

LEARNING ASL, IS AND GSL: LEARNING BY DOING WITH THE SIGAME-APP

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ABSTRACT

SiGame is a new game-App for schools and individuals to learn different sign languages: ASL (American Sign Language), GSL (German Sign Language) and IS (International Sign). Playful learning encourages especially young deaf people to improve their sign language skills.

The App is a tool for deaf people of all ages to learn another sign language effortlessly as part of playing. The benefit of the App is that it works in different settings: it can be used for teaching in school (individual learning or group settings) or people can use it on their private phones. It is a good method for bilingual teaching and teaching sign language to hearing people, especially as there is very few teaching material available.

Users can improve their knowledge with the online language training and check their progress with a learning curve. The App offers various games, such as quizzes and pairs in 100 different levels. The progress is saved which makes it easy to improve and practice your skills. An especially designed avatar signs, which attracts particularly young students. Pupils can play on their own, with their classmates or other schools, which gives them the opportunity to challenge each other and share the results on Facebook. The app has a visual approach. Each sign is translated into written language to improve the writing and reading skills of deaf users. Using an avatar instead of a real person offers the possibility to produce further words/signs without any effort.

That makes SiGame a pleasurable, easy tool for deaf and hearing people, who are interested in learning another sign language for private or professional purposes.

Background

Learning new sign languages is for deaf or hard of hearing people quite challenging. Sign language courses are only offered in the sign language predominantly used in the respective country. Courses for foreign sign languages are in most country not existent. Besides that, sign language courses are only offered in bigger cities and involve considerable costs.

Even for hearing people learning a sign language can be quite difficult. There are very few sign language courses, so people with little time or an irregular work schedule, who live in a village or don't have enough money may have trouble finding a course. There are online training programmes like <http://www.spreadthesign.com>, but these are more suitable for looking up vocabulary as for learning signs as they don't have a playful teaching approach.

Due to national education and disabilities policies in many countries few deaf people have enough skills in written language. A lack of knowledge in written language is a barrier for their access to a regular job market.

To encourage teenagers and children to study is itself a challenge, as they most of the time associate learning with a boring, unpleasant and hard task, no matter if they are deaf or hearing. They prefer to play online games, video games or spend time on the internet, instead of reading a book. The problem is that these games have no educational value at all. That's why equalizent developed a learning game, which faces these problems and offers solutions.

What is SiGame?

SiGame App is a game App for learning different sign languages. The App offers various games, such as quizzes and pairs in 100 different levels and additionally offers a vocabulary trainer and dictionary. SiGame is available in ASL, IS and GSL and in four different written languages: English, French, German and Spanish. The progress is saved which makes it easy to improve and practice your skills. I.e. if the user can't figure out the right answer, the respective sign is repeated automatically in regular intervals. It is based on the SM2-Algorithm (SuperMemo), a software, which is a practical application of the spaced repetition learning method. Its repetition frequency guarantees an efficient long-term learning effect.

All the applications are signed by an avatar. SiMax can change its appearance, so the users can for example choose between a female or male avatar. The use of an avatar offers different advantages. 1: the production of further vocabulary is very easy with the appearance not changing. Using a human being as the signer may cause discontinuity in the production of new signs. 2: An avatar represents the playful character of the App. The goal was to create a tool for learning by doing and for people to have fun. This would not be possible with a human being.

Target groups

SiGame is a game for everybody. Hearing, deaf and hard of hearing people can benefit from this app. It is a game for learning a new foreign language and it is one of very few games in the "mother tongue" of deaf people. All ages can enjoy this game, as it is easy to handle for young children as well as elderly people without any experience in new technologies. Teenagers nowadays are eager to play online or video games. This game allows them to link their enthusiasm for (online) playing with a useful side effect. That's why teenagers will more likely accept this game as a learning tool.

Even people with little time on their hands can benefit of this learning game. The playing units are short, so people can learn a few new words/signs whenever they can spare some minutes, for example while waiting for public transport.

Tool for teaching

SiGame is quite suitable for pupils of all ages. If a hearing person wants to learn sign language he/she is still required to visit a proper course, as sign language grammar is not thought through the App, but it supports the learning process a lot. The hardest thing while learning a new language is building up a treasury of words and with this game it turns out to be easy, pleasurable and without a lot of effort. It can be even more fun, as SiGame can be played in groups, with classmates or other school classes with the possibility to challenge each other, comparing the results on Facebook. In school it is a tool for diversified teaching. Si Game can be used in various ways, learning new signs and written language. Therefor especially deaf students can benefit in both ways. Written language is sometimes very challenging for deaf people, so the translation of all signs into written language improves the writing and reading skills of deaf students.

SiGame empowers deaf people building up their international network. Therefor an international sign language is necessary. Many deaf people are fluent in their “mother sign language” but they are not competent in other sign languages. Given that the structure and grammar of the different sign languages are similar to each other they don't need grammar lessons for learning a foreign sign language. So providing IS and ASL, which are commonly used for international communication, makes SiGame a tool to maintain the international ties between deaf people around the world.

Raising awareness

Even if a hearing person can't learn a sign language just with SiGame due to the lack of grammar instruction, it can trigger a deeper interest in sign language and the culture of the deaf and hard of hearing people. The game can therefore be the beginning of someone to pursue the goal of learning a sign language and to be part of the deaf community.

In a more subtle way SiGame also changes persisting thinking patterns. The selection of the vocabulary is based on an analysis based on gender and diversity criteria. Spoken languages as well as sign languages are full of discriminating word and stereotypes. The gender and diversity analysis helped to increase the awareness of these stereotypes. As a result we used common alternative signs wherever they existed. We avoided to reproduce stereotyping signs as slit eyes for the sign for China or insinuated breasts as the sign for woman for example. This was our contribution to reassess language and to slightly change language into a more acceptable system.