

LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES FOR THE DEAF AND HARD-OF- HEARING STUDENTS

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Abstract

D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students nowadays are eager to exercise their full educational rights, the main of them being a right for high quality education. In countries other than the USA and GB it means, among others, learning English as a foreign language to be able to participate fully in global education, economy and entertainment. The aim of the paper is to present learning and teaching strategies used in *English as a foreign language classes for the D/deaf and hard of hearing*. The paper is based on authors 15-year experience in the field of surdo-glottodidactic and discusses issues of formal aspect of curriculum organisation and strategies using sign languages and/or foreign speech.

Keywords: D/deaf, hard-of-hearing, surdoglottodidactic, English as a foreign language (EFL), teaching and learning strategies

Introduction

Deaf and hard-of-hearing (D/HH) students in many European countries desperately need to know not only sign language and national language of their countries but also English – as this language enables them full participation in education, work market and leisure activities. Thus English as a foreign language is present in many school curricula. However, practice comes first than research, as the knowledge about foreign language acquisition among the D/HH is small. Consequently, there is a great need to develop surdo-glottodidactic – the knowledge about the processes of learning and teaching foreign languages to D/HH students. That is also the aim of this paper – to discuss (on the basis of both desk & empirical research and personal experience of being an English teacher of the D/HH students) some of the important theses of surdoglottodidactic.

1. Formal organization of teaching

One of the most important questions to be solved is to decide whether foreign language classes for the D/HH subject should have an integrative or specialist character.

Many experienced teachers of the D/HH individuals would say that specialist foreign language classes would be the most appropriate mode. Today such classes are organized in the majority of special schools for the D/HH and also in mainstream schools. The students have the chance to work in small groups, organized directly according to their needs. The preferred mode of communication is used (be it sign language or speech and speech-reading) and the acoustic conditions are adjusted. The teachers have the possibility to address the students' needs directly, as they have the chance to check for proper body position, face visibility and other such ways of proper communication. At tertiary level of education this form of instruction has also been used e.g. at the Charles University in Prague (Janakova 2005). A group of D/HH was guided by a language teacher and accompanied by a note-taker and sign language interpreter. At Polish universities first language classes for D/HH students

were organized at John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin in 1999 (Domagała-Zyśk 2001). Both here and in some other Polish universities - Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Nabiałek 2013) or Humanistic and Natural Sciences University in Siedlce (Harań, Gulati 2005) language teachers use sign language on an everyday basis, using interpreter service only when necessary. This shortens the teacher-student distance and makes the conduct of classes clearer.

Today the foreign language teachers' preparation for work with D/HH students is much deeper, though not fully satisfactory. A study conducted by Domagała-Zyśk (2012) showed that among 18 teachers from 15 special schools for the D/HH in Poland (there are 37 such schools all over Poland), only 9 had full qualifications in foreign language teaching AND deaf education. The other half of the group had full pedagogical qualifications as English teachers, but did not have any kind of formal education as teachers of the deaf. The teachers declare they use in communication mainly writing and lip-reading but they also know some Polish Sign Language and use it in communication with the students. As their main teaching strategies they use visuals, reading and translation, writing, written dialogues. Extremely rarely they use CIT tools, films with subtitles or multi-media programs.

Contemporary normalization or inclusion trends call for full integration and inclusion of the D/HH students in their local schools. It applies especially to these students who use speech as their major way of communication, but might include also sign language users who can participate in the classroom work with the support of speech-to-text reporting or sign language interpreter. If the inclusion is to be complete, it should also include the foreign language classes. At a first glance it seems almost impossible. Contemporary foreign language methodology introduces mainly active teaching strategies, based on oral conversations and group work. Indeed, there are many disturbing elements in such a class organization: a high level of noise, which might make it almost impossible for the hearing aid user to select background noises from the speech stream, several sources of voice that might make it impossible to recognize speech by lip-reading, quick pace of interaction that makes speech understanding complicated. It is also difficult to secure for a D/HH student participation in a language group of a suitable level. D/HH persons usually start their foreign language education later and are faced with numerous problems during its conduct. They have no chance to amend it by participation in a private foreign language tutoring or classes as they are inaccessible for D/HH persons. It means their foreign language level might be lower than their peers. One more disadvantage of inclusive classes is the fact that usually the pace of such classes is quicker than the D/HH persons' perceptive skills. Sudden changes of activities, the need for watching the teacher's lips/the monitor with speech-to-text reporting and following the text in a handbook – makes participation really demanding.

However, even such extreme conditions may have their advantages. Integration or inclusive teaching provides the student with full access to the same language materials as the hearing classmates have, together with all social context, like sharing strong emotions or language anxiety before the test time or participating in classroom gigs or jokes. It gives them an opportunity to interact and use the language not in the "special" environment of a specialist class, where they use language only with their teacher, but in a more natural community of their peers. Learning a foreign language is sharing our thoughts about everything – and sharing them with a hearing peer might be really enriching, even if it takes an extra effort to find a proper way of effective communication. This situation can be also beneficial for the hearing peers as they learn about different communication abilities and have to

establish an effective and natural communication route. They can recognize the D/HH students language abilities and get used to their presence in a public sphere.

Nowadays D/HH students participate more and more successfully in inclusive or integration education. In Domagała-Zyśk (2013a) research of 35 university students who studied at KUL University in Poland in the years 1999-2012, 17 (48%) completed primary integration education, while 18 persons (51%) attended special schools. Within the same group of students 16 persons (45%) continued education in inclusive classes and 19 (54%) – in special schools for the D/HH. The tendency observed during these 12 years is that at the beginning of the century D/HH students completed mainly special schools, while last four years of the project the students came mainly from inclusive schools (9 out of 12 students in the years 2008-2012). Another research conducted by Rosowicz & Domagała-Zyśk (2013) shows that 35 participants of this research – university students of the year 2012 - completed mainly inclusive/integration primary schools- 76%; a smaller number completed integrative/inclusive secondary schools – 58%. This tendency shows that in primary education it is much easier for the student to participate in mainstream education while at secondary level a group of inclusive/integration education students choose to attend special schools, designed to answer directly their needs. The students coming from inclusive schools complained about high noise level and difficulties of following the class route, but on the other hand loved group work activities and the idea of attending the foreign language class on the same conditions as their hearing peers.

Such integrative/inclusion classes have to be extremely precisely thought over before the class starts. The classroom has to be well lit and students' desks formed in a circle so as to enable clear face visibility. Both the teacher and the students have to speak according to the rules of effective communication: speak clearly, with their faces directed towards the D/HH student, avoid sudden movements or standing behind a window. The class structure has to be clear and predictable, and its handouts with lesson plans might serve as a great support.

A great possibility of supporting D/HH students integration into regular classroom provides communication and internet technology. Stating it more precisely, language courses can today be almost fully technologically accessible for the D/HH persons. Broadcasts, texts or dialogues that are heard by the hearing students can be simultaneously read as a tapescript or watched in the form of subtitled films. Group conversations can be reported by a student's assistant in the form of speech-to-text service. Written chats can be used instead of oral communication. Such inclusive classes have to be supported by individual tutoring, according to the students' needs.

2. Foreign language via sign language

When beginning teaching foreign languages to D/HH sign language users a significant question appears: is it proper to offer them to learn a new phonic language – or to support them in mastering a foreign sign language, e.g. American or British Sign Language? In some countries (like e.g. Norway, cf. Pritchard 2013) it is common to begin foreign language teaching for D/HH sign language users by accustoming them with a foreign sign language. As Pritchard argues, this gives the students a great amount of confidence and belief in their language competence. If possible, such process is accompanied with visits to a foreign country or participation in exchange programs. During such meetings students have a chance to use a foreign sign language and boost their language confidence. Sign language has been also used in other programs for foreign language learning, like SignOn and SignOneOne developed at Klagenfurt University by Franz Dotter and his team (Dotter 2008). This

language course is deeply embedded into deaf Culture, as many texts describe life of Deaf persons or different aspects of their culture, like e.g. Deaflympics. In Italy in the project SignMedia coordinated by Elana Ochse British sign language is also used for signing Italian media professionals – it is supposed to equip them in necessary qualifications for work in international teams (Ochse 2013, 130). Starting her work in (1998), Daniela Janakowa from the Czech Republic was also very much oriented towards using Czech Sign Language and ASL. She organized regular study trips for the students, organized the service of sign language interpreters working during her English class and prepared some teaching materials using sign language (e.g. her book of fairy tales is accompanied by 3 CDs with the tales told in a Czech Sign language (Janakova 2005). Beata Gulati in Siedlce (2005) has also been enriching her classes with ASL and creates the possibility to use it with sign language users.

The principles and usefulness of this approach do answer directly the communication needs of D/HH participants: they can feel secure and confident while using sign language. At the same time, such projects should be treated only as a first step for foreign language learning, leading towards learning a foreign language in its written or written and oral form. Only then will the students be able to know the language used by majority inhabitants of a given country and to learn the vocabulary and structures that enable them to learn and work in more inclusive communities.

5 Speaking a foreign language

When I disclose to new persons the information that I teach English as a foreign language to the D/HH students, usually the first question – after some moments of disbelief – is: *How can you teach them speaking a foreign language – it is not possible?* A common social stereotype about D/HH persons is that they are deaf-mute and cannot speak even a word. Only after getting to know my D/HH students do my interlocutors discover that D/HH persons quite often can speak in their national language and their speech is quite intelligible. Of course, if in the group there are people who do not use speech in their national language usually they do not want to learn to speak a foreign language as sign communication enables them to get to the meaning of language. In this case foreign languages can be taught in their written form but even then communication skills should be exercises via writing dialogues or internet chats and forums.

While discussing this phenomena it is worthy to know the data (Domagała-Zyśk 2013a). In the years 1999-2012 at KUL University in Poland 35 students learned English as a foreign language. Evaluating their achievement the level of their language and speech skills were estimated. Out of this group 84% understood speech in their national language well or very well, but only 13% had similar skills in a foreign language. 88% were able to build informative sentences and phrases in Polish, but only 34% could do this in a foreign language. Their speech was well or very well intelligible in 76% in their national and 56% in a foreign language. It is worth noticing that speech intelligibility in a national language predicts this skill in foreign language in the strongest way (Domagała-Zysk 2013a). It is probably not possible to learn to speak in a more intelligible way in a foreign language than you do in your national language. On the other hand, having the speaking competence developed in the national language, it is easier and more predictable to learn a foreign language and be successful.

Speaking a foreign language gives the D/HH population a real independence. They are ready to use it alone in any social or professional situation in inclusive setting. With the support of speech-to-text, induction loops, the use of writing and

people's kindness they are able to use foreign languages competently and successfully.

Conclusion

While you work diligently in a given field, it is advisable to stop regularly, check the road behind and reformulate the goal in front of you. In the field of surdo-glottodidactics it is also worthy to do it now. Answering the question *What's behind* - we can point at experience in different South, North and Central European countries. D/HH students do not ask if we shall teach them languages. The basic question is *How to do it?* Past experiences of last twenty years shows that there have been different roads for success: teaching foreign sign or foreign phonic languages, preparing specialist or inclusive settings, communication with the students via foreign on national speech, foreign or national sign language or foreign or national cued speech. The aims were also different and include both teaching only reading and writing in a foreign language and teaching all four language skills: reading, writing, listening accompanied with speech reading and speaking. Our experience so far shows that there is no one and only way in the field of surdo-glottodidactic, there are many of them and they should be flexibly adjusted to the students' specific needs and expectations.

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