

## **Introduction**

One of the most persistent and complex issues troubling educators of deaf students in mainstream colleges and universities is that the majority of those who begin higher studies never graduate. Yet deaf students continue to enrol in programmes of higher learning confident that they will do well. For them, as for their hearing counterparts, a university degree means opportunity. In order to tackle the world of academia, deaf students need to master not only Czech language, but also standard academic English which is a complicated task. At a very minimum, college and university students are expected to use proper grammar and spell correctly; to be able to organize their text topics clearly; to present their arguments coherently. For these reasons, then, success in university is also dependent on success in English.

The role of an instructor in education of deaf students is, therefore, a critical one. To function well in that role the teacher needs an understanding of language learning that goes beyond rules and mechanisms to focus on the linguistic principles. With a clearer understanding of the linguistic principles behind language-in-use, perhaps we as teachers can provide our students with the kinds of information they need to have a realistic chance at future success.

## **Hearing Impairment and Language Acquisition**

Belief in a functional connection between language and learning is so generally accepted that the socially constructed foundation of this belief is rarely questioned. Children will learn the language spoken to them, teachers are told. And indeed, they will – most of the time. From this basic assumption flow two others: all children will acquire their

native language swiftly and efficiently, and once they have mastered this language, they will use it to name their world. At times linguists will qualify these presumptions with the tag: “unless they are severely retarded or completely deprived of exposure. Such is not the case with deaf children, yet these children often struggle to learn the spoken language of their country which puzzled many educators.

In the past for example the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (96? - 55 B.C.) wrote:

To instruct the deaf, no art could ever reach

No care improve, and no wisdom teach.

This statement has been supported very often through the centuries, especially after reviewing national studies on the reading achievement of deaf students of all ages. They repeatedly scored well below average in comparison with their hearing peers. Despite the numerous attempts the results did not change significantly. Deaf students had problems understanding syntactic structures and also struggled significantly with verb and noun inflections. Typically, they were not able to make correct complex sentences and were not able to construct adult language users syntactic structures. Even when students wrote these complex sentences, they were not able to say what they meant, or decipher their components correctly.

This is not so surprising when taking into consideration their oral education and the lack of understanding on the behalf of the society. As Wilbur and Hoemann state:

“With generally negative attitude toward education, English, grammar, and hearing authority figures, and overwhelming feelings of inferiority, frustration and failure,

deaf students are not positively motivated to communicate in the ways which are encouraged by hearing society”.

(1982: p.9)

Their failure to master the norms of their native language consequently led to only very limited access to secondary schooling with even worse situation in postsecondary education. If somehow a deaf student managed to get to postsecondary level (as it is not just a language, but through the language concepts, information and knowledge is communicated, explained and taught), their efforts were very often marred by the requirements of an academic institution to respond to texts and interact through spoken and written native language. Nowadays, more deaf students enter into postsecondary education. However, relatively few possess the skills, or receive the support to successfully complete their studies. It is more the problem of understanding than means and resources.

As Kathryn Meadows writes, ”The basic deprivation of profound congenial deafness is not the deprivation of sound; it is the deprivation of language“ (1980:17). Because current and political bureaucracies foster and prefer acoustically-based languages, few of the educational policies presently in place in mainstream schools meet the physical and cognitive needs of deaf students.

It is the conflict of getting the information across through the native language which many deaf struggle to possess, to grasp on higher grammatical, morphological and syntactical level. It seems like an inappropriate instruction tool is used for getting the meaning across.

Deaf in mainstream schools and in hearing society do not communicate their thoughts easily and nor can their teachers or hearing peers communicate freely with them. Deaf are asked, in schools, to acquire the native tongue, often without the context of another language to help them. And if they are fluent in a sign language, the visual nature of such language necessarily influences the way they approach an oral language. The interference more than often lays in the fact that a sign language is a spacial language, whereas a spoken language has a linear structure. For deaf learners, regardless whether they are oral or sign language users, the spoken language will never be understood and available in the same way as to the hearing students.

So how can instructors of the deaf with no or little knowledge of deaf education or sign language teach the deaf? The answer is not an easy one to answer. There needs to be an understanding of both language structures as well as knowledge of the effects of prelingual hearing impairment on language acquisition and a proper methodology applied how to teach a spoken language to deaf students.

Deaf students up to now have mostly studied at special schools for the deaf where, despite the oral method of teaching frequently applied, they were among the peers of the same kind, and their instructors were acquainted with the way, deaf students expressed themselves in written texts. However, when these students succeed in getting into the postsecondary system, into the world that is predominantly hearing and often has very limited knowledge of deafness, these instructors are often stunned on their first account with the written Czech of the deaf.

## **Variables Affecting Hearing Impairment**

When deaf individuals move from a special environment such as a school for the deaf into the hearing world and its institutions, they are almost always limited by their verbal and written skills. Hearing university instructors encountering their written language for the first time are often stunned by the errors and the apparent semantic weakness of the writing. The way deaf students initially learn an oral language has an influence on subsequent encoding of information in the language and its production which can mean that even a student who completed elementary and secondary schooling, a student who was exposed to more vocabulary, spelling, and grammar instructions than most hearing individuals, a student who is fluent in fingerspelling, Czech-like signing and Czech Sign Language, this intelligent student can still be wrongly perceived by many teachers and researchers as “language retarded“ on the grounds of his or her garbled written language.

Most of all, language is the means through which people present their perception of the world. But for the deaf, language learning is influenced by many variables that are not readily familiar to hearing instructors. These include age of onset and degree of hearing impairment, hearing status and language preference of parents, additional handicapping conditions. Of these, degree of impairment, early language training, and attitudes concerning language and language users appear to influence success or failure in a significant way. Also influencing success is the manner in which language was acquired and how it developed.

## **Grammar Instruction**

When deaf learners begin with English at school as their second oral language – either in mainstreamed or special school-they have already been since the beginning of their school years exposed to Czech language instructions and Czech texts for much of their school day. Because, generally speaking, an oral language is not a language that meets their communicative needs and physical resources, the task of mastering use of different domains of Czech language and later on English language is difficult as well as disconcerting. Even more perplexing is the way that Czech language and later on English language are often presented to them: as a collection of fragmentary and discreet skills. Vocabulary acquisition, reading, writing, speaking, and grammar are often so dissected as to appear unrelated to and separable from the communicative purposes of language. For too many deaf students when they enter university, English is only marginally related to social goals. Most of them realize its importance for academic success, but conceptualize it just in terms of acquiring rules. Students are often confronted with lists of words to memorize and then are asked to use these words to fill slots in sentences. As a result, acquiring English language skills is often regarded as unpleasant for deaf students and typically seen in terms of making others happy rather than as enabling the learner.

The problems of students who come to university as far as English language is concerned is that they either have next-to zero knowledge of English language from their schools or the English language they have learnt is characterized by fossilized grammatical forms that deviate from standard

academic English. These fossilized forms are very difficult for a student to eradicate because they make sense within the student's interlanguage. Often they are understood and accepted by the student's interlocutors. Through careful monitoring, the student may be able to reduce the incidence of these incorrect forms.

Having said all that, I would now like to present my own practical research and experience in teaching English to Czech deaf and hard-of-hearing students in university, i.e. Charles University in Prague.

### **My research**

I have been working as an English teacher for over 15 years teaching mostly university students and adults. The biggest challenge started ten years ago when I took up a position of an English teacher of hearing impaired students at Charles University in Prague, the Faculty of Arts, the Language Resource Centre. At that time, I had (or at least I thought I had) just a hazy idea about how to teach these students, i.e. hearing impaired students. To top it all, there was hardly any information on methodology in the Czech Republic (with exception of the Language Resource Centre) and very few experts to help me adjust my teaching methods to the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing university students.

First, I had to ask myself: What is so special about teaching English to the hearing impaired? Is there any method or are there any methods that really work? Is there even the only best solution to teaching English to the hearing impaired?

After five years of experience as a teacher of hearing impaired university students, I can now say yes to the former

and no to the latter. Yes, there are methods, or, better to say, techniques and strategies that prove more efficient than others. And no, because there is not just one, the ultimate answer for the teachers of English to the hearing impaired as far as methodology is concerned. As was mentioned earlier in the text, the situation is not monolithic, we have to stress out that this group of students with hearing impairment is rather heterogeneous. The Language Resource Centre where I worked was a specialized centre that dealt with students with different levels of hearing loss. These were students with a hearing loss who had a great problem to participate in English classes together with hearing students where they were not able to follow the teaching due to the great number of students in the class and impossibility to lipread the teacher, or to follow conversation with quick and often unexpected changes and turns of speakers. These students, even those who have residual hearing and can wear hearing aids, they still have to rely heavily on lipreading to get the spoken information. Another aspect is, that Czech hearing impaired students were instructed at school in Czech language which is their first oral language they had throughout their whole primary and secondary schooling, and which they often struggled with and did not develop good feelings towards the language.

Needless to say, Czech language differs greatly from English language structure. If we take all this into account, it is then obvious that, while learning English, hearing impaired students encounter completely new system of oral language with respect to morphology, syntax and phonology. It has been scientifically proved that, in comparison to Czech language where, when trained, hearing impaired people are

able to lipread about 40% of spoken language in case the speaker faces them, does not mumble, the hearing impaired are not tired or stressed up, the topic is known and the source of light is not behind the speaker. This percentage drops, due to phonological aspect of English to 30%, the other is a pure guesswork. We are talking about the hearing impaired who have been through intensive speechreading training. Even after all the years of speechreading training they are unable to follow quicker conversations. They are not able to follow other students' reactions. It is too fast for them, plus the pronunciation of the students which differs from student to student, makes it even more difficult for lipreading. All these facts lead to frustration, and that was the moment when we, at the Language Resource Centre, heard of these students. Very often it was by the word of mouth they got to us. Our centre was predominantly for students from the Faculty of Arts, but later on, more and more students kept coming from other faculties of Charles University, and we, of course, took students from the whole university if there was no other way for them or not enough willingness on the part of another language centre to deal with the needs of these students.

For students we taught at the Language Resource Centre, we prepared lower level of the English Exam on B1 level (CEFR). The reason being that even though these students had English at their secondary school, due to the methods that were applied during the teaching there, they had usually made very little progress in English. Teachers usually applied methods that they knew worked well for hearing students. However, the results were not what they had expected and

hearing impaired students did not profit much from such classes.

As mentioned before in the text, the variables affecting learning skills of these students are many. Hearing impaired students attending English classes at the Language Resource Centre came from different backgrounds and we had to deal with the students accordingly.

In my research I was looking into teaching grammar, vocabulary, reading, listening and speaking skills in English to deaf and hard-of-hearing university students.

It needs to be stressed out again that a language is a complex system and one of its features closely interacts with others. Moreover, a language is a living system constantly changing and the main reason a person normally acquires a language is to be able to communicate, to get himself/herself understood by other users of the target language. However, the situation at colleges and universities is somehow different in this respect. All students going through the university system are required to pass an exam from a foreign language. It is a prerequisite. The same applies for Charles University in Prague study programme requirements. Most students, including those hearing impaired, take an exam from English as their compulsory foreign language. The exam form followed Cambridge examination structure, namely First Certificate of English which is level B2 (though the level for hearing impaired students was lowered to B1 for reasons explained earlier in the text) according to CEFR. The English exam taken at the Faculty of Arts, where I worked and according to which we at the Language Resource Centre constructed and modified tests for hearing impaired students

was, unfortunately, very much based on grammar and vocabulary and much less attention and value was assigned to the written part of the test. I believe this is rather a drawback as students, in general, will not make great use of partitioned grammar and vocabulary, but they should be taught the complex language by learning how to write essays, papers and academic texts which, in my opinion, they need most in order to succeed in their academic lives.

That is why, in future I would very much like to devote more time and research to students' writing and mis-writing and their reading and mis-reading.

My research presents a longitudinal study spanning the period of 5 years, and also describes different approaches, techniques and strategies used during that period to see which of these learning styles would be more or less appropriate and fit the needs of hearing impaired students.

In my dissertation I aimed to answer three seemingly easy questions: Who? What? How?

Who were our students and how did their background affect their learning abilities?

What was the content of the lessons?

How did we teach hearing impaired students? This refers to classroom setting and different methods, techniques and strategies used during the 5 years of teaching at the Language Resource Centre.

## **Conclusion**

Even when deaf students are provided with tutoring and special remedial courses, their errors remain resistant to change.

Because of their perceptual prominence, the mechanical and syntactic errors of the deaf/hearing impaired have been studied at length by many researchers. In general, it has been observed that deaf students of all ages have difficulties with passive voice, auxiliary verbs (e.g. *I born in Portugal*), tense markers after be + particle (e.g. I was run), omission of be auxiliary before verb + ing (e.g. School going fast), verb forms after do and modals (e.g. She did not said; They cannot to go), inversion (e.g. I do not know how many are there), selection/omission of articles and prepositions. They also have difficulties as well with sentence boundaries, word choice, and spelling (Quigley and Paul 1984).

In view of the number and kinds of errors appearing in hearing impaired students' writing and their habit of withstanding correction, how and where should instructor begin in offering assistance?

For example, students can be asked to note in their journals which mechanical rules seem to be confusing, or they can be asked to observe and record the kinds of corrections the instructor regularly marks. After a list is compiled, the instructor can work with each student individually to develop a revision agenda. The revision agenda needs to be personalized, because even errors that appear to be similar for a number of students, for example, omission of the indefinite article, may have their roots in different areas of usage. Only by examining the linguistic environments of the incidents of correct and incorrect usage can the instructor begin to diagnose the cause of the student's difficulty and suggest methods of addressing it.

There is, actually, no need to develop a whole new set of activities to assist the hearing impaired to reduce the number and kind of mechanical errors. However, the nature of deafness may have some impact on the kinds of grammatical tasks suggested for deaf students. In general, in selecting the errors to be addressed, the instructor should mainly focus on those errors that cross sentence boundaries. These might include run-on sentences, verb tense consistency, and agreement in number.

A second class of errors that make good candidates for a revision agenda are those involving subordination and coordination, because errors in this area influence the logical relation of the text.

However, no technique, no method of eliminating mechanical errors will work until students regard it as both process and product.

Moreover, we should keep in mind that excessive emphasis on grammatical decision can bring benefits to no one. Furthermore, despite their efforts, many hearing impaired students, in particular deaf students will never exhibit the command of English that hearing students do. Their vocabulary and syntax will continue to differ from that found in textbooks. Therefore, it is far more important for hearing impaired students to be more concerned with meaning than it is for them to worry only about mechanical errors.

Many years ago, George Polya, appealing to instructors of mathematics, provided his readers with two rules for teaching. He wrote:

“The first rule of teaching is to know what you are supposed to teach.

The second rule of teaching is to know a little more than what you are supposed to teach”. (1945:172)

Knowing what one is to teach involves *whom* one is going to teach, their skills and strengths, their abilities and differences. Contemporary instructors, therefore, will need to know a great deal if they are to know what they are supposed to teach. “They will need to know how language is practised by the core population (native English speakers) and special population (the hearing impaired). They will need to know methodologies that allow hearing impaired group to reach their potential and they will need to know how to isolate for instruction linguistic aspects of texts. In all these areas a linguistically-based pedagogy can help.

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