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ON THE UNIVERSALITY OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION: 
WHAT JAN AMOS KOMENSKÝ (COMENIUS) HAS TAUGHT 
TO A JAPANESE LANGUAGE TEACHER*

HIROSHI MATSUOKA

Before beginning with my speech, I would like to express my hearty thanks to Professor Karel Rýdl of Pardubice University, Dr. František Hýbl of Muzeum Komenského, and all the members who took the trouble to offer a precious chance of expressing my views on Jan Amos Komenský and Language Education.

I came to your beautiful country, the Czech Republic, to do research on the propagation of Komenský’s pedagogic ideas on language teaching to the Czech people in Czech schools.

I am a Japanese language teacher. I have been teaching Japanese language to non-natives for more than 35 years. In the first 20 years of my career, I was involved with intensive teaching of Japanese to technical trainees and students who were expected to continue on to Japanese universities. In addition, I have worked several times outside of Japan, namely, in the United States, Indonesia, Austria and China. In the last 15 years, while teaching Japanese for university students, I have also been in charge of training teachers of Japanese and giving lectures on language pedagogy.

As I am a Japanese teacher with the above-mentioned background, I have neither studied Latin nor Czech. However, strangely enough, I have been strongly attracted by Jan Amos Komenský and his ideas on language education. As such I should explain how a Japanese language teacher like me happened to be fascinated by Komenský’s thought, which is practically unknown, especially in the field of Japanese teaching.

After graduating from university almost 40 years ago, I began to work in a semi-governmental organization, which offered scholarship for overseas trainees who were invited to Japan to learn practical knowledge and techniques at Japanese enterprises. Since these trainees were to study in private companies for about half a year or one year, they were all required to undergo a one and a half month of intensive language course in the organization. My task in the organization was to teach these overseas trainees the most useful and

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* This is the manuscript for a series of lectures, which I presented at Pardubice University, Muzeum Komenského of Přerov (both in the Czech Republic), and at Hitotsubashi University in March 2003.

In this paper, I have combined these three manuscripts, shortening and partly revising the original contents. I would like to express my thanks to Ms. Helena Jakšiová and Mr. Jan Železný, who interpreted my speech at Pardubice University and Muzeum Komenského respectively, and to Mr. Simon Peter Bahau for his correction of this paper.
indispensable Japanese within a very limited period and to send them to their respective companies and factories, where only Japanese was spoken.

As I did not at first have even the basic knowledge about how to teach Japanese to foreigners, I simply followed the methods of senior teachers in the organization. However, they did not teach by following some definite theories, but more practically in their own ways according to their teaching experiences. The aim of this intensive course was simple and common. It was to teach very essential Japanese, systematically, effectively, and within a short period. In addition, every participant was expected to reach this goal without exception, which also became my duty and target.

After 2 years of practical teaching experience, under the U. S. government scholarship, I was fortunate to be granted an opportunity to study language-teaching methodology at an American university for one year. This was in the mid 60s, when the so-called “audio-lingual method” was still popular among languages teachers. This method was widely used and said to be theoretically superior in all language classes. Most textbooks included “pattern practice”, a typical exercise, which is based on the audio-lingual method. By getting to know the techniques of audio-lingual method, I realized for the first time that language teaching should be or could be conducted with definite scientific methods based on some linguistic theory or psychology.

Upon returning to Japan, I tried to incorporate the merits of audio-lingual method and pattern practice in our language textbooks and classroom activities. However, this method requires teacher’s techniques to be of very high level. If a teacher uses this method with less attention and poor skills, class-participants get bored and will lose interest in learning. What I have tried at such times was, therefore, to make “pattern practice”, the exercise form of systemized aural repetition, as joyful and realistic as possible. Repetition is necessary, but can be boring. Teachers are apt to avoid this practice, because they do not have the courage to face the risk and overcome difficult situations. However, if they master better teaching skills for joyful repetition, it will not be disliked and boring. I used to call this kind of teacher’s positive attitude the “courage to repeat”.

After 10 years experience of teaching technical trainees, I was appointed as lecturer at the Institute of Japanology, University of Vienna. I taught university students there for three and a half years and then returned to Japan as teaching staff of the Japanese Language School attached to the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. This national language school was established for offering a one-year intensive Japanese language course to scholarship grantees of the Japanese government, who are to be admitted to national universities. This school had the most ideal conditions for language learning, that is to say, all students lived in a dormitory next to the school and could learn in small classes of 5 to 8 participants. Above all, the students were highly motivated. The teaching method used in this school was what is commonly called “direct method”.

Teachers were expected to speak only Japanese language from the very beginning of the first lesson and textbooks did not include any explanation in foreign language. The final goal was to bring up the Japanese language abilities of pre-university students to academic levels
within one year. This school enjoys a high reputation and is still recognized today as one of the best language schools, because it succeeded in fulfilling this task. From this success, the “direct method”, was considered as the ideal and most effective way of language teaching in Japan, at least from the 1970s to 1980s.

As such, I can say that I have experienced two contrastive, leading methods in actual educational institutions, and I could put them into practice and confirm the merits and demerits of both the teaching methods.

From around the 80s, some linguists and language pedagogue began to criticize both the audio-lingual method and direct method, insisting that these methods are based only on grammar and teacher, and that the necessary communicative competence of learners could not be attained through these methods. I could easily understand the importance of this kind of new stream in language teaching, which are categorized under the name of “communicative approach” or more recently “learner-oriented education”, because I knew the disadvantages of audio lingual method and direct method, in case they were used unskillfully and with less attention. However, I thought it was regrettable that every thing in the so called “old and traditional methods” would be dammed all in one body or only their negative aspects were pointed out, because I also know about the successful results by those methods through my own experiences.

As mentioned above, I learned and mastered fairly representative types of language teaching, and recognized their respective merits and put them into practice. However, I did not feel complete sense of satisfaction with them. They had useful, effective and refined skills, but I was thinking vaguely, in language teaching there must be surely something beyond teaching techniques, beyond mere mastery of communicative ability, although, I could not find proper words to express my thoughts and beliefs on language education.

About 6 years ago, I happened to read one chapter from “Didactica Magna (“Great Didactics)” written by Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius in Latin). I was really astonished by the following sentence of the first paragraph of chapter 20. It said, “.... artificiose (docendi), id est facile, solide, celeriter.” (.... (to teach) proficiently means (to teach) easily, thoroughly and quickly.)

I could immediately tell from these three words what the author of the book had in mind for this kind of actual process, exercises and final target in the language class. Intuition told me that the author must be a language teacher, more exactly, a teacher who taught a foreign language to learners, exactly just like me.

Afterwards I read other chapters (chapter 16 to 19), where he explained the content of “easily, thoroughly and quickly” in details or metaphorically, hence I was convinced that my intuition was not wrong. I was very excited by the fact that a person in Europe in the 17th century described the actual process and method of language teaching in details, so perfectly and practically, as if he had the same experiences as I did. I cried finally in my mind, he must be a man in the same trade! In fact, my approach to Komenský started from this sort of
friendly feeling.
I knew later that the author of “Didactica Magna”, Jan Amos Komenský (1592-1670) is called “teacher of nations”, “father of pedagogy”. He was not merely a language teacher, but also a great thinker, theologian, and philosopher. Needless to say, he also is a national hero in the Czech Republic. The more I read the writings by Komenský (My regret is, I must still mostly read them in Japanese and German translation, because of my limited Latin), the stronger I feel fascinated and surprised by his profound thoughts on education which are not limited only to the scope of language. However still, I am strongly impressed by the fact that Komenský started as a Latin teacher. In this respect, however rude and ignorant this might sound, I feel that I understand Komenky’s experiences and his assertion on language teaching as if they were my own.

In his comprehensive and systematic style of writings, Komenský showed me what I searched for long time, what I myself could not express properly. In one word, Komenský convinced me that language teaching is an art and skill; its task is to form learner’s skills through the teacher’s art. Additionally, at the same time, language teaching is not all art and skill, but the nurturing of human beings and humanity.

Now, I have to clarify how art and humanity could be related in language teaching.

Since I started teaching Japanese to trainees from developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, and later I also taught many university students from Asia, I have been worried about two problems. The source of the one problem is the past of Japan. Japan had colonized and governed several Southeast Asian countries and regions and forced the people there to learn Japanese. Many teachers were sent there from Japan and they worked devotedly and successfully. Their deed, however, is not appreciated anymore by the people of those countries nowadays. To teach Japanese skillfully and effectively did not contribute to the benefits of the people and children of those countries. What is worse, teaching Japanese resulted in depriving them of their mother tongue. If it is true, teaching skillfully, effectively, and successfully to the students from Asian countries will be regarded as repeating the unwelcome past history of Japan again in our times, Many of my students were actually sons, daughters, furthermore grandsons and granddaughters of the people who had been forced to learn Japanese in the former days!

Another worry was my strong doubt about what the general understanding of the objective of learning a foreign language should be. First of all, it should contribute to convenience in daily life, capacity for mutual communication; namely, practical benefits should have priority over other roles of language learning. This means that teaching a second language is nothing but training of communication competency, which has nothing to do with human education. Although I myself insisted for a long time on the importance of teaching skills and training of communicative competency of learners, I could not agree with this thought on language education.

I have been worried with these contradictory problems, namely, successful Japanese teaching as a second language would deprive learners of their mother tongue, and Japanese
teaching would be merely skill training, not as in the sense of education for education at all. What a sinful job and what an unimportant job is it to be a teacher of Japanese! I have been driven sometimes by this grief. However, Komenský gave me decisive solutions to my hardship.

Komenský was teacher of Latin. Through the experience of teaching Latin, he found and developed not only language teaching method, but also the teaching art in general. Here, I will neither assert that Latin in the Czech lands in the 17th century was a second language in the present day’s meaning, nor will I simply compare the language situation in the Czech lands at that time with that of the prewar Japan. Nevertheless, the fact that a patriot with indomitable spirit, who considered education by mother tongue as the most important, exerted himself to improve and to accomplish the teaching skill of Latin, namely, second language for his pupils, gave me a strong impression and encouragement.

Furthermore, Komenský also advocated that learning language is learning things, while stressing the importance of the teaching art. He wrote;

“45. Verba non nisi rebus conjuncta doceantur et discantur…. Quamcunque igitur linguam discent, etiam vernaculam, res vocibus designanda communtemtur,… Quam- tum quis intelligit, tantum eloqui consuescat, et vicissim, quae enuntiat, discat intelligere …. Nos autem homines formamus cupimusque formare compendiose;quod fiet, si ubique sermo cum rebus et res cum sermone pari passu ambulent. (“Didactica Magna”, Chapter 19, 45)

(Words, which are not connected with things, should not be taught and learned…. Therefore whatever language, even mother tongue they may teach, they should also clearly show the things which are to be nominated by sound, …. So many he understood, so many he should be accustomed to speaking, and in turn, he should learn and understand what he expresses in words…. We nurture and form human beings, and we want to nurture them quickly. This takes place, if speech and things, thing and speech proceed or walk with same pace.)

Komenský suggested me a new way of thinking. That is, to learn a second language is to know things in the world, to deepen the learner’s wisdom and to form human beings. We already know that the mother tongue should bear this task above all, but the second language can not be exempted from this responsibility. That is why; Komenský did not discriminate between the importance of mother tongue education and second language education. For Komenský, to teach a language easily, thoroughly, quickly did not mean just to teach a language only for practical daily communication. Encouraged by Komenský’s ideas, his didactics and textbooks, I confirmed strongly that to teach even one word, one sentence, one simple letter, or even one simple grammar is not mere practice, but important process leading to the formation of learner’s intellect and humanity. That is just the universality of second language teaching.

(This latter part is mainly based on my additional speech at the symposium for Japanese teaching held by the Center for Student Exchange of Hitotsubashi University on March 29th,
the next day after I returned from the Czech Republic).

The title of my speech: “Universality of Second Language Teaching”, might sound too
exaggerating. To tell the truth, I used a different expression, when I delivered a short lecture
at Pardubice University in the Czech Republic, from where I just returned yesterday. The title
there was “universal method of language teaching”. After my speech, one member of the
audience raised a question and pointed out the improprieness of the usage of “universal”. She
insisted there could not be a universal method, because many types of teaching methods were
suggested in the past and each founder advocated the universality of his own and rejected
other methods or approaches. In her view, eclecticism would be the best in language teaching.
I did not refute her opinion, because I agreed that the word “universal” might be misleading.
I wanted to express “universality of language teaching” with “universal method”. “Universality”
in my use originates in part simply from Komenský’s “universal” (universalis).

Here I will not argue about what was meant by “universal” in the whole ideas of
Komenský. The main purpose of my speech is to suggest the possibility of considering Japanese
language teaching from the universal point of view, not from nationalistic or pragmatic point
of views.

Staying three weeks in Přerov in the Czech Republic and visiting Muzeum Komenského,
I have been engaged with my small research work about the influence of Komenský’s ideas on
language teaching after his death in the Czech lands. This museum possesses a large amount
of schoolbooks for language teaching used in the Czech lands in the 17th-20th century. By
investigating these books, I could find to some degree what kinds of textbooks were used in
schools. I could also guess what kind of teaching process was followed at that time. Frankly
speaking, I was fairly doubtful about the propagation of Komenský’s ideas and method on
language teaching in actual schools. I thought foreign languages must have been taught
differently from what Komenský thought to be ideal. I was convinced that his description in
“Didactica Magna” was in my view too perfect to be realistic and his language textbooks such
as “Janua linguarum reserata”, “orbis pictus” were too comprehensive to be taught completely
in a limited period. This conviction was based on my own experiences as language teacher and
also the author of several textbooks.

I found that my guess was wrong after reading through several language textbooks, which
were used in schools for teaching German to Czech children mainly from the middle of the 19th
to early 20th century. First information was given by “Deutsche Sprachbücher in Böhmen und
Mähren vom 15. Jahrhundert bis 1918”. I read this book, after arriving in Přerov, and later on
I could meet one of authors of this book, Professor Libuše Spáčilová, University of Olomouc.
Professor Spáčilová informed me that Komenský’s ideas on foreign language teaching were
incorporated in textbooks under the name of “Vermittelnde Methode” and she mentioned the
name of Eduard Ouředniček was representative of this “Vermittelnde Methode”.

I tried to find the characteristics of textbooks written by Ouředoniček and confirmed that
Ouředoniček’s textbooks are certainly based on the Principles of Komenský’s “Didactica
Magna”. What I found was that the whole frame of each book and chapters of his textbooks
were so skillfully organized that teachers could teach smoothly and learners would be able to get the required knowledge and skills without going against the rule of nature and their natural capability. Komenský emphasized in his Didactics that teaching should proceed in the same way as nature shows.

As an example, I shall quote just one sentence which he wrote in “Didactica Magna”;

“Natura non facit saltum, gradatim procedit…. Tricas igitur esse patet, si praeceptores sibi et discipulis studia non ita distribuant, ut solum alia aliis succedant perpetuo, sed et unumquodque intra terminum certum absolvetur necessario. (Chapter 16, 46-49)

(Nature does not leap, but proceeds gradually….Therefore, it is nonsense, if teachers for themselves and pupils do not divide the study, so that learning comes one after the other successively, and each will definitely be completed within a certain time limit.)

I am now convinced that Czech teachers of German language for Czech schools inherited without doubt the Komenský’s ideas on language education and I knew that they called this kind of method “Analytisch-synthetische Methode” or “Vermittelnde Methode”.

Just before coming to Přerov, I had written one article with the title of “Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) and Yamaguchi Kiichiro: On the Universality of Language Teaching”. Yamaguchi Kiichiro (1872-1952), was a teacher and pedagogue of Japanese as a foreign language. He taught mostly in Japanese colonies in the first half of the 20th century. He left behind the “Principle of Japanese teaching”, probably the only one book worthy of pedagogical work in the history of Japanese teaching as second language. In my article, I compared the theory and method of Yamaguchi’s language teaching with Komenský’s and pointed out basic common points in both.

Yamaguchi’s method has been categorized as one of “Direct Method” in the history of Japanese language teaching, because he himself admitted that he was greatly impressed by the Gouin Method, which had been introduced in Japan around 1880 by way of English translation. He opposed to the use of learner’s language in textbooks and classrooms and he insisted on the superiority of his method over the so called “parallel-text method”, in which explanation was given by learner’s native language.

My conclusion was that Yamaguchi’s basic ideas on language teaching were very close to those of Komenský’s. Although Yamaguchi attempted to characterize his principles under “Direct Method”, I thought his method would be not understood only by the concept of “Direct” method. I defined Yamaguchi’s “Direct Method” as Komenský’s “Natura”.

While checking several textbooks of Ouředoniček in Muzeum Komenského this March, I was strongly impressed by the similarity between Yamaguchi’s ideas on textbooks and the basic concepts of Ouředoniček’s textbooks. This will probably be called as “natural process of teaching”, if I can summarize in one word. As far as ideas and methods of language teaching are concerned, I dare say, Komenský, Yamaguchi and Ouředoniček are the same.
It might seem perhaps too hasty and unrealistic, to conclude that there is a basic similarity of the ideas on language teaching between Komenský, Ouředoniček and Yamaguchi, especially when we know that Yamaguchi worked as the teacher at Japanese colonies and its occupied territories on the governing part. Some researcher insists that Yamaguchi’s devoted teaching activities and his excellent teaching method might have caused children to lose their mother tongue. Komenský fought for his mother tongue and mother country against the tyranny of the Habsburg dynasty. Ouředoniček was a Czech teacher and pedagogue of German language, which was dominant language under the Habsburg dynasty. After we realized their different historical backgrounds, would we be ever allowed even to suppose that the ideas and methods of Komenský, Yamaguchi and Ouředoniček are the same? On the Contrary, should we condemn Yamaguchi for his teaching in colonies? Should we condemn his method for its excellency as an art? Would Komenský condemn Ouředoniček for his teaching German to Czech children and for his teaching method? ¹

I would like to conclude my speech with following summarizing words. Teaching a second language has universal meaning and value, which cannot be swayed by nationalistic or only pragmatic interests. Komenský teaches us the meaning and importance of second language teaching. Komenský also teaches us the importance of effective teaching and the teaching art. Komenský shows that us that skill is not for skill itself, but for human education, in other words, for cultivating human wisdom and humanity, which will be developed through skillful effective teaching. Komenský teaches us that, not only the mother language but also the second language will contribute to the forming wisdom and humanity. In this respect, second language teaching and second language learning have universal role for forming intellect and humanity of human beings. This is what Komenský teaches us all Japanese language teachers.

Lastly, if I could be allowed to imagine that Komenský’s grand design on the reform of human affairs were built up and developed on the basis for his ideas and conviction, which Komenský had acquired through his actual experiences as Latin teacher, I can not stop saying, what a terrific, important and honorable vocation it is to be a teacher of language education!

¹ Yamaguchi should be probably accused strictly of his imperialistic mind, if he had any. In his pedagogical works and textbooks, however, we find very few descriptions or few subjects, which are related to Japanese culture, Japanese empire and Japanese Emperor. This was, I can say, very unusual in those days, as all Japanese and the people in Japanese colonies were educated under the doctrine of Japanese imperialism and forced to worship Japanese Emperor as god.