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Adamik-Jászó, Anna: Literacy in Hungary. Past and Present

Budapest: Dinasztia Educational Publisher – The National Educational Library and Museum, 2006. 102 pp.

The book is a comprehensive survey of the history of elementary reading instruction in Hungary, from the foundation of the first school in 996 up to the present days. The author, Anna Adamik-Jászó, is professor of linguistics at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her field of research is Hungarian Language Teaching Methodology, especially the Methodology of Reading. She has developed a language and literature programme for the first eight grades.

The first two chapters briefly survey the following questions: who the Hungarians are; what should be known about their origins and about their history since the foundation of the state in 1000 A. D.; what the basic characteristics of the Hungarian language are. The latter is important when reading methods are determined by the features of this Finno-Ugric (Uralic) language, which differs considerably from Indo-European languages. Hungarian is an agglutinative language, abounding in suffixes. Its orthography is relatively easy thanks to the transparent phoneme-grapheme correspondences; consequently the phonics method can be applied to reading instruction, but the length of word forms also makes the syllable an important reading unit. All these linguistic phenomena make it almost impossible to use the whole-word method.

The next two chapters deal with the history of reading instruction from the Middle Ages up to the 20th century. In Hungarian medieval schools Latin was used as a medium of education till the 16th century. From that time on, the mother tongue became more and more prevalent. It is the great Moravian educator, Johann Amos Comenius who deserves special mention here. He played a significant role in the middle of the 17th century: his famous book in Latin, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, was soon translated into Hungarian, German and English. He suggested the phonics method, that is, teaching the phoneme-grapheme correspondences. As we can see in the pictures from the book, sounds are demonstrated by imitating various animals: *B b beee Agnus balat, The Lamb blaiteth. – C c ci Cicada stridet, The Grasshopper chirpeth. – P p pi pi Pullus pipit, The Chicken peepeth*, etc.

In the second part of the 18th century reforms were initiated (1777 – Ratio Educationis by the Hapsburgs), and illustrations started to be used in schoolbooks to make reading easier. Adamik-Jászó has chosen a number of interesting pictures from various books as illustrations for her study. This is the point where we can examine the function of demonstration during the teaching process. The author claims that demonstration is assumed to mediate between sensation and abstract thinking in order to facilitate the understanding of abstract knowledge. There are two formidable tasks at the beginning of reading instruction: teaching and consolidating sound-to-letter correspondences and blending sounds to get syllables and words. In the past, teachers used visual and other aids to facilitate instruction (demonstration for decoding), and they used illustrations to facilitate comprehension (demonstration for comprehension). The various types of demonstration are distinguished on the basis of the five senses: we can talk about visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory aids. The history of reading instruction provides examples of instruction centred on all five: illustration (visual), sounds, songs (auditory), concave letters (tactile), dried letter pasta (gustatory), ginger-bread letters (olfactory). In the history of reading instruction, we can observe both the abundant use of demonstration in some cases and a lack of it in others.

To show an excellent instance of demonstration, let us see the core activities of a specifically Hungarian reading method called phonomimics introduced at the end of the 19th century. The essential feature of this kinetic aid is to make the learning of sounds easier by means of signs made by the hand. In this process, each sound has a sign imitating and expressing a concrete word. For example, when the sound [r] is taught, the teacher tells a story about an angry barking dog. Both the teacher and the children imitate the sound and make a motion, e.g. grabbing at their own clothes on their chest. The vowel [a:] is the sound of astonishment, and the hand is raised to express the same feeling. As László Nagy Jr., Hungarian psychologist, lead-

ing educational theorist, the founder of child psychology, declared, this programme facilitates learning and blending sounds.

Interestingly enough, the ABC books of various ages are authentic mirrors of cultural history as well. We should not forget about the pedagogical moral either: the past history of reading instruction is an accumulated knowledge which can be used by the present for the future.

Many problems are discussed and presented in connection with the second part of the 20th century. After 1978 some of the new methods followed American and British programmes, combining with Hungarian traditions. Preparatory oral exercises were omitted, the ‘sound teaching then letter teaching’ order and syllabification were cancelled. Silent reading gained priority, worksheet-exercises were introduced. All these created several problems because the processes mentioned do not fit the Hungarian language. During the last 15 years the main task has been to find the right way between conservative or traditional and modern methodology and correct the mistakes in the new programmes. Nowadays the situation is consolidated.

At the end of the book we get acquainted with the stages of reading (technical reading, fluent reading, expressive reading; from another point of view: literal, interpretative, critical and creative reading) and we get an answer to the question of how to teach text analysis. Text analysis has a long tradition in Hungary. It is a synthesis of the fragmented disciplines of text linguistics, rhetoric, stylistics, etc., and it requires wide background knowledge related to history, science, everyday life, etc. The so-called process reading and reader response theory will soon help improve reading methodology.

On the whole, the book makes it possible for those who do not understand this language to carry out research into Hungarian Language Teaching Methodology. Considering the lack of publications in English in this field, Anna Adamik-Jászó’s work is indispensable.

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