

Joanna LEEK
Uniwersytet Łódzki

JOHN AMOS COMENIUS – THE INITIATOR OF MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND WORLD UNDERSTANDING

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zapoznanie z życiem i poglądami Jana Amosa Komeńskiego na temat nauczania języków, jak i stworzenia uniwersalnego języka, umożliwiającego porozumienie się ludzi różnych narodów, religii, ras. Od ponad trzystu lat osoba Jana Amosa Komeńskiego wzbudza w środowisku nauczycieli na całym świecie duże zainteresowanie. Przede wszystkim dlatego, że jako pisarz i publicysta był niezmiernie pracowity. Do historii przeszedł jako ten, który poszukiwał nowych metod niezbędnych w dydaktyce szkolnej, jako znawca i propagator środków dydaktycznych oraz zwolennik nauczania pogładowego na każdym przedmiocie szkolnym. Był też twórcą idei stworzenia uniwersalnego języka, z którym wiązał nadzieje na naprawę świata i ulepszenie stosunków między narodami.

Through out centuries a lot of theories about the learning and teaching of languages have been proposed. John Amos Comenius has become one of the major influences on modern educational thinking, with his personality, philosophical and educational writing. The guiding ideas of Comenius' system and their true significance are difficult to appreciate fully without some prior knowledge of his life. Comenius' life and work are as closely interwoven as his ideas on world brotherhood and his religious precepts are inseparable from his educational reforms.

It's been almost four hundred years, since Comenius formulate his thoughts, by which then has been built the whole educational system of Europe. In tracing contemporary education movements and idea back to their origins we can find a surprisingly large number of them were coming from the progressive tendencies of the past. There are few content aspects of educational methodology in the current teaching curriculum in many countries which have not been influenced or advocated by Comenius. John Amos Comenius has been described by Anthony Howatt

as „a genius, possibly the only one that the history of language teaching can claim”¹. He managed to combine his pastoral duties with secondary school teaching and a prodigious written output on child foreign language learning, including use of visual aids, direct association of language and referent, functional vocabulary, use of concrete examples rather than abstract rules. His „Didactica Opera Omnia” has had the most far-reaching influence on the thinking of educators from the 17th century up to the present day and the principles of his philosophy were to be reflected in the major plans elaborated in the course of the past centuries to achieve peace and international collaboration in the world.

Comenius as a Man

John Amos Comenius was born 1592 in Moravia. Up to his 12th year he was brought up in happy and peaceful environment of family house. His life was shattered unexpected when his parents and two sisters died as victims of the pestilence which devastated Bohemia. When Comenius was sixteen, thank to the generosity of friends he was sent to the grammar school of Prerov where he was encouraged to attend some courses by the rector. After study at the Calvinist Academy at Herborn in Nissau and a year at Heidelberg, Comenius was welcomed back to his old school as teacher. At the age of twenty-six he was appointed to his own church at Fulnek in Northern Moravia. Shortly after he got married and within the next two years his two children were born. After return to Bohemia Comenius started to work as a headmaster in a school when the Thirty Years War started, it forced him to leave his church and go into hiding. In the same time he suffered another tragic blow, with the death from pestilence of his young wife and two children. This marked him deeply. Like any father Comenius had looked forward to the joy of sharing and guiding his own children’s learning. The blow encouraged his life-long effort to make early learning a happy and fulfilling experience for all children. Because of the complicated political situation, religious prosecution in the first half of XVII century for almost next seven years Comenius travelled around Europe hiding in different places. Finally, in 1628 hoping to keep his church alive he found a place where he could write and teach in peace. He went to Leszno in Poland, where the local protestant lord Rafael Leszczyński gave him a home for the next twenty-eight years. Comenius was glad to become a teacher at the grammar school which Leszno boasted. He turned to writing books which he had planned during his years of solitude. During all his years in Poland he was always hoping to return back to Bohemia one day and take part in the establishment of a better society than he had known before. Education was to be the key to the new state. In his publication “Brief Pro-

¹ Howatt, Anthony P.R.: A History of English Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984. Chapter 3.

posal regarding the renewal of schools in the kingdom of Bohemia” he put forward the view that the society could only be reformed if there would be created a new system of schools. He foresaw a nation and comprehensive system in which children of all classes would be brought up to love their native culture, but would also be given the key to a more universal culture through the Latin language. He couldn't accept that the learning of Latin had to be such a painful task as teachers made it. He believed that with some more creative teaching it could be made so easy that any child could achieve it. Therefore he wrote a text-book which he entitled a “Gateway to the learning of language”. This differed from all previous books by not insisting on grammar and in giving descriptions of all things useful to know. The book was written in Czech and Latin. But after translation into German Compendious became quickly famous throughout Europe. In the same time as turned his mind to the thought that if education could become universal the way would be opened to a universal reform of human society. In 1641 he went to England, in the following years to Sweden and in 1649 to Hungary where he was asked to establish a school on the basis of his theories of education. He saw this opportunity as big chance to convince others of the practicability of universal education. To fulfil his big dream about the school he rewrote the text-books in the Magyar language and composed a detailed outline of the organisation of the school and gave lectures explaining his methods. 1651 the first class assembled and about hundred pupils started his education in Comenius school. Because of change of political situation he had to come back shortly to Leszno. He took back with him the manuscript of the picture book and other manuscripts, by 1657 he published most of them. Even if most men would not listen to him while he was alive, he hoped that would do so after he was dead. The end came in November 1670 when Comenius was buried in the French Reformed Church of Naaden on the Zuyder Zee.

Comenius as thinker and practitioner of foreign language learning

Comenius' great principles concerning education stem naturally from his conception of the world. For Comenius as well as for Rousseau a century later, man is capable of infinite perfection, and education is the path that leads to his development. Comenius believed that the one sure way to the heart and confidence of a child was through love, observation of nature and respect for its laws. He advocated that school lessons should be carefully adapted to the different aptitudes of children and that a child's spontaneity and dignity could be fully respected.

Leibnitz, Buisson and Raumer marvelled at his extreme breadth of mind; Michélet called him “the Galileo of Education”; and the American educator, Nicolas Murray Butler said of him that his relation to our present teaching is similar to that held by Copernicus and Newton toward modern science, and Bacon and Descartes toward modern philosophy.

In “Great Didactic” we can find answer to the question: How is language to be learnt quickly, pleasantly, solidly? The general answer is: quickly, by constant familiarising with examples; pleasantly, by giving clear precepts; solidly, by continual practice; and all these objects are attained generally by following good method.

To insure Quickness, Comenius is giving following rule:

Clearly lay down the end at which you aim, and neglect all that does not bear on that end: keep to one example and one explanation of it, relying on practice for all else: advance by gradual steps, remember that steady, continuous progress is notable progress; therefore, no day without a line, no hour without its task: leave nothing undone when once begun².

To insure Pleasantness,

The secret of a pleasant process lies in the handling of the minds of the young in accordance with nature. To do otherwise is to struggle against nature. Everything should be done with paternal affection, all moroseness being banished. Brevity, order, definiteness, should characterise the substance of our teaching. The senses must be always appealed to when possible. The utility and bearing of what is learned should be made manifest. Teaching should be tempered with an agreeable variety, and the playful element admitted. The rivalry and emulation of free games should be encouraged in lessons³.

To insure Solidity,

the leading principle here is that we teach the young solid truth, and what will be of solid use, avoiding frivolous things, and indeed everything the truth and utility of which are not patent. Let our examples be very select, placing the thing to be learned distinctly before the eyes, so that every part of it be seen: let the rules be few, brief, clear: let exercises be appended sufficient in number to bring the example and rule clearly out, as without these a vague idea leads to vague and uncertain imitation. Let the first foundations be solidly laid; the beginnings of things are the most important; they should be taught slowly and accurately. By precipitancy everything is destroyed. Let everything therefore be rightly apprehended in its beginning, and secure this by examination. The foundations being solidly laid proceed cautiously with the superstructure. Let nothing be laid on the top of foundations not yet firmly settled. Those who sow much and plough little lose much and reap little. Bring all the senses into requisition wherever possible. Above all, the examples and rules being given, give continual practice. Let repetitions and examinations be constant⁴.

Following list of innovation show Comenius’ beliefs about young learner foreign language learning:

1. Teach the language directly by means of visual aids. A suitable object should be shown to as many of the senses as possible.
2. A student needs someone to guide him/her.
3. Induce rules from examples, rather than deducting sentences from rules learnt by heart... so “percept before precept, exemplar before rule”. Meet the language in context before discussing the structure, not vice versa.

² Comenius, John Amos: *The Great Didactics*, translation by M. Keatinge. A and C. Black, London, 1896, p. 58.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

He demanded that “things” and not “words” must be the starting point. Familiar words ought to be introduced in the next stage, and only then their foreign equivalents should be found, and texts and examples should come before definitions of principles and rules.

Comenius devoted particular attention to the methods of teaching of foreign languages and the mother tongue. The first innovation based on the principle that in a textbook should be accompanied with pictures. Two textbooks of Comenius are of unusual importance: his “Gate of Languages Unlocked”, already referred to, and his “Orbis Pictus” (The World in Pictures). “Orbis Pictus” was first illustrated textbook, where the pictures are not just illustrations added for attractiveness but vital to the whole conception of the work. The “Orbis Pictus” is a great pioneer work for the reasons that Comenius shifted the emphasis in instruction from words to things, and taught language by means of pictures. The book tied the thing, shown in the picture, with the word forming part of a sentence, passing from word to thing to new word. Furthermore it provided the Latin words and sentences and their translation side by side. The subject matter was not the world of classical antiquity but everyday, useful information and scientific knowledge. Comenius, who was the father of education through pictures, was also the precursor of the global method of teaching reading.

Comenius focused as well on the idea that the child’s experiences and senses are a gateway to the acquisition of language. For him sensual cognition was the first step in education of man. In all his works Comenius directed attention towards the objects around us, in a sublime and emotional style. He also pointed out the necessity of relating sensual impressions to the pupil’s activity, and to the learning of words. Comenius postulated that child’s senses can grasp, and attempt always to associate the word and object referred to. He was convinced of the rightness of the view that word should be taught and learned only in association with things for what are words but the husks and coverings of things? Whenever instruction is given in any language, even though it is in the mother tongue itself, the words must be explained by showing the child the object denoted. On the other hand, everything that the child sees, hears, touches or tastes, he must be taught to express in words, so that the command of language and development of the mind progress uniformly side by side⁵.

Second Comenius’ innovation based on the teacher’s role. He believed that the teacher had a vital role to play in helping the child towards learning independence. This involved guiding the learner, supporting and correcting when necessary, grading input and syllabus, and selecting topics as appropriate. He pointed on the student’s and teacher’s role by learning. The pupil’s role should be to search, discover, discuss and repeat; the teachers’ merely to supervise and guide them in their efforts at discovery. He recommended that the teacher should take his students on visits to

⁵ Rabecq, Marie: Comenius: apostle of modern education. In: UNESCO Courier 11 (1957), p. 8.

manufactories and on field trips to study the land, plants and animals. Comenius emphasized the need for attractive lessons given in pleasant and harmonious surroundings by teachers who were both gentle and understanding. Because the development of the mind is based on love of learning, stressed Comenius in "Great Didactic": "Before setting about making of his pupil a well-cultivated mind by cramming him full of rules, the teacher should make him eager for learning, and better still, capable of receiving learning. But who takes the trouble of doing this with kindness and love? Generally speaking, the teacher takes his pupil as he finds him, each one setting about at once turning, tanning, carding, weaving and modelling him as he thinks fit. The child is expected immediately to become a well-formed product, a polished jewel. And if the miracle does not take place in a hand's turn.... The teacher grows indignant and storms and rages"⁶.

To the third innovation Comenius wrote "It is necessary that examples come before rules"⁷. One of the most popular educational Maxim of Comenius was that words and things should never be divorced, that knowledge of the language should go hand in hand with the knowledge of the things explained. Comenius stress this particularly principle within the teaching of language teaching, that examples must precede rules: as the natural course of development consists in acting first and only afterwards reflecting on the circumstances of the action. Examples cannot be deduced from a rule unless the rule is understood, but understanding of the rule derives from the retroactive organization of examples already utilized in spontaneous practice.

John Amos Comenius as advocate of universal language

Comenius dreamt of closer links between all the countries of Europe. Once this dream established, than closer links could be made between all parts of the world. He did not underestimate the difficulties in the path of international collaboration, and preached tolerance and understanding to overcome them. He advocated therefore that men join together in the cause of peace, that they gather together in a great unified assembly of human solidarity, a community of minds and knowledge set up in a "Council of Light", an international organization where education, science and culture could be employed for the good of all mankind.

Although Comenius advocated universal and independent authorities for peace, for religion and for broadcasting ideas, but he believed that there must be a common language throughout the world if all men were to become international citizens. The biggest obstacle to the universal community was for Comenius the multiplicity of tongues. He mentioned a lot of times in his publications that the lan-

⁶ J. A. Comenius: *The Great Didactic*. London: Adam & Charles Black, Keatinge 1896, p. 157.

⁷ Quotation of Comenius' "Great Didactics" comes from Rusk, R: *Doctrines of the Great Educators*. Edinburgh: Macmillan 1969, p. 89.

guage barrier made people deaf to each other and cut them off from international communication. Comenius has not left people with this problem and proposed solution in this regard. He suggested that everyone should be bi-lingual. Each man should have his own vernacular in which he could express his deepest feelings – a language of the home – and in addition should have a lingua franca by which he could speak to anyone beyond his own linguistic group and give his attention to the propagation of world news and ideas.

Most of his life Comenius was in exile. Particularly he appreciated the fact that he could speak Latin in each country, which he came to. The reason he published most of his books in Latin was that only that way he could reach people. Latin was the language of the Ancients, gave Europe a basis culture, as well as was the religion and science. Comenius considered Latin, but noted that to choose it would be “providing preferentially for ourselves, to whom it is already known, and not with equal fairness for uncivilized people (though for them we ought to have a larger consideration in this matter as they make up the larger part of the world)”⁸. Comenius was aware of the fact that Latin was a dead language which could not be resurrected. Another argument against Latin as global language was that there were uncounted millions of men in the newly-discovered lands who had no links with classical Rome. But they were also citizens of the world.

Hence Comenius favoured a language not already known by any group of people, a language that someone would have to invent. Such a language should be “easier”, “pleasanter”, and “more perfect” than any existing language. It should be “rational”, “analogical”, and “harmonious”. The new language should be constructed from a system of symbols each one of which would represent some property or quality, so that a person hearing or reading the new language for the first time would be at once, be able to recognize what kind of thing it represented. If he knew the meaning of the symbols he would know the meaning of the world and there could be no ambiguity. Thus particular qualities should be assigned to particular phonemes, and there would be an obvious parallel between the form of the world and its meaning, and each thing would have only one name which could apply to nothing else. Thus the form of a world would be its definition. Although there is an infinite variety of qualities, he argued that they could be reduced to a manageable number of basic elements (Comenius suggested 300). To increase the possibilities he suggested a range of prefixes and suffixes.⁹ Comenius wanted a lingua franca such that a literal translation could be made into any vernacular without confusion of meaning and linguists would call this a hopeless task.

⁸ Comenius, John Amos: *The Way of Light*, translated by E.T. Campagnac. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1938, p. 182. Quotation comes from Etzioni, Amitai: *A Global, Community Building Language?* In: *International Studies Perspectives* (2008) 9, p. 113–127.

⁹ Dobinson, Christian, Sadler, John: *Comenius as an International Citizen*. Hamburg, Unesco Institute for education 1970, p. 72.

Conclusion

Languages in the 17th century were taught by oral methods for communicative purposes. The works of Comenius stress the importance of the senses rather than the mind, the importance of physical activity in the classroom and his innovative ideas about text book composition. John Amos Comenius was greatest and most important of all the reformers whose life and work have been recorded in the annals of education. He has been called “the prophet” among educationists. With a pure, profound, and loving heart; a restless will, wide-seeing, self-thinking, and powerful mind make him one of the noblest characters in the educational field. Famous in his own day; enjoying the friendship of great scholars and the confidence of royal personages; the founder of numerous school systems; the author of more than a hundred books and treatises, which were translated into most of the languages. Comenius contribution to the science and art of teaching will never be forgotten. His theory of teaching, as a whole, surpasses any that had been proposed up to his time.

There are many different reasons to know the history of language teaching, but specially two of them are significant nowadays. Firstly history of language teaching is key to the understanding the way things are and why they are that way. In turn that might help to understand the importance of communication around the world. At the beginning of twenty-first century people on Earth are plagued with various tensions, disputes. The most dangerous of these events which causes the most dangerous, fateful and painful for the majority of people in the conflict between nations, countries, religions, individuals. Secondly reason is that teachers may better comprehend the forces that influence their profession.

I hope my article about Comenius will be interesting and inspiring for both theoreticians and practitioners of education and will highlight new perspectives on this two issues.

Comenius’ idea of universal language might be understood not only at linguistic level. It can be as well understood as universal language of peace. Universal language might be a tool to create a world where the rich diversity of cultures will become a source of strength, understanding, tolerance and solidarity as well as tool to promote multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue.

The selected works of John Amos Comenius¹⁰

Comenius wrote during his life-time about two hundred works. About fifty were lost or destroyed. The following list represents an overview of selected works of which majority have been translated into English.

1. *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, published in 1631, first translation by C. Lutzow, London 1901.
2. *The Gate of Tongues Unlocked (Janua)*, published 1631, first translation J. Anorchan, London 1633.
3. *The Porchway of the Latin Tongue (Vestibulum)*, published 1633, first translation J. Brookbank, London 1647.
4. *The School of Infancy*, written between 1628 and 1631, first translation by D. Benham, London 1858.
5. *The Great Didactics (Didactica Magna)*, written between 1628 and 1632, first translation M. Keatinge, London 1896.
6. *The Way of Light (Via Lucis)*, published 1668, first translation by E.T. Campagnac, Liverpool 1938.
7. *The Newest Method of Languages (Methodus)*, written between 1642 and 1648, an abridged English version is given by A. Turek 1951.
8. *Outline of a Pansophical School (Delineatio)*, written 1650–51, an abridged English version is given by A. Turek 1951.
9. *Picture of the World (Orbis Rictus)*, published 1658, very soon after Charles Hoole translated the work in London.
10. *General Consultation about the Improvement of Human Affairs (Consultatio)*, published 1966 by the Czechoslovak Academy of Science, first translation made by UNESCO in Paris 1957.
11. *The Angel of Peace*, published in 1667, first translation W.A. Morison 1944.

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¹⁰ Based on: Christian Dobinson: *Comenius and contemporary education*. Paris Unesco Institute for Education 1970.

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