

# “Never Forget Your Inner Child!”

Interview with Prof. Dr. Engelbert Thaler, new Chair of the Department of English Didactics

**Q:** How did you decide to become a teacher and, later on, a lecturer at university?

**A:** I made the decision to become a teacher in 11th grade. It was my dream job, the thing I absolutely wanted to do for a living, and my expectations were never disappointed. Even after twenty years I kept saying this is the best job you can possibly have. The reason I went on to university lies in the fact that . . . well, I used to play a lot of football, and, at one point, your age doesn't allow you to keep playing any more. This was a difficult turning-point for me; it was sort of a defeat that I had to stop playing, so I thought I needed a new challenge, which was doing my PhD. I started to write my dissertation while I was still teaching full time, and, then, things began to develop. My dissertation supervisor asked me whether I'd be interested in lecturing at university. So, I began to do that part-time, which meant I spent half of my time teaching in my old school and the other half teaching at the LMU in Munich. Having both was really a nice arrangement, but at one point my supervisor asked whether I wouldn't be interested in continuing and writing my postdoctoral thesis. Of course, that meant deciding whether really to leave school, and I thought about that for a long time because I didn't want to leave for good. But, on the other hand, it was such a great challenge. And I really enjoy teaching at university.

**Q:** Are there certain aspects you miss about being a school teacher?

**A:** The good thing about university is that you can teach in a more demanding manner, while you have to lower the level a little bit in school.

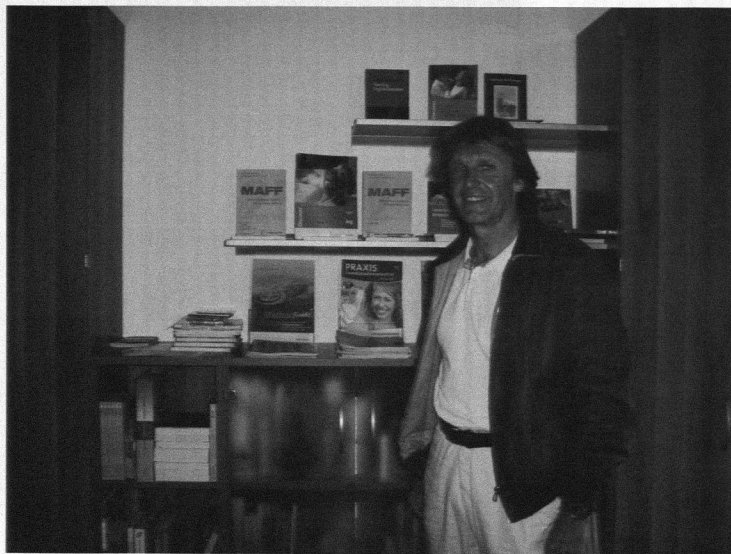
lish. Of course, you don't have to be pedagogic in that sense any more at university.

**Q:** Was there a special experience that convinced you that your decision to become a teacher or professor was right?

**A:** Not just one, but every single day. I always enjoyed going to school, and when you have many hands raised and you see in their faces that they really want to take part and enjoy learning, and when you get positive feedback from them or their parents, you feel you made the right choice.

**Q:** The topic of our current issue is “(Not) Growing Up”; is there something that immediately comes to mind?

**A:** Well, I can sympathise with everyone who doesn't want to grow up. You should, even as a teacher, never forget your inner child. Of course, you have to develop, and at some point student teachers need to shift from the point of view of a student to that of a teacher, but they should keep a part of the child they used to be - maybe also remaining a bit naive, and not taking everything too seriously, especially



The good thing about school is, though, that there's a wider range of personalities and age groups and that you can establish a better relationship with your students. I would see them four, five times a week, which means I could really call all of them by their first name after two weeks. The pedagogic contact you have with them is much closer. Unfortunately, I see my students at university only once a week, so a relationship like this is much harder to estab-

themselves. The Germans would benefit from the rather British attitude of self-deprecation.

Q: Have you also kept your inner child to a certain degree?

A: Definitely. I've kept the hobbies I had in my childhood, like sports and, in particular, football, but also sitting together with friends and fooling around with them in beer gardens or pubs. Simply being childish and not taking everything seriously is something I've definitely kept inside me.

Q: So, would you also advise students to keep their inner child?

A: Not being earnest rule, as Kate Fox puts it in her great book *Watching the English*. That's also something the Germans should keep in mind. There are things you should take seriously, like your profession, but you shouldn't take yourself seriously all the time. You should prepare your lessons conscientiously, but shouldn't lose a certain humorous or childish attitude.

Q: Do you think this can also help future teachers to understand their pupils better?

A: Yes, although each of us is different, of course. Everyone has their own personality and shouldn't change that, but losing the feeling of what it's like to be a student is the wrong way. Carl Rogers developed the three co-characteristics for teachers - empathy, respect and authenticity - and all of them show that you should never be too grown-up. You need a certain empathy, you need to appreciate your pupils and you need to be yourself. You shouldn't have a strict, schizophrenic break between your professional and private life.

Q: Do you still know what you wanted to become as a child?

A: Well, the idea of teaching came very soon, although I only made the final decision in 11th grade. And the other dream was, of course, to be the world's best footballer. I had that dream for a very long time . . . perhaps I still do have it a little bit (laughs).

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