

Young students get language lessons

By T. LYNN ADAMS For the Tribune • June 13, 2008

Standing in a conference room at the Peak, Susanne Reutiman announces "Ahoi Matrosen!" (Ahoy sailors! in German) to almost a dozen onlookers. Ranging in age from 1 1/2 to 7 years old, they answer her back, also in German.

Reutiman teaches German and French classes to Great Falls children. Born in Germany, she moved with her family to the United States four years ago. She spent several years studying French and attended Lyons University in France.

"There is a window of opportunity between birth and eight years of age where they learn so well," Reutiman said of her students.

She would know because Reutiman and her husband, who's American but also fluent in German, are raising their children to be bilingual.

"I speak to them in German and my husband speaks to them in English," she said.

Reutiman wanted learning a foreign language to be fun so she played games with her kids and sang songs to them. Soon she started a play group and invited other children to join.



Susanne Reutiman uses costumes to help teach youngsters German through storytelling, music and drama. (TRIBUNE PHOTOS/LARRY BECKNER)

"I realized quickly that the children memorized the new vocabulary best by singing songs," Reutiman said. "Unfortunately, they were exposed to the songs only once a week when we met and sometimes would not remember the melody or the words."

Then Reutiman learned about Music Lingua, a unique method to teach children foreign language skills. She drove to Bozeman to investigate the program and knew it was what she wanted to do.

Music Lingua uses music, movement, storytelling and visual aids to help children learn a language in a fun setting. Reutiman's students sing and dance to songs, go on treasure hunts and play dress-up.

The program is broken into themed teaching units such as "Life at Home" or "African Safari." The class revolves around the theme, which helps children remember and relate to what they learn.

For each 10- to 12-week course, Reutiman gives the students a new CD with the songs that fit the upcoming theme. Parents are encouraged to play the CD as often as they can so the children are exposed to the foreign language songs more than once a week.

Elizabeth Jennings, whose children are taking the class, is thrilled that it doesn't feel like work.

"They don't even realize they're learning," she said. "They just start playing and interact in another language."

At a recent German class, the children reviewed past vocabulary and learned new material, all in a pretend journey to the seashore. Using a beach ball, colorful towel and giant sunglasses, Reutiman spoke to the children in German.

They responded naturally, bouncing with excitement to answer her questions in German.

Together the class made pretend sandcastles and learned the names of fish and seaside activities. They discussed colors, numbers, temperatures, emotions and adventure as they swam in the Meer (ocean) and sang songs about pirates.

Linda Caricaburu, who knows some German, has two children in the class.

"I know enough that I can get a beer and a bathroom," she laughed. "But my children outspoke and outsang me.

"I am so happy she is doing this," Caricaburu said. "There isn't much opportunity for something like this in Great Falls."

Reutiman's instruction is planned carefully, using bright props, puppets and other objects. There is one-on-one time with the children and lots of group activity. The parents sit on the floor with their children, singing and learning right along with their little ones. For the adults, it's a language class they can enjoy, too.

"Usually the adults really get singing," Jennings said.

However, Jennings usually leaves the dancing to her 3-year-old daughter Ruby and her 7-year-old son Seamus.

Six-year-old Cayley Norman quietly announced she likes "the Blasen song the best."

"Blasen is bubbles," said her mom, Deb Norman, who also speaks German and

French.

Caricaburu said her children listen to the songs at home and in the car, and she finds the songs have helped her improve her understanding of German as well.

Reutiman said that when children learn a foreign language before the age of 8, their brains benefit.

"The brain actually forms new connections," she said. "The result is better brain performance. Research shows that children who learn a foreign language at an early age do better in math and logical thinking."

"Sometime after the age of 8, the ability of the brain to form these new connections is lost. Of course it is still beneficial to learn a foreign language after that age, but it is much more work."

At the end of each class, Reutiman incorporates a craft or a snack. During a recent class to the seashore, the children went on a treasure hunt and found bowls of blue pudding and colorful fish to eat. Sitting on the mat eating their snack the children spoke in both German and English.

"They even use words and phrases at home all the time," said Caricaburu, whose 7-year-old daughter, Marian, sang a song in German for her school talent show.

"I love it when that happens," Reutiman said. "I'm so happy to be doing this."

At the end of the class the children waved, saying "Auf wiedersehen meine Freunde. Tschüss!" — see you again my friends. Bye!
