

Comenius and Young Learners

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Introduction

Consider the following quotes on children's learning of foreign languages

1. '...a suitable object should be shown to as many of the senses as possible, until the mind has duly received its image' (in Bowen 1967)
2. 'It is necessary that examples come before rules' (in Rusk 1969)
3. 'A student needs someone to guide him' (in Kelly 1969)
4. 'Plays and games delight...the young, for it is natural to be pleased by freedom...Another reason why it is enjoyed is that it always takes place in company' (in Sadler 1969)

These are not the words of a contemporary writer, but of a Czech bishop, born in Moravia over 400 years ago. Jan Amos Komensky, widely known as Comenius, has been described by Howatt (1984) as 'a genius, possibly the only one that the history of language teaching can claim'. Comenius' life was extraordinarily turbulent, much of it spent in hiding, or as an exile or refugee in other countries. He lost two wives and several children to disease, and had his library burnt in public twice. Nonetheless, he managed to combine his pastoral duties with secondary school teaching and a prodigious written output on child foreign language learning. I myself have read only a small part of Comenius' work, but would like to outline in this article my understanding of his views on the teaching of foreign languages (in his case Latin) to children aged approximately 6-11.

Comenius' beliefs about young learner foreign language learning

The quotes illustrate four of Comenius' most fundamental beliefs. The first of these is that the child's experiences and senses are a gateway to the acquisition of language. 'The senses are the primary and constant guide to knowledge', he wrote (in Keatinge 1910). This belief was shown in the production of a bilingual coursebook in 1648. *Orbis Pictus* (The World in Pictures) made use of new printing technology to provide 150 illustrations to a series of connected topic-based texts showing the learning journey of a master and pupil as they travelled through the world. The book was revolutionary not only in its use of pictures to depict the world of the senses, but also in its concentration on the spoken language. Comenius felt that children needed to use language for a purpose, and that this purpose often involved some kind of social interaction. Up until this time, the focus had been primarily upon the written language. Howatt (1984) observes that these two innovations were more than three hundred years ahead of their time, only resurfacing in the mainstream in the 1960s with the advent of an audio-visual approach in foreign language teaching

Comenius' views on young learner cognitive development

The second quote demonstrates Comenius' view that the child's knowledge develops if ideas and content are tailored to their conceptual starting place. 'Nothing should be taught the young unless it is not only permitted, but actually demanded by their age and mental strength', he believed (in Rusk 1969). He insisted that language learning was not an end in

itself to a child, but rather a means of finding out about the world, of forming new concepts and associations.

Comenius on the role of the teacher

Comenius 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 wrote that 'The teacher should teach not as much as he himself can teach, but as much as the learner can grasp' (in Kelly 1969). He even argued at one point that as the teaching of young learners is such a skilled job, such teachers should be paid more than others!

Comenius and the role of fun in learning

One of Comenius' most famous tenets is his stressing of the pleasure principle in learning. 'The teacher ensures that the learning is thoroughly agreeable, such as to make the school a form of play' he comments (in Murphy 1995). This seems to reflect a process view of learning, in which the child feels they are doing a puzzle, singing a song, or playing a game, perhaps unaware of the fact that at another level they may also be acquiring language and developing non-linguistic skills. This view was also unusual for the time. The orthodoxy of the age was more to give pupils texts which they were expected to study, learn by heart, and then be tested upon. (Kelly 1969).

The relevance of Comenius' work

At first glance, Comenius may seem uncannily modern in his outlook. His stressing of multisensory learning, of the use of real objects and visual aids, of children's oral aural-development, of the role of the teacher in scaffolding learning, of the simultaneous development of language and thought, and of language as a vehicle for content all seem familiar. However, it would be mistaken to make too many comparisons with contemporary thinking for three reasons. One is that, unsurprisingly in such a prolific writer, some of his writings are self-contradictory. Another is that for all the apparent modernity, Comenius remained resolutely medieval in other aspects of his thought. He refused to accept, for example, Galileo's theory that the earth circumnavigates the sun. Finally, as Howatt (1984) observes, it may be difficult for some in a more secular age to assimilate a paradigm in which the child develops knowledge and an understanding of their relationship to God through a study of the natural world.

However hard it is to view Comenius' work through a modern prism, I feel strongly that we should not ignore his work, as it shows that current ideas have developed, however indirectly, from a tradition of values, attitudes, beliefs and experience. It seems to me entirely fitting that the EU-funded Comenius grants for teacher language and methodology courses and student exchanges should be named after a philosopher and educationist who showed such a profound empathy for and insight into children's learning.

References

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