

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH TO DEAF PUPILS IN NORWAY

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

This paper discusses Deaf pupils' English education, attitudes to sign-bilingualism in English-teaching, pupils' face-to-face communication choices and the development of English literacy.

In Norway there are national curricula for deaf pupils in Norwegian Sign Language (NSL), Norwegian, and English leading to national examinations and giving access to higher education. Negative attitudes towards teaching English exist. Some questions need answering: Do we give the child what is available, or do we assess and cater for the needs of the individual? Can a mismatch of needs and teaching method be the cause of failure?

The English curriculum's goal is age-appropriate skills in literacy and face-to-face communication, and cultural knowledge. Due to variation in hearing and speaking skills, pupils can choose "oral language" suited to individual needs: BSL (British Sign Language) /ASL (American Sign Language), Signed English, English speech, "chatting" or combinations.

A description is given of developing face-to-face communication and literacy in a class of seven year olds. Observations of literacy strategies suggest there is a need to develop phonic reading in addition: awareness of English sounds (visually, tactile, aural) and their written symbols and spelling patterns.

Method

A study (2004) showed that teaching and using BSL is feasible and provides language awareness and motivation. A project (2015) showed that a combination of BSL, Signed English and phonics, aided reading skills.

Conclusion

Visualising language assisted by aural and tactile senses, can aid reading skills. Pupils need literacy and "oral" skills they can use in the real world.

PROCEEDINGS ARTICLE

Introduction

This paper will describe Deaf pupils' English education in Norway, discuss attitudes to sign-bilingualism in English-teaching, pupils' face-to-face communication choices and the development of English literacy.

To learn a foreign language (L2), pupils need to have access to a complete language system if the learning of that language is to progress smoothly. From research (Pritchard, 2004) we

know that young hearing impaired, sign language users do not have problems learning a foreign sign language, so it seems logical that language learning itself, is not directly connected to hearing loss. However, experience shows that learning a foreign spoken and written language proves to be very challenging, and probably has to do with pupils' access to the language and its modality. If a pupil is partially or totally unable to perceive speech sounds, this will affect his ability to hear and develop speech. In addition, any aural signals reaching the brain may be distorted. Lack of access to spoken language, will inevitably affect the acquisition and learning of a new, foreign spoken language. The question is then, how to overcome the obstacles hearing loss puts in the pupil's way. Does the term "oral language" necessarily have to mean speech?

In Norway today about 95% of deaf pupils have cochlear implants (CI), and the majority attend their local school. Regardless of where pupils live or go to school, they have the legal right to choose to be educated in and about sign language and become sign bilingual. They also have the right to follow the national curriculum English for the hearing impaired (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013), where pupils can choose which language and modality they use in face-to-face communication depending on their individual needs and preferences. The curriculum has many parallels to the curriculum for the normally hearing, and many of the learning goals are the same. However the curriculum does include goals concerning knowledge of deaf culture in English-speaking countries and literature about deaf people and by deaf authors. This is seen as an important part of the development of positive self-image. Due to the huge variation in hearing and speaking skills among today's generation of hearing impaired pupils, the curriculum allows pupils to choose BSL/ASL, Signed English, English speech, "chatting" using written language and ICT or different combinations of these. The curriculum leads to national examinations giving access to higher education. Oral exams are arranged according to the pupils' choice/s of modality: signed, spoken or written. The aim is for pupils to show that they can communicate, regardless of modality, and show their knowledge of the English language, culture and literature.

It is obviously a challenge for teachers to communicate in all or some of these modalities, but it is of great importance that the teacher and pupil are well-matched language-wise if teaching is to be successful. The goal of the English curriculum is to achieve age-appropriate skills in English literacy and face-to-face communication, and acquire cultural knowledge. How to reach this goal is a professional judgement and generally left to the teacher.

Negative attitudes sometimes exist towards teaching English to hearing impaired pupils and it can be a subject that all too readily is removed from the timetable. Often this is a result of teachers' expectations that pupils will not be able to learn a foreign language; as a result pupils are deprived of valuable language learning experiences. There can also be negative attitudes to the use of sign language generally and especially in connection with the teaching of English; even more so after the advent of CI. While CI gives pupils access to speech sounds, it is not always enough to give every pupil full access to spoken language and facilitate an age appropriate spoken language development (Kermit, Mjøen & Holm, 2010); which again would imply that the pupil cannot take full advantage of teaching methods used in the English classroom with normally hearing pupils without adjustments being made. In my experience there is an enormous variation in the functional hearing of deaf children with CI, and the promise of normal development of spoken language for all, has not been met. Today, we see that some pupils with CI have chosen sign bilingualism, thereby taking

advantage of the access to sound provided by CI and the ease of communication afforded by sign language.

So, instead of taking a bombastic stand in relation to signing, the first step should be to systematically assess each pupil's actual needs and preferences, and provide the pupil with an appropriate learning environment. However, although pupils have the right to an education as outlined in the National Curriculum for the hearing impaired, are they actually receiving this? Do we give the child the education that happens to be available locally, or do we really assess and cater for the needs of the individual as the curriculum prescribes? Who is doing the "adjusting" – the teacher or the pupil? There are concerns that damage can result by exposing the child to repeated failure due to a mismatch of needs and teaching method, especially in the subject of English.

The key to developing **face-to-face communication** is to make language accessible to the pupils. By choosing the correct modality suited to the pupils' needs, language learning can be readily achieved by using the language in natural situations where the content is ample, understandable and interesting to the pupils. By preparing the pupils in L1 and activating prior knowledge of the theme that is to be presented in English, pupils become active language learners, acquiring whole language by doing and not by learning vocabulary lists. One of the crucial points and the biggest challenge is whether the teacher is fluent and familiar with teaching methods.

Observations of hearing impaired pupils' reading and writing strategies have long suggested that there is a need to also develop phonic reading as an added reading strategy: in other words, awareness of English sounds (visually, tactile, aural) and how they are represented in written symbols: graphemes and spelling patterns. After the revision of the curriculum in 2013, this has been added as a learning goal. The development of **English literacy** is generally thought to spring out of English spoken language and will take longer to develop than the development of face-to-face communication. When access to the spoken language is inhibited it is clear that the written language may also suffer. In some cases, from lack of sufficient input of English leading to insufficient knowledge of English syntax, pupils will transfer knowledge of sign language syntax and/or Norwegian syntax and use that in their English written texts. As long as this does not interfere with getting their message across, we do not focus too much on this at the primary school stage.

There are two ways of teaching pupils English literacy: top down methods and bottom up. First, top down: by giving the pupils ample experience of English through varying types of signing, aural input and visualization we can develop vocabulary and phonetic awareness, and create a bridge to the written language. Pupils will gradually acquire language if they are given access to a variety of English texts about which they have activated prior knowledge. Texts can be written, signed, subtitled and spoken. This can also be achieved by encouraging pupils to read texts other than from the school text book. This involves letting pupils read texts of varying complexity in their own way and not demanding that they always have to understand every word. Most important are the discussions and activities arising from the texts. We can also work bottom up: teaching pupils the building blocks of the language i.e. speech sounds and their graphemes using chaining (Hermans, Nijmegen, Knoors, Ormel, & Verhoeven. 2008). We have further developed chaining to give pupils different experiences connected to English speech sounds, words or concepts, by allowing the pupil to use all the senses:

- seeing the written letter/word
- hearing the spoken sound/word
- being made aware of how the sound/word looks on the mouth, how they are made and how they feel within the mouth, on the throat and other parts of the face
- performing the movement of the BSL sign or BSL alphabet with the appropriate mouthing
- (spelling the word using the BSL alphabet)
- seeing an illustration of the BSL sign using for example *Let's Sign BSL Graphics* (Smith, 2011)
- seeing, feeling or experiencing the actual letter/object/person/happening

The order in which these sensations or links in the chain appear is not important. **All this work is a continuous process that must begin early in the pupils' school careers.** Similar methods are used when teaching the Norwegian language, and because of this, pupils already know some of the speech sounds because they are similar in both languages, and they know how to write them. By analysing and comparing Norwegian and English we know which English phonemes to focus on and which spelling patterns. By using phonetic texts which enable pupils to sound out English words, pupils start to read English texts with correct pronunciation, for example *Songbirds* (Donaldson, 2008). The 25 most commonly used small words are learnt as sight words. In addition pupils learn other reading strategies and language learning strategies so that they also can tackle texts that they meet and that are not based on phonics. Our basic principles are that we use the target language during lessons, rarely resorting to NSL or Norwegian, and we make sure that pupils have a short repetition every day.

Method

A quantitative study reported at an earlier ICED congress, was carried out in 2004 (Pritchard, 2004) and tested the total population of Norwegian deaf 4th graders with the aim to find out if, after four years of English teaching, they could understand BSL and at what level. The *Assessing British Sign Language Development* (Herman, Holmes & Woll, 1999) test was used. This is a standardized test, and results showed that Norwegian sign bilingual pupils, who had been given access to BSL texts, did understand the language at an equivalent level to their British peers, even though their teachers often had little competence in BSL. In addition BSL proved to provide language awareness and motivation. Using BSL can be said to be a feasible option if it suits the needs of the individual pupil.

During this school year (2014 - 2015) I carried out a project focusing on the combination of BSL, Signed English and phonics aided reading skills. A 2nd grade class consisting of three seven year old boys attending a school for the hearing impaired full-time, took part in the project. The boys started learning English this year. The boys are sign bilingual and can be said to represent a cross section of the hearing status of many hearing impaired children today: one is a successful CI user, one uses hearing aids, and one does not use any aids. The boys' teacher is fluent in NSL, Norwegian, English spoken language and is learning BSL.

At regular intervals throughout the year I visited the class for two hour sessions and used BSL and/or signed English throughout the lesson. Lessons consisted of inter-curricular, practical activities and demonstrations, games, stories, drama and role play. If pupils asked or answered in NSL or Norwegian, the reply was given in BSL or Signed English which they

were asked to repeat in some playful way. A high energy, low stress language learning environment was created where the boys showed that they understood English by following instructions and participating in games using the face to face communication in different modalities and their reading skills. The class teacher followed up these sessions and introduced new themes in between my visits. My sessions included a short interlude concerned with developing phonetic awareness and reading using games where pupils had to look, feel and/or listen for speech sounds, connecting them to their grapheme, sounding out and reading words and so on. This resulted in all the pupils becoming confident and looking forward to English lessons, despite their varying degrees of functional hearing.

At the end of the school year the *BSL Assessment Test* (Herman et al, 1999) was used in a similar way as in the 2004 study, and a simple reading test was conducted to find out if the boys had learned to connect any English speech sounds to letters and spelling patterns, and if they could sound out and read simple CVC words. Results will be given at the conference as the project is on-going.

Results and Conclusions

By the end of the school year the class had worked on everyday themes such as presenting themselves, home and family, clothes, food, weather, animals, hobbies and so on. They followed the same themes as suggested in a school text book for first and second grade hearing pupils. It has become apparent throughout this school year that these young hearing impaired pupils prefer live dialog and natural interaction, to watching films or using interactive smart board programs. Our expectations when we started the project were that the pupils would succeed, and so they did in their individual ways. After six months the boys had gained a considerable vocabulary and were reading simple English phonetic books (Level 1+); some using English spoken language, spoken language with signing, or BSL and some signed English signs. Either way, the boys showed that they understood the story content.

As with all other children and young people living in today's world, hearing impaired pupils need English literacy and "oral language" skills adapted to their individual needs that they can use in the real world.

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