

# TEACHING AND LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN HUNGARIAN SCHOOLS FOR THE HEARING IMPAIRED: A NATIONWIDE STUDY

Edit H. Kontra, Kata Csizér, Katalin Piniel

Department of English Applied Linguistics, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research carried out in one of those countries where the audio-verbal approach prevails in institutions for the hearing impaired. Although foreign languages are being taught, there are no teaching methods or materials developed specifically for Deaf<sup>1</sup> learners, nor do higher education institutions train language teachers for this student population. In 2012, a three-year nationwide project<sup>2</sup> was launched to take a closer look at the motivation, language learning beliefs and strategies of 14-19-year-old students, and the local circumstances in which foreign language (FL) teaching takes place. First, a survey was conducted in eight different institutions. This was followed by lesson observations and individual interviews. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students were found to have lower levels of motivation than their hearing peers and their motivation is mainly affected by their language learning experiences at school. The qualitative data show that FL teaching in Deaf schools is taking place in unfavorable circumstances, with little or no sign language support, without adequate resources, and with modest success. Our study points to the need for developing and sharing FL teaching methods and materials internationally and for developing Hungarian learners' and teachers' sign language skills for effective in-class communication.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The FL education of Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons is still an under-researched area, a seemingly marginal issue for both special needs educators and second language acquisition researchers. There could be a number of reasons for this. First of all, those involved in special needs education research may not consider giving the teaching of FLs greater priority because there are so many other issues to resolve in Deaf education. Secondly, the number of FL students and teachers in any one context is small; FL education does not take place in large, concentrated groups, which makes the collection of data difficult and the generalizability of findings questionable. Nevertheless, providing equal access to all areas of education for Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons in the spirit of article 24 of the UN Convention (2007) necessitates that we find out about the FL learning needs of this group and support the work of teachers, schools and educational decision makers with research results.

## 2 BACKGROUND

Second or foreign language teaching presupposes that the learner is already a competent user of a first language, but in the case of persons who are either Deaf or severely hard-of-hearing (from here on D/HH) this is usually not the case. As 90-95% of prelingually D/HH children grow up in hearing families, their hearing loss deprives them from naturally acquiring the spoken language of their environment, and if early intervention programs do not include the provision of regular contact with native or fluent signers, the children's sign language skills will not start developing in time either. Several researchers have asserted that most D/HH children start school without an adequate language base to build on (cf. Goldin-Meadow and Mayberry 2001; Holcomb and Peyton 1992; Muzsnai 1999) and that countries with strong oralist traditions tend to be slow in implementing change in education (Dotter 2008, Krausneker 2008). This, however, does not mean that D/HH persons cannot or do not want to learn foreign languages. They live in the same globalized world as their hearing peers and want to benefit from FL knowledge in education, work, travelling or accessing

information, just like anybody else. It is the job of researchers and educationalists to find the best ways of enhancing their language learning process.

## **2.1 Deaf education in Hungary**

There are seven residential schools in Hungary which specialize in teaching D/HH boys and girls: one in Budapest and six in various regions of the country. In the capital city there is also a separate K-8 school for hard-of-hearing learners. At the secondary level there is only one secondary vocational school that has a separate section for D/HH learners. Students here can specialize in IT and take the Matura exam. In the past few years, as a result of the intensive promotion of integrating special needs (SN) students in mainstream education, the traditional 'Deaf schools' have experienced a strong fallback in D/HH student enrolment and had to open their doors to a variety of other SN students. This resulted in classes with mixed students representing a range of hearing impairment and a wide variety of educational needs.

At these institutions, the dominating teaching approach is auditory-verbal (Csuha et al. 2009). Deaf children entering school are taught spoken Hungarian in two preliminary years before starting first grade. All lessons then are conducted in spoken Hungarian with little or no sign language support so that students learn to make use of their residual hearing and practice listening and speaking. The use of Hungarian Sign Language (HSL) is not prohibited any more, but it is not promoted either. Most teachers only learn to use basic HSL from their students, on the job. Act 125 on Hungarian Sign Language and Sign Language Use (2009) accepts HSL as the first language of the Deaf community and grants them the right to use it in all spheres of life; however, schools have until 2017 to get ready for offering bilingual education in HSL and spoken Hungarian at schools.

Foreign languages – English, and to a lesser degree German – are taught in all of the above institutions; paradoxically, however, students integrated in mainstream education are most often exempted from the FL requirement so that they have more time for keeping up with their peers in their other subjects. In a study conducted among D/HH adults in Budapest, Kontráné Hegybíró (2010) found that young people resented having accepted these exemptions, which they saw retrospectively as exclusion from learning languages at school. As regards the medium of education, the results of a nationwide survey of D/HH adults yielded strong support for the inclusion of HSL in education including FL teaching (Kontra, Csizér 2013).

## **3 RESEARCHING FL TEACHING AND LEARNING AT D/HH SCHOOLS**

In the framework of a nationwide project "The foreign language learning motivation, beliefs, and strategies of Deaf and severely hard of hearing students", all schools specializing in D/HH education were visited and data were collected from both students and their language teachers as well as school principals to get an insight into the present FL teaching and learning situation. The results of the student interviews are available in Kontra, Csizér, Piniel (2014). Here we present the findings of the student survey and the interviews with teachers.

### **3.1 D/HH students' dispositions towards learning FLs**

We used a standardized questionnaire to collect quantitative data from 105 D/HH students. The instrument covered a range of individual variables that were collated into ten scales (Table 1). The descriptive statistics concerning these scales indicate a number of important issues. First, D/HH students' motivated learning behavior, which is the amount of effort they reported to be investing into language learning, is of a medium level on a five-point scale ( $M=3.70$ ). Given the fact that motivated learning behavior is usually seen as a key component to achieving long-term success, it seems that although these students do invest some energy into FL learning, it is questionable whether or not their effort will lead to success in the long run. This lack of sufficient effort might be partly put down to the

communication difficulties they are facing daily in their FL classes. Another reason might be that these students do not seem to receive an enhanced amount of environmental support, which is indicated by the fact that the mean value of the milieu scale (M=3.01) is even lower than the mean value of their effort. As a possible consequence, they have a low level of self-efficacy (M=3.22) as well; that is, they are uncertain about the extent they are able to learn a FL. Second, the participants scored relatively low on such important variables contributing to motivated learning behavior as their Ideal and Ought-to second language (L2) selves as well as Language learning experience (LLE). The mean values of these scales range between 3.3 and 3.8 with Ought-to L2 self receiving the lowest endorsement. Since the concept of the Ought-to L2 self entails outside expectations towards the importance of FL learning, the results suggest that the students might be unsure about what expectations they have to adhere to in FL learning. The Ideal L2 self entails students' future visions about themselves as language users, and our participants' score on this scale is lower than what has been measured for hearing students in Hungary (Csizér, Piniel, Kontra, in press). The value of LLE is closer to 4, which is reassuring: it means that these students do seem to enjoy the FL learning process. Third, students' beliefs and learning strategies also received mean values in the middle range of the five-point scale, with social strategies receiving the highest mean value. This indicates that for these students language learning is a social endeavor; that is, they not only need general support to learn FLs but also constant help from adults and peers to overcome difficulties.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation results of the scales*

<i>Scales (number of items)</i>	<i>mean*</i>	<i>St. dev.</i>	<i>r**</i>
Motivated learning behavior (3)	3.70	0.95	--
Ideal L2 self (3)	3.55	0.82	0.574
Ought-to L2 self (5)	3.36	0.80	0.618
Language learning experience (3)	3.72	0.94	0.790
Milieu (3)	3.01	0.92	0.451
Language learning beliefs (8)	3.57	0.73	0.659
Cognitive learning strategies (3)	3.78	0.76	0.573
Social learning strategies (3)	3.96	0.76	0.440
Affective learning strategies (4)	3.73	0.92	0.513
Self-efficacy (3)	3.22	0.91	0.572

\*Measured on a five-point scale, 1 indicating complete disagreement and 5 denoting complete agreement with the statements.

\*\*Correlation with Motivated learning behavior. All results are significant at 0.05 level.

The correlational analysis measuring the strength of the relationship between motivated learning behavior and the measured scales suggests that the most important contributor to success for D/HH students is positive LLE, but language learning beliefs seem to be of crucial importance, as well. Language teaching should help students develop realistic beliefs about learning because this can lead to enhanced learning success. A relatively high level of correlation exists between the Ought-to and Ideal self as well as self-efficacy. As the Ideal L2 self is commonly seen as a highly important contributor to long-term success in learning, developing both students' visions about themselves as successful future FL users and increasing their self-efficacy beliefs could certainly enhance their success in FL learning. Finally, our data suggest that it might also be important that teachers express clear expectations towards students about FL learning.

### **3.2 Teachers' views**

After gathering and analyzing the student data, we also invited language teachers working in the visited specialized institutions and the heads of school to take part in our study. Ten FL teachers and seven principals agreed to participate. The FL teachers were generally of diverse background: three colleagues had qualifications in both FL and special needs education; the rest of them had degrees either in one field or the other. The interviews were structured around issues that were thought to be pivotal in Deaf FL education in Hungary. Among others, the questions focused on foreign language teaching goals, difficulties and successes, the use of HSL in the FL classroom, the availability of resources, and finally possible suggestions for improving language teaching in these specialized institutions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by two researchers (co-coders) with the help of MAXQDA software.

Our categorization of the data was founded on the main themes of the interviews listed above. From the respondents' answers, it is clear that all schools try to take into account the special needs of D/HH learners when formulating the attainable outcomes of FL learning in the schools' curricula. Generally, by eighth grade, learners would be expected to be around A2 level of proficiency as described by the Common European Framework of Reference, but most teacher participants stressed that very few D/HH learners achieve that. The A1 level is a more realistic goal, but naturally, this is only applicable to learners' FL reading and writing skills. Other less formally formulated and more practical goals were also mentioned by colleagues, such as simply arousing learners' interest towards a FL and giving them a taste of the FL learning experience so that they can communicate with foreigners at a basic level, can understand FL scripts on the Internet, and can comprehend signs while travelling. In light of these modest goals, most teachers could remember special cases of students who were motivated to learn the FL; some of them continued studying the FL when integrated in mainstream education or even had successful experiences abroad. Many times, these cases were coupled with accounts of a supportive home environment (the importance of which was also clearly depicted in the quantitative data).

For these successes to become widespread, more favorable circumstances should be provided for the institutions to teach FLs. In the interviews, all colleagues mentioned the unavailability of specially designed FL teaching materials and the fact that they do not know of any particular teaching method that has been developed for teaching D/HH FL learners. Most teachers resort to their intuition and spend a disproportionate amount of time on preparing materials themselves. Relying on their background in special needs and/or FL education, they try various ways to approach FL teaching, with varying degrees of success. In their responses, colleagues mentioned that they would very much benefit from guidelines as to the teaching methods to use and perhaps even textbooks geared to meet the needs of D/HH FL learners. Another problem that arose was the lack of networking possibilities where FL teachers of D/HH learners could exchange materials, share teaching ideas, and have professional discussions.

Finally, in the interviews, colleagues also noted the obstacles they experience in terms of classroom communication. With the exception of two proficient signers, all other respondents acknowledged the fact that they are not fluent users of HSL, though they have learnt (i.e., picked up) signs from students, which they use from time to time to be efficacious: FL teachers claimed that using signs can ease communication in the FL classroom. Previously, some institutions had the possibility to provide support for teachers who wanted to take part in HSL training; however, presently, most teachers are left on their own to seek out opportunities to learn HSL.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

Overall, we can say that the FL learning and teaching situation at the special institutions involved in our nationwide study is not ideal, but the chance to gain some experience in learning and using a foreign language and to get a little insight into the culture of the speakers of another language is provided for all D/HH students. The attainable goals are modest at best due to the overall abilities of the student population, their low level L1 skills,

the lack of appropriate methods and materials and the lack of necessary support and encouragement from the learners' immediate environment.

The qualitative data from the teacher interviews provide us with a few recommendations for improving FL teaching in schools for the D/HH. First of all, it was mentioned that teachers could benefit from the development of well-founded approaches to teach FLs to D/HH learners as well as ready-made materials and course books that could be easily adapted to cater for individual learner needs. This way, colleagues would not have to compile materials basically from scratch, having mainly the Internet as their sole resource. Alongside increased professional support, adequate knowledge and fluent use of HSL in the FL classroom could also help interaction and thus enhance FL teaching efficiency. The introduction of a bilingual approach in 2017 would require teachers with higher levels of HSL knowledge for enhanced in-class communication and better teacher-student rapport.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We follow the tradition of spelling *Deaf* with a capital 'D' to denote people who share a sign language as well as distinct cultural values and consider themselves a linguistic and cultural minority.

<sup>2</sup> Supported by OTKA K105095

## References

- Csizér, K., Piniel, K., and Kontra, E. (in press). An investigation of the self-related concepts and foreign language motivation of young Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners in Hungary. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*.
- Csuhai, S., Henger, K., Mongyi, P., and Perlusz, A. (2009). „Siket gyermekek kétnyelvű oktatásának lehetőségei és korlátai” című kutatás eredményei. Zárótanulmány [Results of research into “The possibilities and limitations of teaching Deaf children bilingually”: Final study]. Budapest: Fogyatékos Személyek Esélyegyenlőségéért Közalapítvány. Retrieved from [http://www.fszk.hu/mjp/szakmai-anyagok/Siket-gyermekek-ketnyelvu-oktatasanak-lehetosegei-es-korlatai-c-kutatas-eredmenyei\\_zarotanulmany.pdf](http://www.fszk.hu/mjp/szakmai-anyagok/Siket-gyermekek-ketnyelvu-oktatasanak-lehetosegei-es-korlatai-c-kutatas-eredmenyei_zarotanulmany.pdf)
- Dotter, F. (2008). English for Deaf sign language users: Still a challenge. In C. J. Kellett Bidoli and E. Ochse, (Eds.), *English in international deaf communication* (pp. 97–121). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Goldin-Meadow, S., and Mayberry, R. I. (2001). How do profoundly deaf children learn to read? *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 16 (4), 222–229.
- Holcomb, T., and Peyton, J.K. (1992). *ESL literacy for a linguistic minority: The deaf experience*. *ERIC Digest*. Retrieved from <http://www.ericdigests.org/1993/deaf.htm>
- Kontra, E.H., Csizér, K., and Piniel, K. (2014). The challenge for Deaf students to learn foreign languages in special needs schools. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. doi:10.1080/08856257.2014.986905
- Kontra, E.H., and Csizér, K. (2013). An investigation into the relationship of foreign language learning motivation and sign language use among Deaf and hard of hearing Hungarians. *IRAL* 51(1), 1–22. doi: 10.1515/iral-2013-masthead1.
- Kontráné Hegybíró, E. (2010). *Nyelvtanulás két kézzel: A jelnyelv szerepe a siketek idegennyelv-tanulásában*. [Language learning with two hands: The role of sign language in Deaf language learning]. Budapest: Eötvös Kiadó.
- Krausneker, V. (2008). *The protection and promotion of sign languages and the rights of their users in Council of Europe member states: Needs analysis*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Muzsnai, I. (1999). The recognition of sign language: A threat or a way to a solution? In M. Kontra, R. Phillipson, T. Skutnabb-Kangas, and T. Várady (Eds.), *Language: A right and a resource* (pp. 279–296). Budapest: CEU Press.
- United Nations (2007). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Retrieved from [www.un.org/disabilities/convention/convention\\_full.shtml](http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/convention_full.shtml)