THE COMPARISON OF COMENIA SCRIPT WITH THE ENGLISH VERSION OF WRITING

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Abstract

This article focuses on the handwriting which is integral to reading literacy. Handwriting has been around people since time in memorial, in this contribution we will therefore deal with the historical development of handwriting up to the present times, features of the two fonts, teaching of elementary writing and the application of the modern font CS (Comenia Script) into the Czech elementary schools. Attention is focused primarily on the contemporary teaching of elementary writing. The issue of the CS is current, the font has been used in the Czech Republic for the teaching of a very initial writing since 2010. CS was created as a reaction to the EHS (English handwriting script). Due to teaching of English language, which is according to the RVP ZV (Framework Education Programme for Basic Education) taught in the Czech elementary schools from the third grade, EHS implemented into schooling. Schools are creating their own ŠVP (School Education Programme) according to the RVP ZV, thanks to this English language could be taught already from the first grade. For this reason our research focuses on the differences of these two styles of handwriting, CS and EHS. The aim of this contribution is to compare within the qualitative research these two models of writing in terms of graphomotricity and find out if they are convenient to the needs of modern times. Firstly we will define given issues and general terms connected with the teaching of elementary writing. After that we will analyze written patterns which are used in the Czech elementary schools. Finally through interviews with elementary teachers, we will find out which font they prefer the most and what causes the biggest problems to the pupils during the learning of writing. We will then interpret the results of the research in this article.

Keywords: Comenia Script, English handwriting script, features of the fonts, graphomotricity, handwriting, history of fonts, qualitative research, reading literacy.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Writing is in the Czech Republic a constantly discussed topic by the experts as well as by the parents of pupils of the Czech elementary schools. In the Czech Republic there is a possibility to teach pupils according to the two fonts, which are approved by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MŠMT ČR). One of them is the single stroke linear font. The second font is called Comenia Script (CS). Czech schools have a freehand in which font they can choose and put on their School educational programs (SEPs). In this research we were to consider which one of two fonts is for the teachers and pupils the most suitable. We were monitoring the positives and negatives of both of them.

1.1 System of writing of ancient nations

Writing is connected with the development of the civilization. It was invented 5 thousand years ago. Thanks to early writing documents we can learn about the life of people in ancient times. The form of the handwriting we encounter nowadays went through a long term progress. Writing is a medium of human communication, this is how humans differ from other living creatures. It represents language and emotions with signs and symbols [2].

Before the formation of the script, there existed symbols systems. By means of these symbols people could express their thoughts. Beginnings of visual communication fall within the Paleolithic period. Archaic script of the Sumer civilization emerged around the third millennium BC in Mesopotamia at the same time as the hieroglyphics of the Ancient Egyptians. They are considered as the earliest writing systems. The Sumerians carved wedge shaped marks on clay tablets. This script is called cuneiform which means wedge shaped. Both scripts, hieroglyphics and cuneiform originally come out from the pictograms. ‘Pictogram is an ideogram that conveys its meaning through its pictorial resemblance to a physical object’ [7].
In China was also invented paper. First Chinese scripts were similar to the pictograms, later they added some extra marks. Each picture belonged to one special symbol. Nowadays the Chinese language has about 60 thousand symbols. Japanese writing is closely related with the Chinese writing. The most complicated system of writing is the Indian script which contains about 2 hundred characters in its alphabet. Indian because of archeological discoveries is linked to the culture of Mesopotamia.

The Phoenician civilization invented its alphabet in 1300 BC. The Phoenician alphabet became one of the most widely used writing systems. It was assimilated by Romans, Greeks and many other cultures. Phoenician writing indirectly follows on from hieroglyphics. This alphabet enabled people to learn only thirty symbols to compose words. Then learning reading and writing was easier [3].

1.2 History of the Latin script up to the script we use nowadays

The greatest influence on the Roman and Greek scripts had been the Phoenician alphabet. The Greeks were first to assume the Latin script from the Phoenicians. The script spread quickly into the Roman Empire. In the 8th century formed Carolingian minuscule. The shape of the script corresponded with the building blocks of these times, it was semi-circular. Due to the effect of the changes in the architecture of the various historical stages, the script was changing too. During the Gothic times, the Latin script was under the Gothic style of influence. The main architecture element was lancet arch. Latin script started to be closer to the form of script we use nowadays [3].

Latin alphabet is still used. The Czech language had more speech sounds than Latin, that is why the digraphs emerged. A digraph is a pair of characters used together to represent a single sound. Jan Hus, the Czech theologian, simplified digraphs all the more. He introduced the diacritic marks.

In the 15th century started to be used a humanist minuscule style of script in our country. Humanist script has block letters and is called Antiqua. Antiqua developed into the Latin script we encounter nowadays. Humanist Antiqua spread around the whole of Europe. Robert Thorne, English typographer and typefounder, introduced Antiqua into England [1]. English Latin script was adapted for the Czech script. Calligraphic neat handwriting style of the script was rescinded in the 19th century. From that times many changes of the script we use in our country did not take place. However, there were many efforts to create a simplified version of the script for the Czech elementary schools.

Cursive handwriting used in the Czech schools is composed of too many complex graphic elements which are complicated to learn for the pupils. It is important for the elementary teachers first to start practicing with the pupils single graphic elements of letters and numerals from the easiest to the most difficult.

Modern times request thin letters which are good, legible and we are able to write them quickly on the paper. Cursive handwriting is divided into the letters of the medium height (a, c, e…), the letters of the upper length (b, d, h…) and the letters with the low length (G, J, f…). The ratio between the medium height, upper length and low length of the letters should be 1:1:1. Cursive script is in the whole time of its development one stroke and bound. Slant of the cursive handwriting is dependent on the position in which we turn the paper. Common slant of the letters is 75 degrees. Spaces between letters should be regular and not greater than the letter ‘n’. We can observe that pupils implement capital printing letters into the cursive handwriting more and more often. Accordingly the norm, pupils should be to write 10 letters in 1 minute in the first class [3].

1.3 Comenia Script

The author of the CS and accompanying didactic materials was the artist and graphic designer Radana Lencová, designer František Šrom and Tomáš Brousil. Lencová designed CS script in the 2005 when she was studying PhD program at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. She was searching for the new more suitable school script. CS was designed according to the needs of pupils of the Czech elementary schools. It complied with the requests of modern times, they were primarily simplicity, speed and legibility. It is definitely more legible that the classic cursive school script. Its invention was a reaction on the English Latin script which has a calligraphic form. Czechs had more problems with this type of script than English, because we used more diacritic marks. However, in the 19th century the calligraphic form of the script was simplified, but the problem with the legibility of this script still lasts in our country [6].

Lencová considered the fact that in these times the communication via computers dominated over the face to face communication. In real life we encounter the cursive handwriting very rarely. Her
inspiration was the printing script. CS is a non-bound script but the letters bounding is allowed partially. It depends on the child what is natural for it and which slope of the letters will be chosen and to which extent the child will bound the letters together. For bounding letters together is used a special typographic element, its name is ligature. One of the advantages is that children can write the diacritic marks immediately. After the two year verifying by the MŠMT ČR, the CS was approved as the suitable script for the elementary schools in the 2010 [4].

CS was designed in several variations so it can be suitable for all pupils according to their writing skills. For the Czech elementary school is the chosen variation CS universal which was approved by MŠMT ČR in 2010. CS is divided only into capital and small letters. The simple strokes of letters are used. The width of the small letters is not determined. The width for the capital letters is only recommended between 8 and 7 millimeters. Slope of the letters is on the right side between the 7-20 degrees from the perpendicular axis. Teachers rely on children for whom the creation of the spaces between the words in the sentence is intuitive. Neither the speed of writing for CS is determined [6].

2 METHODOLOGY

Our research is focused on interviews with the teachers in the elementary schools from the Olomouc region. Interview is the main research method. Research is qualitative and took place in April 2019. The research deals with the CS font and its usage in the practice. The aim of the research is to find out the personal experiences of the teachers with the CS font who were teaching it in the Czech elementary schools.

We visited one of the elementary schools of the Olomouc region. There is only one school where is the CS taught from the year 2010. The school is in the Czech town Šternberk, which is involved in the project of CS. There is one first class in which half of pupils are learning the classic cursive script and the second half CS. Both of the groups will encounter these two fonts. The class has tables on the walls with the alphabets of both fonts. Here we were leading the interview with two female elementary teachers, who have several years practice in the teaching CS. One of them was over 50 years old, who teaches in the second class and second one who teaches in the first class is under the 50. Every two years teachers switch from first class to the second and vice versa. They went through seminars to be able to teach CS. The interview lasted about 15 minutes. It took part in the classroom.

We prepared a semi-structured interview with 9 questions. It was about verbal communication between the interviewer and interviewee. Interviewees were the two female teachers. Language of the interview was Czech. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research. It is a qualitative research method. It is something between the standardized and non-standardized interview. This type of interview method of research is used most often in the social sciences. It is similar to everyday life communication such as couple interviews. Participants have a lot of freedom during the interview. The semi-structured interview is open, allowing new ideas. It is in contrast with the structured interview, which has firmly given questions and expects direct answers. The interviewer can only note down the answer and divergence is not allowed. The interviewers should well prepare the topic which they want to explore for the research projects in advance. They may also prepare the questions they want to ask [5].

3 RESULTS

In this part we will present the questions which we used in our interview and comment on the answers of teachers. Their answers were mostly positive.

1 What does the teaching of CS brought to you?

All the things that CS brought to the teachers were positive. According to the answers to this question teachers have much more time for the reading and other activities thanks to teaching of CS. Teachers could spend more time with pupils on the practice and the expansion of the vocabulary. Pupils enjoy writing with CS.

2 Which advantages and disadvantages did teachers observe in teaching CS?

Teachers claimed that the advantages of the CS are the possibility of fast writing, the good readability, that it is simplified. Thanks to its simplicity pupils learn the letters faster. Pupils can write the diacritic marks immediately whilst they are writing a single word. So the error rate has become lower. The script similar to the CS surrounds children in everyday life because of the
technical progress. They have minimal chance to meet with the classic cursive script in the real life. They meet with the similar script even in the student books of the English language.

3 Which disadvantages did teachers observe in teaching CS?
Since we listed the positives of CS it is necessary to add the negatives. According to the teachers CS has not a lot of disadvantages or none at all. Teachers added that pupils who are learning writing of CS do not have extreme problems to read classic cursive script. They introduced only one disadvantage and it is with numeral one. Pupils could easily mix numeral one up with the numeral seven.

4 Do you think that CS because of its non-single stroke form could cause any problems to pupils?
Teachers think that pupils have no problems with the CS because of its non-single stroke form. The script is simplified and does not cause problems to children to recall the shapes of letters.

5 How are children able to recognize the borders of the words while they are reading CS?
They admitted that children had problems with the space between words from the beginning of learning writing. Some of them do not do them at all and some do not have proportionate spaces. It is very individual and pupils needs to practice a lot. Thanks to practice children learn to make spaces between the words. Teachers use some methodical aid to help children with practice spaces.

6 Do you think that the teaching of the CS should be included as an alternative into the teaching of elementary writing?
Both of the teachers are satisfied with the two script modes approved by the MŠMT ČR. They do not want any other changes in the area of elementary writing. Schools can choose which of the two approved script models they want to use. Parents task is to choose which school their child will attend. Parents are satisfied with the way the elementary school in Šternberk teaches their children writing. They want their younger children to learn the CS like their older siblings were.

7 Have you noticed with pupils who started to learn to write with CS better results than those of children who learn to write with the classic cursive font?
This is not about the type of script, but about the intellect of the pupils and other factors, explained the teachers. How much the teachers and parents practice the writing with the child. It depends of the individualities of the pupils. Experts claim that CS is more appropriate for disabled children.

8 Are the teachers satisfied with the didactic materials intended for the teaching of CS which are available for them?
Their answers were again positive. Children are delighted from the writing. The didactic materials have overlap into the other subjects. One of the topics of the writing exercise book of CS is travelling around the world.

9 Which mark from 1 to 5 would you rate CS?
Both teachers rate CS with the mark 1. Because they are highly involved in the teaching of CS we cannot expect that teachers who do not work with CS will rate the script with the same mark. They would probably prefer the more the classic version of the cursive script, because they met with the CS only on the internet or on TV and do not have enough experience with it. CS is thanks to its printing form similar to the script which is used almost all around the Europe.

4 CONCLUSIONS
Teaching writing is in the Framework Educational Program for the Czech basic schools (FEP BE) a part of the educational area called Czech language and literature, which is made up from expected outcomes. Educational content of the educational field for the first grade is divided into two periods. The first period corresponds with the first, second and third class. The second period corresponds with the fourth and fifth class. Even though FEP BE is recognized as a highly important document mentioned expected outcomes are only tentative [4].

Writing is for pupils a very difficult activity. After the automation of writing in the higher classes, pupils start to use the script as mean of communication. Pupils use the script in all educational areas.
Although we found out that the CS has not only the advantages but also disadvantages. On the side of the pupils, teachers and parents we see positive reactions on the CS. Almost everybody claimed that the CS is easier and more readable than classic cursive script. The question is if the simplification is the right choice in the present times.

There exist too many publications which deals with teaching of the elementary writing. They focus predominantly on the history and the contemporary concept of teaching writing. On the other hand, there are not many scientific works which are engaged in the topic of CS. Therefore, we believe that our contribution will be beneficial for the pedagogical practice.

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REFERENCES