matters themselves and were, therefore, truly interested in it, were more motivated than pupils who had to learn externally chosen matters. They used a wider range of different learning strategies, achieved a deeper state of concentration, and their increase in knowledge was profounder. Additionally, they generally were in a better emotional condition and more enthusiastic about their learning, far more often experiencing the flow-

feeling, in the course of which they enjoyed learning for the sheer sake of it. In contrast to Jürgens who wrote about the effect of interest on learning in general Willis (1996) focused on SLA when she identified motivation as one of three essential conditions for successful learning. In total she listed three essential and one desirable conditions for effective language learning to take place. The three conditions which are essential to the learning of a L2 are exposure to the target language, language use and motivation. According to Willis in order to successfully acquire the L2 the students, first of all, need to be exposed to a variety of comprehensible spoken and written language, secondly, learners need to use the language themselves and, thirdly, they have to be motivated to listen, read, write and interact in the L2. As desirable but not really essential for learning Willis mentioned instruction (cf. Willis 1996: 11-16). On the topic of motivation Willis argues that learner motivation plays a crucial role in the teaching of a foreign language. Students who lack any kind of motivation to learn a L2 will never be able to use it successfully. Willis (1996) and Cook (1991) refer to two kinds of learner motivation, namely integrative and instrumental motivation. Learner motivation is integrative when the student “admires and identifies with the target language and culture” (Willis 1996: 14) or when they learn the language in order to “take part in the culture of its people” (Cook 1991: 72). The motivation of students who learn a foreign language because of career reasons or in order to be able to engage in further studies is instrumental. Ur (1996) added another distinction to the two kinds of learner motivation mentioned above which she found more useful for teachers. She distinguishes between intrinsic motivation – i.e. learning a L2 out of interest, for the sheer sake of acquiring knowledge - and extrinsic motivation - i.e. motivation deriving from external incentives, such as the teacher, the parents, or tests. According to Ur both types of motivation can be influenced by the teacher. Ur found that pupils learn a foreign language the fastest and easiest out of intrinsic motivation. She admits, however, that intrinsic motivation, even though being typical of young learners, deteriorates with age and that, therefore, it increasingly is in the teacher's hand to keep their students motivation high. Ways of arousing the learners' interest in tasks are the following: setting clear goals, varying topics and tasks, providing pupils with eye-catching visuals, challenging activities and games, entertaining tasks, role plays, information-gap

activities, activities which give pupils the opportunity to talk about themselves, tasks which allow for more than one possible solution or response (cf. Ur 1996: 276-81). In harmony with Ur Willis (1996) opines that even if students lack intrinsic motivation, the teacher can select topics and activities which increase their interest in the short term (cf. Willis 1996: 14). Cook (1991), Willis (1996) and Ur (1996) agree that success plays a crucial role in learner motivation. As Ur states “strategies to increase the likelihood of success in learning activities should have high priority” (Ur 1996: 275). If pupils experience success through their own individual effort, they are more likely to enjoy engaging in subsequent activities. Thus, teachers need to design tasks which set achievable goals and to emphasise learners' success (cf. Willis 1996: 14-15).

For the analysis of Ms L's lessons I will make use of Ur's (1996) notions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In contrast to Ur who sees the increase in age as the cause of continuously deteriorating intrinsic motivation, Ms L is convinced that only pupils who unlearned to follow own interests lose their intrinsic motivation to learn. Ms L told me that as far as motivation to learn was concerned she could easily distinguish a great difference between learners from traditional as compared to pupils from alternative schools. Pupils who during the first four years of their school career went to traditional schools used the freedom they found entering the *SchülerInnen Schule* first of all to refuse to learn anything at all. Ms L made the experience that those learners needed at least a year before they started to gain back their intrinsic motivation and began to become interested in learning again. Wild (2002) made the same experience at her Pestalozzi School. Some of her pupils who had changed from a rather strict traditional school to her alternative school spent years playing before they suddenly decided to prepare themselves for the entrance examination of a public high school or university. Then, however, they were capable of learning the same matters for the acquisition of which pupils in traditional schools needed years within months (cf. Wild 2002: 41-46). According to Wild (1992) the reasons for this phenomenon are complex. Until the age of twelve free and unguided play is the most important way of a child to study their environment and acquire necessary skills. Only after the age of twelve the need for playing as a form of interaction with the world disappears slowly and gives way to the

development of logical thinking. This is so because before the age of twelve the child's brain builds important inner structures of understanding in the course of an interaction with the environment which incorporates all senses – i.e. the physical, emotional, and mental (see as well the section on the Wilds' key concepts in the third chapter of this thesis). Traditional teaching methods, however, focus mostly on mental activities and disregard the other senses (cf. Wild 1992: 159-61). In summary, if young learners are forced to give up their free play in order to spend hours in a row sitting and listening to a teacher telling them what they should be interested in, their organism is hindered to gain experiences which are vital for their development. Thus, if pupils from traditional schools are denied their naturalistic way of interacting with the world and, therefore, lack important experiences, they will want to make up for these experiences when they get the chance to do so.

From my observations I am bound to argue that Ms L's focus lay on giving her pupils the freedom they needed to gain back their intrinsic motivation. As far as extrinsic motivation is concerned I heard Ms L several times try to make her pupils aware that they were learning for life, not for school. And that they should learn only for themselves, not in order to please her or anybody else. Cook (1991), Willis and Ur agree that success plays a crucial role in learner motivation. Ur even sees it as the teacher's duty to emphasise the student's success in order to increase their extrinsic motivation. Since Ms L's pupils learnt independently and self-corrected their work most of the time, Ms L got little opportunity to highlight her pupils successful completion of a task. Nevertheless, occasionally I heard Ms L compliment one of her students on their achievement. In general, though, I would say that whether they failed or succeeded in a task was not too big a concern to the learners. That is due to Ms L's conviction according to which failing was an integral part of and important for learning. On more than one occasion I observed Ms L explaining to her class that one learnt the most by trying things out, making mistakes and trying again in a different way until one was successful. In conclusion, one can, thus, say that extrinsic motivation was not of as much relevance in Ms L's classroom as intrinsic motivation.



## 8.2. Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy was an important aspect of the English lessons at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. Since Ms L did open learning with her pupils, they were expected to engage in autonomous, self-directed work from the date they entered school. Ms L's lessons were in many ways similar to the autonomous classroom. According to Holec (1997) the autonomous learner is characterised by four abilities. They have “the ability to practise language learning actively and independently” (Holec 1997: 24) (ability 1), they are able to “devise and implement their own learning programme, with or without external assistance when preparing it” (ibid) (ability 2), they know how to “acquire new knowledge and representations in the fields of language competence” (Holec 1997: 27) (ability 3) and are able to take over full responsibility of their learning (cf. Holec 1997: 24) (ability 4) (for a more detailed discussion of the abilities see the introductory section of chapter six). In the autonomous classroom an environment has to be established in which these abilities can evolve. In Ms L's lessons the pupils had the possibility to work on their English competence individually as well as in pairs or groups. Since teacher-centred activities took place only rarely, the students studied independently most of the time with Ms L functioning as a mentor giving advices (ability 1). The pupils were allowed enough freedom to find, improve and alter their learning strategies as often as they needed to. In fact, they were expected to find their own ways (ability 2). The learners were used to finding appropriate study material themselves. I do not know whether they were all fully able to do so, at least, they had the possibility to autonomously acquire new knowledge (ability 3). On a number of occasions I experienced Ms L reminding her pupils that they learned for themselves, for life (and some for the AHS they wanted to change to) but not for her, the teacher. Moreover, once in a while she reminded and explained simple learning strategies, such as the keeping of a vocabulary log, for instance. But whether or not her pupils implemented those strategies in their learning was not a matter of her concern. That is, Ms L continuously reminded her students of the value of keeping a vocabulary log, but she did not punish those students who refused to keep one (ability 4).

Elaborating Holec's (1997) description of learner autonomy Dam and Legenhausen (1998) established a list of aspects defining the autonomous classroom in greater detail. First of all, in the autonomous classroom it is the pupils and not the teacher who decide over learning objectives and study material (aspect 1). Second, assessment takes place in the form of self-evaluation (aspect 2). Third, activities and discourse are authentic (aspect 3) (cf. Dam and Legenhausen 1999: 91). Concerning the first two aspects Ms L's teaching is comparable to an autonomous classroom. In her classroom the pupils set their study goals themselves and decided independently over the material they wanted to use. Ms L helped and advised them. The responsibility, however, lie with the learners (aspect 1). And in Ms L's classroom the students corrected their mistakes themselves with the help of study material devised for that purpose. Exceptions were texts the students wrote which Ms L corrected (aspect 2). Since the pupils spent much time working individually on drill activities, such as found in workbooks such as 'Smile', for instance, not much authentic discourse did take place. However, there were activities in the course of which authentic discourse took place, too. Part of the study material were games which were not particularly devised to foster language learning like Memory, or Uno, for example. And on those occasions where Ms L got the pupils to talk English the discourse during the games was authentic (aspect 3).

### **8.2.1. Learning strategies**

In contrast to the opinion of many experts in the field of learner autonomy, such as Holec (1997), Little (1991, 1999) and Crabbe (1999), for instance, who argue that autonomous learning can and has to be taught explicitly, Ms L leaves it in her pupils own responsibility to develop the capacity to take charge of their learning, being convinced that they have to and eventually will develop this ability naturally. In the course of the lessons where I was present she helped her pupils to find and articulate learning objectives, to set goals and define ways how to achieve them. However, she did not explicitly engage them in learner strategy training as described in the chapter on learner autonomy (see chapter six, section 6.6). She dispensed with activities aimed at inciting learners to

critically reflect on their learning, such as awareness-raising tasks (cf. Little 1999), problem-solution frameworks (cf. Cotterall and Crabbe 2008), guided self-evaluation diaries (cf. Nunan 1999), self-report questionnaires (cf. Lai 1999), or computer assisted instruction to raise metalinguistic awareness (cf. Keobke 1999). Little (1991) argues that in the autonomous classroom the co-operation of teacher and pupils in setting learning objectives and finding appropriate study material is important (cf. Little 1991: 51). In her classroom Ms L definitely functioned as co-operator and counsellor regarding her pupils learning. Ms L tried to leave as much responsibility over the finding of learning objectives, materials and strategies to be used to her pupils. Nevertheless, she continuously supported her pupils' learning in a rather unobtrusive way by giving them advice, helping them with decisions, or summarising for them the options they had. For instance, when a student complained that the book which she was reading at the moment was nonsense, Ms L asked her why she did not like the book. The pupil answered that the book was nonsense, because so many words in it did not make any sense. So, Ms L advised that if there were too many words in the book which the pupil did not understand, she should get an easier book and read the other book later. Then, she told her where in the shelf she could find easier books and helped her choose a novel by asking questions about the girl's reading preferences. Ms L simply could have handed another book to the pupil. But she demonstrated to the girl one possibility of how she could proceed the next time she had difficulties understanding a novel. Another girl had written "die 4 Fälle lernen" on her study plan – i.e. a list of linguistic items and skills the pupil wants to have learnt or improved by the end of the term –, before she realised that she did not know whether they actually existed in English. When the girl asked Ms L, she told the pupil that they did not really exist, but that she could analyse how the "4 Fälle" were expressed in English anyway. In addition, Ms L told the girl that comparing the differences and similarities between German and English was one possible learning strategy which could help the girl acquiring English. At a later stage of her learning, when her English would have gotten better, she probably would not need this strategy any more and could deploy other strategies. By explaining to the girl that what she had written on her study plan was not wrong but actually a useful approach to the learning of English, Ms L gave the pupil confidence in

her autonomous learning abilities and at the same time clarified that there existed more than one learning strategy. According to Little (1991) it is vital for the autonomous learner to realise that there is more than one learning strategy which can lead them to the mastery of a L2 and that they should use those which best fit their needs (cf. Little 1991: 57). Acting in the above described way Ms L incorporated in her teaching what Little calls an analytic learning strategy (see the section on autonomy in the classroom in chapter six). Little argues that learning vocabulary and grammar rules students should be encouraged to make use of their already existing L1 knowledge (cf. Little 1991: 53). In a further instance a boy questioned Ms L on the difference between 'will' and 'going to'. Ms L explained to the student that, first, he should investigate and exercise only 'will', subsequently, only 'going to', and that only finally he should try to work out the differences between the two tenses in order not to get confused. Thus, instead of simply illustrating to the pupil the use of the two tenses, she told him how to go about finding the answer to his question himself. The three above mentioned are good examples of how Ms L incorporated learning strategy training in her lessons whenever the occasion arose.

What is more, every once in a while Ms L dedicated a whole lesson to a discussion on the subject of self-directed learning. In an open English lesson Ms L made the class write their individual study plans for the next term, having them define their personal learning goals. When the class asked her why they had to write them she explained that most of the pupils wanted to continue their school career in an AHS the following term. And these students would be expected to know certain aspects of the English language and would have to be able to prove their knowledge by passing tests. So, Ms L would do some English tests with those students who wanted to prepare for the exams in the AHS. Moreover, especially these students needed to create detailed study plans to get an idea of what they already knew and what they had to work on harder. Subsequently, she asked them what their goals were in English for the rest of the school year and had the pupils write them down. A few students seemed confused, so she clarified that she expected them to note in meticulous detail those subject matters which they still had to study as well as those skills which needed further training. She explained that they could have a look in the

textbooks of the third and fourth grade of the AHS to get an idea of what they were expected to know entering the public school. An example of how they should write their plans was “Until the end of the year I want to learn the present tense simple and progressive and the past tense simple and progressive”. Additionally, she asked them to note not only grammatical items, but include as well their active and passive skills, writing for example, “At the end of the year I want to understand not only level 2 books, but also level 3 books”. Working with them on their individual study plans Ms L showed them one aspect of autonomous learning. A further important aspect of self-directed learning is the students' ability to critically reflect on their learning (cf. Dam and Legenhausen 1999 and Little 1991). By having her pupils write their individual study plans, Ms L made them automatically think about where they stood in their L2 development. The aspect of self-evaluation will be discussed in further detail below.

### **8.2.2. Capacities for autonomous learning**

As far as I could observe during the lessons the capacities for self-directed learning varied greatly from one student to the next. There were a few pupils who seemed totally successful in their autonomous learning, working on their own and addressing Ms L with clarification questions on a few occasions only. The great majority, however, appeared to be strongly dependent on Ms L's support. They did not really seem to be aware of their learning needs and were not able to set learning objectives for themselves. Some pupils kept asking Ms L what they were meant to do at the beginning of every lesson, being unable to take over control of their learning themselves, even though Ms L had repeatedly explained to them how to go about it. When I asked Ms L for the reasons of this phenomenon, she explained to me that one could recognise a striking difference in the capacity for self-directed learning between pupils from traditional and students from alternative elementary schools. The children who had attended traditional elementary schools before coming to the SchülerInnen Schule were far more dependent on the teacher's guidance than pupils from alternative schools, simply because they had unlearned how to follow their

individual needs and interests by the teacher taking control over their learning from the very beginning. Whereas pupils from alternative schools were given enough time and space to learn by doing, trying out their individual learning strategies and to learn by observing older pupils, students in traditional schools habitually were not trusted to possess the capacity for self-directed learning and, therefore, never granted that developmental freedom. According to Ms L some of the pupils from traditional schools manage to regain their innate interest in learning as well as the capacity for self-directed learning. Nevertheless, in most cases pupils from traditional classrooms stay disinterested and unwilling to take over the responsibility for their learning.

### **8.2.3. Self-evaluation**

Except for those students who need a school leaving certificate at the end of their fourth year, because they want to attend an AHS afterwards, there exist no grades at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. The pupils self-evaluate their abilities in written form once at the end of every school year with the help of a guidance sheet and with the support of the teachers. There exists a general guidance sheet for all of the subjects addressing the following questions:

- What am I to write?

In your certificate you describe all the subjects, projects, journeys, plenary meetings and Stammgruppen – in short, everything you have done and learnt in the course of the school year.

- How does that work?

Arrange your descriptions and reflections under the following headings:

What have we done?

What have I learnt by doing it?

Am I satisfied with the outcome?

In what way have the learning matters been communicated? How did I like the subject?

What have I found interesting, what not and why?

## What are my plans for the next school year?

Dam and Legenhausen (1999) as well as Natri (2007) had their pupils engage in self-evaluation and critical reflection regularly in the form of dialogues or writing activities. Ms L incited her learners to reflect on their competences, first of all, by having them write their individual study plans (as described in detail above) at regular intervals during the school year. Moreover, discussions about the learners' self-perception as compared to Ms L's evaluation of their abilities took place continuously. Mostly in the form of short dialogues during the breaks. Often it was the pupils who questioned Ms L on their level of competence. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to be present at one of these discussions. Besides the writing of the study plans and the private discussions Ms L organised English tests at which those students who wanted to learn about their level of proficiency participated voluntarily. Additionally, a conference was organised twice for those pupils who needed school leaving certificates. During these conferences teachers and school leavers met in order to discuss the marks the learners would give themselves according to their self-evaluation and to compare them to the teachers' assessment. Each school leaver's marks in every subject were discussed separately. An interesting fact is that these discussions did not take place solely between the learner in question and their teacher, but everybody present interfered. For instance, when one pupil found herself marked unjustly and demanded a better mark, her friends backed her referring to some extra work she had done in order to improve her mark.

In the chapter on learner autonomy I mentioned a study undertaken by Dam and Legenhausen (1999) which showed that forms of external assessment were no more valid than the self-evaluation of learners who were exposed to self-reflection activities during a longer period. Natri (2007) came to a similar conclusion. She tested her students' capacity for self-evaluation after one term of critical reflection tasks and found that those students who had previous experience in self-evaluation techniques were by far more capable of valid self-evaluation than those learners who had no previous experience. Thus, the conclusion Natri drew from her study is that critical self-reflection techniques do enhance the learners' capacity for self-evaluation, but that learners not used to

self-evaluation need longer than one term to adapt to it. When I asked Ms L in how far she thought her pupils were able to self-evaluate their abilities, her explanations mirrored Dam and Legenhausen's as well as Natri's findings. She told me that those pupils who had spent more time at the *SchülerInnen Schule* were well able to self-assess their level of competency, but that new students coming from public schools often had problems self-evaluating. According to Ms L the traditional learners needed at least a year or two to adapt to the new system. Moreover, Ms L informed me that there existed many aspects which influenced the learners' capacity for self-evaluation. One big problem concerned the pupils' parents. Only a few parents really stood behind the school's progressive pedagogical principles. The majority were parents whose children had had problems in the traditional school (or in various schools) and who did not know where else to put their offspring. For a few of these parents the *SchülerInnen Schule* seemed the last alternative to the special needs school. Those parents continuously compared their children's achievement to that of pupils from traditional schools, thereby undermining the efforts of the teachers of the *SchülerInnen Schule*. Ms L complained that these parents did not seem to understand that at the *SchülerInnen Schule* progress was measured differently than in traditional schools. Traditional schools tended to measure the pupils' achievement or lack of it in terms of how much of the curriculum they acquired and in how far they were able to reproduce their knowledge during the exams. Ms L, however, was used to measure her pupils' improvement in relation to the goals they had set themselves at the beginning of the school year. For example, once Ms L had a pupil who was not able to learn to read or write in English, no matter what techniques she used to help him. So she decided to have this pupil focus on his listening skills making him work with a computer assisted language learning program. During the years he spent at the *SchülerInnen Schule* the student never learnt to read or write in English and would never have managed to pass an exam at a traditional school. Nevertheless, when he left school he was able to speak and understand English. According to Ms L it was difficult to make the parents aware of their children's achievements, if they judge their children's abilities only in comparison to the values of the traditional school. The parents' lack of confidence in the pedagogical believes of the *SchülerInnen Schule*,



consequently, affected their children's self-evaluation. One of Ms L's pupils spent the entire first term working on the same grammar items without showing any sign of having acquired these items. During a meeting with the girl and her parents the girl's mother admitted that she did not believe that children could learn anything in the open classroom. Apparently, she kept telling her daughter the same over and over again until her daughter lost every trust in her own learning. To Ms L the same pupil kept saying that she simply was not able to learn in that way and that she did not understand anything in English. To check whether the girl really did not understand or had simply lost any trust in her abilities Ms L wrote down the sentence 'The cat ate my dog' and asked the girl what it meant. The pupil reacted very insecure answering that 'the cat' could maybe be 'die Katze' in German. The girl's utterance was followed by a disbelieving glance at Ms L who approved. Subsequently, Ms L asked the girl what 'ate' could mean. Doubtfully the girl guessed 'essen', but immediately dropped her guess explaining that, if the word meant 'essen' the sentence would not make any sense, because cats do not eat dogs. Thus, the pupil was very well able to understand English. But because she did not have any trust in her abilities, she was dependent on Ms L to approve of every word she translated. Additionally, the girl was convinced of it being her fault that the sentence did not make any sense. It did not occur to her that the sentence itself was nonsense. Ms L stated that she had several pupils like the girl mentioned above who thanks to their parents distrusted their abilities having too little self-esteem to self-evaluate correctly.

### **8.3. Task-based language learning**

Ur (1996), Willis (1996), Skehan (1996a), Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) as well as Ellis (2003) agree that in the context of task-based learning (TBL) tasks feature certain definitive characteristics. They are authentic, goal-oriented activities which incite the learners to use the target language in a meaningful way and the successful completion of which can be measured by some kind of observable outcome. Ellis and Ur refer to the communicative aspect as being of great importance in the context of TBL. Skehan, Bygate, Skehan and Swain as

well as Ellis, however, state that the target language is to be used in some way in the course of task-completion, but that communication may or may not arise. What is more, Ur is the only of the above enumerated TBL experts to define tasks as interactive pair or group activities. Even though Ms L's teaching was not based on tasks as defined by experts of TBL, authentic, goal-oriented activities with an observable result were part of her lessons. The activities which came nearest to Ur's, Willis', Skehan's, Bygate's, Skehan and Swain's and Ellis' definition of tasks were, for instance, the pupils doing research for a presentation, playing a game, writing a letter to learners from a twin school, or reading novels in order to produce a book report.

Before I proceed to depict similarities between TBL and Ms L's approach to teaching, one striking difference between the two teaching methods needs to be discussed. The main difference between the two teaching methods lies in the aspect of who eventually controls the learning. In comparison to traditional teaching methods TBL provides the learners with a greater deal of responsibility and autonomy in that neither the outcome of the task, nor the way in which it is to be achieved are predetermined but left to the pupils' creativity. Moreover, in the TBL context learners are not expected to acquire specific language items in a fixed order and all at the same pace as is the habit in traditional classes. Instead they are allowed to try out and improve their interlanguage as they engage in task-completion learning about target language aspects as the need for clarification arises. Nevertheless, even though learners in TBL classes enjoy greater freedom in their language acquisition, eventually it still is the teacher who is in control of the students' learning. It is the teacher who chooses or designs activities for specific purposes and, thereby, (even if unobtrusively) manipulates the way in which the pupils' interlanguage develops. In Ms L's classes it was the students themselves who were free to follow their own interests and who bore the responsibility for their individual progress. They had the sole control over their learning. Even if not all of the students were able to cope with that responsibility right from the beginning, they were still trusted to learn to take control in the end. At least those students who did not want to change to an AHS afterwards were completely free to work on their interlanguage in any way which pleased them. Their freedom was only

restricted by the limits of the learning materials they had at their disposal. And even concerning the learning material the pupils were welcome to bring their own materials to class if they did not want to work with any of the material provided. Nevertheless, the freedom of those learners who planned to continue their school career at a traditional public school was restricted by the Austrian school curriculum, as entering the traditional school the pupils were expected to have acquired specific linguistic aspects.

### **8.3.1. Principles of TBL**

Since TBL and Ms L's approach to open learning differ greatly in the way they are organised not many of the principles of TBL listed by Ellis (2003) are mirrored in Ms L's teaching (for a detailed depiction of these principles see chapter seven, section 7.2). I will, nevertheless, try to enumerate the most striking similarities in the following section. According to the first of Ellis' principles teachers have to assure that learners engage in tasks of an appropriate level of difficulty. Since Ms L worked with heterogeneous age groups (pupils from the age of ten to 17 attended her courses), one of her principle functions was to make sure that every pupil worked with material appropriate for their individual level of proficiency. Every now and then I could observe Ms L proposing tasks of a lesser or greater level of difficulty to one of her students. The eventual decision over the kind of task, however, was always taken by the pupils themselves. The second principle advises teachers to define unambiguous goals for each lesson. In Ms L's classroom, however, the goals for each lesson as well as long-term objectives were not fixed by Ms L but by the learners themselves. The fourth principle states that learners should be active during the lessons, engaging in meaningful negotiation of meaning. To my mind Ms L's pupils were not active enough during the lessons. They did not very often engage in spontaneous and expedient negotiation of meaning (this aspect will be further discussed in the section on teacher-role in TBL below). Ellis' fifth principle highlights the importance of encouraging students to take risks in their oral speech production. Ms L's classroom provided for a jovial and friendly atmosphere, and she repeatedly explained to her pupils that there was

no need of being afraid of making mistakes, because only by making errors one was able to learn and improve one's skills. Nevertheless, her pupils refused to speak English most of the time and needed to be constantly reminded not to use German. Their willingness to take risks was not very high (this topic will be further discussed in the section on focus on form vs focus on forms). Principle seven stresses the importance of introducing focus on form in the lessons. Whenever Ms L sensed an opportunity to integrate focus on form in her lessons she took it. On one occasion a group of five boys at the age of ten approximately played Memory in order to increase their vocabulary knowledge. Whenever one of the boys turned over a card he had to name the item depicted on the card. Ms L watched the group play for a while. Then she asked the players why they did not use the articles when depicting the items on the cards when they certainly would have done so in German. When one of the boys turned over an apple, Ms L used the opportunity to recapitulate the indefinite articles *a/an*, questioning the boys on whether they would use *a* or *an* and why. Afterwards one of the pupils turned over grapes but pronounced them like the French word 'crêpes' and was not sure which article to use for them. So, Ms L corrected him by using a recast and asked him whether one could say 'a grapes'. The boy negated that and told Ms L that he would rather use 'these grapes' but pronounced it in a way which sounded more of 'this grapes'. Ms L answered: "This grapes?" in a doubtful tone of voice and one of the other boys came up with the correct pronunciation, explaining that the 'e'-sound was longer in 'these grapes' than in 'this grapes'. According to Ellis' eighth principle teachers should give their students opportunities to reflect on their L2 development. Ms L made her students' self-perception of their abilities a matter of discussion on a regular basis. The means she used to incite her pupils to reflect on their L2 development have already been depicted in the section on learning strategies above (see section 8.2.1.).

### **8.3.2. Focus on form vs focus on forms**

Experts in the field of TBL, such as Long (1991), Willis (1996) and Ellis (2003), argue against the teaching of isolated linguistic items and favour form-focused

instruction. According to them students are not able to acquire a language focussing at one linguistic item at a time, but only through forming, verifying or altering hypotheses about target language features, and thereby developing complex, gradual and inter-related paths for grammatical subsystems. Neither are they able to learn language aspects the moment they are taught, but only when their organism is ready to incorporate them in their interlanguage. Moreover, they are convinced that teachers can best help learners finding out about the L2 by providing them with as great a variety of authentic materials and tasks as possible, allowing for a focus on form either as need arises or in the form of especially designed tasks. Even though Willis identified instruction as not being essential for the acquisition of a L2, she argues in favour of focus on form instruction in TBL. According to her this instruction does not necessarily have to be teacher-led, but should rather happen in the form of what she calls consciousness-raising activities – i.e. “tasks that focus explicitly on language form and use” (Willis 1996: 102). Consciousness-raising activities are tasks which do not consist of decontextualised presentation and exercise of language items in isolation, but involve the learner in an analysis of those language features which they have already come across during the task-cycle (for further information on the task-cycle see chapter seven). Analysis activities aim at raising students’ awareness of the L2 through “observation through identification” and “critical investigation of linguistic features” (Willis 1996: 103). The advantage of consciousness-raising activities over teacher-led grammar drills is that learners do not depend upon the teacher's knowledge solely, but build confidence in their abilities by autonomously and gradually ameliorating their linguistic knowledge. Typical analysis activities are, for example: finding phrases which refer to certain concepts or themes, identifying phrases about time, ordering words into self-chosen categories, reflection on the meaning of grammatical features, comparing different features and how meaning changes with them, and the like (cf. Willis 1996: 101-07).

Ms L offered a variety of different courses which theoretically would have allowed her pupils to approach English from various different angles. Moreover, her lessons even catered for tasks in the sense as experts in the field of TBL defined them. In some of her lessons Ms L had her learners engage in

meaningful, goal-oriented, as well as authentic activities. She offered subject courses in English, such as biology, computers and democracies, in the course of which her learners were confronted with authentic tasks and texts. For instance, they were given tasks, such as finding the answers to specific questions ("Where are the red blood cells produced?", or "What do we need red blood cells for?") in books or the world wide web, had to realise experiments ("In what kind of earth do bean seedlings grow the fastest?"), and prepare presentations on certain topics ("The leopard"). In the course of the literature courses the learners were confronted with a wide range of fiction or scientific texts. The reading beginners' lessons were aimed at helping the pupils understand the spelling and pronunciation of the English language. During the courses Green and Yellow book Ms L and her students together worked through the Cambridge "English for Schools" textbook engaging in all kinds of communicative and grammar tasks. And in the Open English lessons the learners had the possibility to work on language aspects of their choice with the help of grammar books, worksheets and CD-ROMs, or engage in games, which when played for the simple sake of playing can be defined as authentic, goal-oriented tasks, too. Thus, ideally there would have been plenty of opportunities for the students to engage in meaningful, goal-oriented and even communicative activities. Additionally, in theory the learners would have had enough possibilities to establish their individual hypotheses about the English language and verify or alter them autonomously and independently in the course of the Open English lessons. However, many learning opportunities were lost to the students by Ms L being not strict enough about the use of English as only means of communication during the lessons. In the subject courses she allowed the pupils to use German as well as English Internet sites when doing research and, eventually, the students began to work with German sites only. What is more, she permitted her pupils to decide themselves whether they wanted to give the presentations in English or German. And she tolerated their speaking German to each other during the lessons. When I questioned Ms L on this topic she admitted that she had underestimated the importance of being strict about the use of English during the lessons. She told me that she should have used the fact that she was a native speaker and should have let her learners go on believing that she could not understand German. But since

she had started to use German for all informal discussions during the breaks and outside of school, the pupils had increasingly refused to talk English to her during the lessons. The reason for this Ms L saw in their being afraid of making mistakes and making a fool of themselves, an attitude which she recognised more in pupils from traditional schools than from alternative schools. At some point Ms L had simply given up reminding the students to talk English. Other factors for her being not strict enough about the use of English were, first of all, Ms L's disliking of any kind of authority. Having spent most of her school time in free, alternative schools and having had problems with blind obedience and the acceptance of authority all her life, she wanted to trust in her students' ability for responsible and self-directed behaviour. In her opinion children were very well able to gain back the motivation as well as the capacity for self-directed learning, if only they found the appropriate environment and were conceded enough trust and freedom. Another reason why Ms L allowed her students to use German if they pleased, was because she did not want to overcharge her pupils. The majority of the students had had problems with authority, stress, and being overextended at the traditional schools they had attended before changing to the *SchülerInnen Schule*. So, she was afraid of destroying the last bit of intrinsic motivation left to the pupils, when demanding too much of them. However, by allowing the students to do their research for the topic related courses in German, Ms L withheld her students one very important way of getting into contact with varied, authentic language material. Of course, there still existed the fiction novels, the games and DVDs, but in my opinion they cannot compensate for the variety of texts found in the web. Furthermore, by being allowed to communicate in German during the lessons and even to give their presentations in their mother tongue the pupils lost their only opportunity to try out their speaking skills. In conclusion, since the pupils' contact with authentic English language material was restricted to fiction novels and a few scientific booklets which they read during the literature lessons, and since they spoke German instead of English most of the time, their opportunities for establishing their own hypotheses about the English language were limited. Consequently, the Open English courses, which the learners could have used to verify or alter their self-established hypotheses, turned into mere out-dated forms-focused lessons in the course of which the pupils individually studied

isolated linguistic items and practised their use with the help of drill exercises. With those students who wanted to change to a traditional AHS at the end of the school year, and therefore, needed to be prepared for entrance tests, Ms L additionally engaged in short sequences of traditional frontal teaching during some weeks at the end of which she had the learners pass a test. Reading through the test results I had the impression that many pupils had difficulties understanding and remembering the grammar, as well as embedding it into their sentence constructions. This can have various reasons. Firstly, like at any other school there were stronger and weaker learners at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. Secondly, a great part of the pupils at the *SchülerInnen Schule* already had learning difficulties before they attended the alternative school. For many of the students their learning problems as well as their difficulties with authority were the only reasons why their parents sent them to the *SchülerInnen Schule* in the first place. Thirdly, it could be that even after a few years at the alternative school some of the students who had attended traditional elementary schools were still not able to cope with autonomous learning. A fourth reason for some of the students' bad test results could as well be the fact that they were not used any more to exam situations. What is more, I was able to observe that at least half of Ms L's students simply lacked any intrinsic motivation to acquire a foreign language, countering every attempt to organise interesting activities by lack of motivation, and their refusal to actively participate. For instance, one of the biology advanced pupils' responsibilities for the school year was to do any scientific experiment of their choice. They were free to think of something they wanted to find out about themselves or imitate any experiment they found on the web. Not really any of the students found this activity interesting or challenging enough to joyfully engage in it. They all had to be persuaded and pushed to get active. Of course, this does not necessarily have to do with the pupils' intrinsic motivation to learn. Another possible explanation for this behaviour could be that the pupils simply felt overtaxed and unable to cope with all the autonomy and freedom given to them at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. Nevertheless, another possible reason for some of the pupils' lack of proficiency could be that they simply lacked opportunities for active and authentic use of their skills. If they were constrained to use English as the only language for their research and communication, they would have more opportunities to actively



use their receptive as well as their productive skills. Then again, if they were forced to do so against their will, this would go against the principles of a democratic, alternative school. And against Ms L's anti-authoritarian beliefs in especially. In summary, on the one hand Ms L's situation as an English teacher at the *SchülerInnen Schule* is a complex and difficult one. On the other hand, in my opinion it would have been to the students' advantage, if Ms L would have been slightly stricter about the use of English in her lessons. Furthermore, in my opinion Ms L could have used one of her weekly lessons to do task-based learning with her pupils in order to give them various additional opportunities to get in contact with authentic material and especially to train their productive skills. She could have proposed game-like, challenging as well as communicative activities to the pupils in order to increase their extrinsic motivation. In order to overcome communication problems which might have arisen due to differing proficiency levels of the learners, Ms L could have proposed one task-based lesson for beginners and another one for intermediate students.

### **8.3.3. Teacher role in TBL**

One striking similarity of the teacher roles in TBL and in Ms L's approach to open learning lies in their functioning as a language learning facilitator, rather than a typical teacher who controls every aspect of their pupils' learning. Samuda (2001) states that in the context of TBL teachers need to be able to "lead from behind" (Samuda 2001: 137). In my opinion this is exactly what Ms L did during her lessons. She left an impressive amount of freedom to her pupils, having them decide on what, how, with whom and when to study. Ms L did not punish her students for not using vocabulary logs or not writing their homework in exercise books, trusting in her pupils' abilities to organise their learning themselves. Nevertheless, she always kept the overview of what was happening in her classroom. Walking from pupil to pupil, taking time for each of them, she checked on their work and progress. She always knew exactly what her students were working on, what their strengths and weaknesses were and helped them with advice when they demanded it. Furthermore, whenever a

pupil had difficulties to understand something, Ms L first of all encouraged them to ask a classmate for help or to try once again to find the answer independently giving them hints on how to proceed. Only if the student had tried all other possibilities, Ms L gave them the answer. She did so in order to get them to think for themselves and to work autonomously. Moreover, in case a pupil had difficulties deciding what to work on next, Ms L questioned them on what they thought they already knew well, or what they had worked on previously. Then she enumerated some options the learner had. The eventual decision, however, always remained the student's responsibility. In my opinion being there for one's pupils in a supportive way without taking the control over their learning from them is important for the student's self-perception and self-confidence.

Willis (1996) defined exposure to the target language and language use as two of the four conditions for successful foreign language learning (the other two are motivation and instruction). According to her one fundamental aspect of facilitating language learning is to find a suitable balance between the pupils' exposure to the target language and their active use of the language. The teacher's function, thus, is to provide for both in equal amount and quality. This is a critical point in Ms L's teaching approach. Her pupils were not really exposed to a great variety of different English texts and refused to speak English most of the time. It is commonly agreed upon by most pedagogues and SLA researchers that in the classroom pupils should be exposed to as much L2 in written, as well as in spoken form as possible (cf. Cook 1991, Ur 1996 and Willis 1996). The exposure to the target L2 in the classroom habitually takes place in the form of reading and listening activities, as well as teacher talk. As regards spoken L2 Cook (1991) differentiates between authentic and non-authentic language. Authentic language is language in the form it is used in real-life communication. Non-authentic language is language "specially constructed for its teaching potential" (Cook 1991: 93). Non-authentic language features accurateness, grammatical correctness and a clear sequence of turns which is only seldom found in real-life interactions (cf. Cook 1991: 93-94). Concerning listening activities Ur (1996) argues for their authenticity. In order to prepare students to real-life communicative interactions they should get in contact with as many features of real-life situations as possible. These are, for

example, chunks of conversations, negligent pronunciation, background noises, colloquial vocabulary and grammar, and so forth (cf. Ur 1996: 105-07). Furthermore, in her work with learners of L2 Ur found that “activities based on simulated real-life situations are likely to be more motivating and interesting to do than contrived textbook comprehension exercises” (Ur 1996: 107). Regarding exposure to spoken language Willis (1996), too, thinks that students should be exposed to authentic language. In her opinion it is beneficial for the learners when the teacher adapts their teacher talk to the learners' level of proficiency. However, she disapproves of teachers exaggerating the modification of their speech in such an extreme way as to create a kind of “classroom pidgin” (Willis 1996: 12). Apropos of exposure to written language Willis (1996) critiques the “impoverished and restricted language found in some textbooks” (Willis 1996: 68). She, therefore, favours the incorporation of a great variety of different and authentic texts in the lesson. Moreover, she finds it vital for the learners' individual studies outside the classroom to get them acquainted with reading and listening strategies (cf. Willis 1996: 67-73).

Concerning the exposure to the spoken target language Ms L's pupils enjoyed one great advantage over many other learners. Their teacher is a native speaker and, therefore, had an infinite amount of formal as well as colloquial vocabulary at her disposal. What is more, the pupils learnt the correct American pronunciation. In reference to Willis' classroom pidgin I can say that Ms L's use of language was authentic. She spoke fluently and did not modify her speech in order to adapt to her pupils' level of proficiency, except for situations in which the students asked her for clarification. As far as listening comprehension is concerned in addition to listening to Ms L the students could use five CD-ROMs with vocabulary and grammar exercises to improve their listening skills. Moreover, every once in a while Ms L watched an English DVD with the class. And she encouraged her learners to watch their favourite series and films in English whenever they got the opportunity. However, I did not observe Ms L engaging her students in any listening activity as defined by Ur and Willis. In regard to the exposure to written language Ms L's pupils had a variety of fiction novels, booklets on specific topics (such as 'Dinosaurs' or 'London', for example) and some youth magazines at their disposal. Additionally, as already

mentioned above, theoretically the students would regularly get in contact with authentic English texts from books or the web during the content courses. But since Ms L allowed them to use German web sites, too, their exposure to English texts diminished.

Concerning the active use of language Willis (1996) declares that especially beginners may need a silent period in the course of which they process and internalise L2 input, before they begin to use it actively in communicative interactions. Students of an L2, therefore, should not be pushed to actively produce language before they are ready to do so. Moreover, learners should be given opportunities to communicate for real purposes – i.e. getting things done, or socialise sharing experiences. In the course of such tasks pupils have to be able to express what they think and feel in a “positive, supportive, low stress atmosphere that encourages creativity and risk-taking” (Willis 1996: 13). Willis identified the teaching of discourse skills – i.e. opening and closing of a conversation, interacting and turn-taking, negotiating meaning, etc. - as one of the first abilities to teach in respect of spoken L2. Additionally, learners should be encouraged to communicate and, optionally, even be pushed to speak before greater audiences, because those students often work harder to improve and reach a higher level of proficiency. All activities enhancing use of the target language should be meaning-focused. Drill activities, such as reading out dialogues, for example, the aim of which is to practise particular language forms often result in students doing them automatically without further having to think about what the language items actually mean (cf. Willis 1996: 13-14).

Ms L agrees with Willis' (1996) position according to which L2 learners need not be pushed to actively use the target language before they are ready to do so. I can only support this position, having myself observed one young Dutch L2 learner of approximately ten years whose parents moved to a German speaking community not saying a word in the target language for several months and then suddenly starting to speak almost fluently from one day to the next. Pushing this learner to use German before she was ready to do so would most probably have led to the child feeling overcharged, which certainly would have hindered or delayed the girl's actively using the L2. Ms L does not only believe

that pupils should not be impelled to speak before they are ready, she is even convinced that up to the age of 14 pupils learn the most by using their receptive skills anyway and therefore considers speaking tasks as a negligible aspect of her English lessons. A point of view which I cannot quite support on account of the above mentioned experience with the Dutch girl who at the age of ten already spoke German fluently. Nevertheless, the incident I am referring to did not take place in a formal teaching context. The girl needed to adapt to a new community speaking a different language. Therefore, the girl most probably had a strong integrative motivation (cf. Willis (1996) as well as Cook (1991) to learn the L2. In contrast, the intrinsic motivation of learners acquiring a language in a formal institutional context might not be as strong and, consequently, the time span they need before they are ready to use the target language might be arguably longer. As already mentioned in the section on the exposure to the target language above in my opinion Ms L's courses would cater for enough opportunities to communicate for real purposes, if only these were fully exploited. Pupils could train authentic use of English in the course of playing games, while doing research together, when giving presentations or when discussing with Ms L. The atmosphere in Ms L's classes definitely was positive, supportive and stress-free. And Ms L's way of interacting with her pupils was friendly, encouraging and jocular. Thus, to my mind there was no reason at all for the learners to feel afraid or ashamed of trying out their oral skills. However, since Ms L allowed them to use German as the main language of communication during her lessons in order not to overcharge them, many speaking opportunities were lost to the learners. From my own experience I can say that it can be tiring having to constantly remind the students to speak English. However, I experienced that if one is strict enough about the use of English as only means of communication and makes one's standpoint clear, eventually the learners will at least try to use the target language. In my opinion it is the easiest to get the class to speak English when playing games. On one occasion I was allowed to stand in for Ms L who had fallen ill. The first lesson we played a game in which everyone had to write a famous film star on a piece of paper and stick it to somebody else's forehead without the person noticing the name of the star. Then, everyone had to find out which film star they represented by asking yes- and no-questions only. If their question was

answered with yes, they were allowed to keep on asking. When their question was answered with no, it was the next person's turn. I played the game with a group of eight boys and it took me over 20 minutes until they stopped fooling around and started to play the game. Then it took me another quarter of an hour until they all asked their questions in English. They seemed to be ashamed or afraid of ridiculing themselves, but as soon as the first shyness had passed they seemed to enjoy the game. In the second lesson the pupils wanted to play UNO. One would think that UNO is a game in the course of which there is no need to speak much. Male pubescent teenagers, however, cannot even shut their mouths for a second. Their need to comment on everything is unlimited. So, I introduced a new rule into the game. Everyone saying a word in German had to pick a card from the deck. This turned the game into real fun and incited even the weakest students to use English. In summary, in my opinion Ms L's viewpoint on speaking tasks is too narrow. The younger pupils are the more easily they acquire the pronunciation of a foreign language. Thus, not doing any speaking tasks with the learners until they are fourteen does not seem right to me. There exist a variety of options of how to integrate more speaking tasks even in the open learning context. In my opinion the easiest way would be via proposing game-like speaking activities to the pupils. Not once when I offered to play a game with the learners did they refuse. So, once every while Ms L could ask her students to play games of the above mentioned kind. With bigger groups she could have the pupils form several smaller groups and make sure that they use English only by walking from group to group and reminding them. And with small classes Ms L could play the game together with her learners in order to ensure their using English only.

## 9. Conclusion

My diploma thesis deals with various strands in progressive education and analyses how these are realised in one Viennese alternative school. No matter how different the realisation of their ideological convictions may sometimes be, all the progressive educationalists I worked on in the course of my research share a set of core beliefs about education. Aspects which exist in the didactic theories of all educational reformists treated in chapter three are child-centredness, freedom, autonomy, independence, responsibility, democracy, self-determination, joy and learning in real-life situations. In my opinion these facets of an ideal educational environment lack in the Austrian schools where rules are imposed from above, instead of established co-operatively by teachers and pupils, where the curriculum and tests decide over learning matters and not the students, and where holistic learning including all senses is neglected in favour of the learning by heart of incoherent subject matters. To my mind schools like the *SchülerInnen Schule* could form a realistic alternative to the existing school system. In the place of huge impersonal schools with too big classes and overworked teachers, why not create schools with less pupils where parents are more integrated in their children's educational environment, where there exists room for the children's individualities, and where the relationship between teachers and pupils is not based on authority and a system of success and failure, but on mutual trust as well as a set of rules which the students established themselves? However, as I was able to observe it is quite a challenging task for a free, democratic school to, on the one hand, cater for an environment in which children find enough freedom to develop autonomously and to, on the other hand, meet the expectations of parents as well as the Austrian school curriculum.

A second important aspect which my diploma thesis treats is in how far aspects of three different approaches to language teaching are realised in the English lessons at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. Some of the above mentioned pedagogic core principles of progressive education have already been integrated in the analysed language teaching methods. Open learning, the English teacher's

didactic method, stems from the progressive educational movement. But learner autonomy and TBL, too, show similarities to progressive educational principles. Child-centredness, responsibility, self-determination, autonomy, independence, joy and learning in real-life situations are core facets of the progressive educational strands treated in chapter three as well as of learner autonomy and TBL. Thus, I was able to identify aspects of a great variety of different approaches to learning in Ms L's lessons. Since I will be a teacher myself, this realisation taught me an important lesson. In regard to my own teaching I will try not to rely too much on one didactic method, but will do my best to incorporate the best of various approaches to learning and teaching into my lessons in order to cater for as much diversity as possible.

Concluding, a great variety of helpful insights into learning have already be provided by educational masterminds. To my mind the Austrian school system needs to open up for this existing knowledge in order to be able to successfully prepare young individuals for the exigencies of a rapidly changing world. However, not only the schools need to open up for a rethinking of education, but the universities, too, would have to bear responsibility due to the fact that they train our future teachers. I find it disappointing that progressive education was not even once mentioned in any of the teacher training courses I attended during the five years I studied at the University of Vienna. Nevertheless, I hope that my diploma thesis will serve as an impulse to make progressive education a more important topic in teacher training.



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## Zusammenfassung

Diese Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit alternativem Lernen und dessen Umsetzung im Englischunterricht der Wiener alternativen *SchülerInnen Schule*. Zunächst wird der traditionelle Unterricht mit alternativen Lernformen verglichen. Darüber hinaus werden sowohl die Theorien jener Reformpädagogen und Alternativschulen vorgestellt, deren Prinzipien sich in der Methodik der *SchülerInnen Schule* wieder spiegeln, als auch deren konkrete Umsetzung im Schulalltag. Der zweite Teil der Arbeit ist der Auseinandersetzung mit drei verschiedenen Ansätzen zum Thema Fremdsprachendidaktik gewidmet. Der erste dieser Ansätze ist Offenes Lernen, die bevorzugte Lernmethode der Englischlehrerin an der *SchülerInnen Schule*. Die beiden anderen vorgestellten Methoden sind Learner Autonomy und Task-based Learning, die neuesten Lehrformen aus der englischsprachigen Forschung zur Fremdsprachendidaktik. Im dritten Teil dieser Arbeit wird der Frage nachgegangen inwiefern sich, erstens, elementare Prinzipien des alternativen Lernens im Allgemeinen, und, zweitens, Aspekte aus den drei oben erwähnten Methoden der Fremdsprachendidaktik im Englischunterricht wieder finden. Der Forschungsarbeit zufolge ist es keine leichte Aufgabe in Österreich an einer Alternativschule zu unterrichten. Für die LehrerInnen der *SchülerInnen Schule*, und im Besonderen für die Englischlehrerin, ist es oft problematisch einen Mittelweg zu finden zwischen ihren persönlichen pädagogischen Überzeugungen und den Anforderungen von Eltern und dem Österreichischen Lehrplan. Eine zweite Schlussfolgerung ergab sich aus den Unterrichtsbeobachtungen. Es ist auf jeden Fall von Vorteil für LehrerInnen, sich das Beste aus diversen Ansätzen zur Fremdsprachendidaktik zu wählen, um so größt mögliche Vielfalt in den eigenen Unterricht zu bringen.



## Abstract

This diploma thesis is concerned with progressive education and its application in the English lessons at the Viennese alternative school *SchülerInnen Schule*. The first part of this paper compares progressive to traditional education, presents a number of renowned educational reformists as well as alternative schools which influenced the methodology of the *SchülerInnen Schule* and depicts the pedagogical convictions of the school. The second part of the thesis deals with three different approaches to foreign language teaching. The first approach is Open Learning, the preferred teaching method of the English teacher at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. The second and third approach are Learner Autonomy and Task-based Learning, the latest trends in SLA research. The third part of this paper treats the question in how far, first of all, the fundamental principles of progressive education and, second, aspects of the three before mentioned approaches to foreign language teaching are mirrored in the English lessons at the *SchülerInnen Schule*. The result of research shows that in Austria it is quite a challenge to teach at an alternative school. For the teachers of the *SchülerInnen Schule*, and especially for the English teacher, it often is problematic to act according to their ideological convictions and at the same time live up to the exigencies of parents as well as the Austrian school curriculum. Moreover, a second conclusion which can be drawn from observations is that it is beneficial for English teachers, if they are able to introduce the best of various different approaches to foreign language learning in their own teaching.

# Curriculum Vitae

## Persönliche Daten

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## Ausbildung

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1990 – 1994	Volkschule in Walding
1994 - 2002	Gymnasium, Peuerbachstraße 35 in 4040 Linz, neusprachlicher Zweig
2002 – 2003	Biologiestudium an der Universität Wien
Seit 2004	Studium an der Universität Wien, Lehramt Französisch und Englisch
2007	Erasmusaufenthalt an der Université d'Avignon, Frankreich (4 Monate)
Seit 2007	Ausbildung zur NEW HEALTH Seminarleiterin im Bereich der ganzheitlichen Gesundheitsvorsorge

## Berufspraxis

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1999	Ferialpraxis als Servicekraft im Sozialprojekt „Seidl-Bräu“ der pro mente, Steyr
2001	Ferialarbeit bei der Firma Efko, Eferding
2002 – 2003	Call Center Agent bei CCC, Wien

2003	Praktikum im Rogerthorpe Manor, Best Western Hotel, Yorkshire, England (3 Monate)
2003 - 2004	Absolvierung des Europäischen Freiwilligendienstes in Bayonne, Baskenland, Frankreich (6 Monate)
Seit 2004	Telefonistin bei EDV Firma, Fa Juprowa, Wien
Seit 2005	Lehrkraft im Nachhilfeinstitut Lernquadrat, Wien
Seit 2008	Praktikum an alternativer Schule: SchülerInnen Schule, 1090 Wien

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### **Besondere Kenntnisse und Fähigkeiten**

Englisch und Französisch fließend  
Erfahrung als Assistentin bei Persönlichkeitsentwicklungsseminaren