

OPPORTUNITIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO DEAF STUDENTS: THE USE OF DIGITAL MATERIALS AND HUNGARIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

© Lilian PRECSKÓ
(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary)

precsko.lilian@gmail.com

Received: 01.07.2013; Accepted: 19.12.2013; Published online: 07.07.2014

There are only a few studies dealing with teaching English as a foreign language to Deaf learners, and the number of such studies regarding Hungarian issues is even lower. Due to the lack of methodology on this field and the high need for English teachers of Deaf learners, I decided to conduct a pilot study investigating the opportunities in teaching English to Deaf learners. The aims of this work are 1) to discover new ways of successfully involving Hungarian Sign Language use in teaching English as a foreign language and 2) investigate the possible use of different digital tools which could facilitate the learning process. Relying on my literature review and the observations I made in a school for the Deaf, a pilot English course has been designed for two Deaf sign language teachers. After conducting interviews with the participants at the end of the course and evaluating the reflective journal which documented the teaching experience, it was possible to draw the final conclusions, namely that digital material made it possible to use a high number of visual materials, which helped Deaf students' comprehension. The use of sign language in class seemed to be a problematic area as the participants of the pilot study did not share the same views, although, it has been proved that a visual language could help Deaf learners to memorise words more easily.

Keywords: Deaf education, EFL, digital materials, ICT, sign language

Hungarian Sign Language (HSL) has been finally recognised as an official language in Hungary in 2009, and as a consequence, HSL is slowly arising from the results of the detachment and silence of the past. However, teaching English to Deaf learners is still a field to be discovered and developed. Due to these reasons, I decided to explore the opportunities lying in teaching English to Deaf students.

This paper aims to present a qualitative research which has been carried out to compensate for the lack of methodology for teaching English to Deaf students. The pilot study presented in this work also strived for providing a realistic presentation of the possibilities and hidden opportunities in teaching English to Deaf students. After a brief review of the existing literature, the

method and results of the research will be discussed. The focus of research was determined by the following research questions: 1. How is it possible to incorporate sign language as the language of instruction in a Deaf EFL classroom? 2. In what ways does the use of digital materials facilitate the learning process of Deaf learners?

Literature Review

Teaching the Deaf in Hungary

Sign languages are natural languages as it has been proved by Stokoe, who, as a linguist researcher, achieved outstanding results in investigating American Sign Language (ASL) (Marschark & Spencer, 2003). Accordingly, it is obvious that sign language users should possess equal rights as the users of other languages. As the primary channel of communication and information is the visual channel for Deaf people, it can be said that sign languages, which are visually based languages, satisfy the needs of Deaf people the most. Therefore, sign language can be considered as the preferred language or L1 of Deaf people.

The consequence of the 1880 International Congress of Milan, which proclaimed the use of the German Oral Method, is still significant in present-day Hungarian education of Deaf students. The method was introduced by Samuel Heinicke and aimed to teach Deaf children speak in order to achieve total integration into the hearing society (Bartha, Hattyár & Szabó, 2006; Stewart & Akamatsu, 1988). Applying the Oral Method meant teaching the majority language in its spoken form to Deaf children. As the language of instruction was the spoken language, all form of sign language was forbidden in schools (Bartha, 2005). Deafness was considered as a “clinical problem based on the lack of hearing”, therefore, in order to cure this problem, children had to acquire lip reading skills and struggle with learning the pronunciation of a language which was audibly inaccessible for them (Bartha, 2005:214). According to the followers of the Oral Method, the use of sign language hinders the acquisition of a spoken language (Bartha, 2005). As a consequence, sign language was banned from Hungarian schools for more than a century.

There has been a slight change in the status of Hungarian Sign Language in the last few years. Act CXXV, which finally recognized HSL as an official language in Hungary was passed by the Hungarian Parliament in 2009. The act also states that the ‘bilingual educational method’ shall be introduced, which creates a need for teachers of foreign languages who can sign and are able to apply HSL in their teaching. There is a serious lack of signing English teachers and teachers in general who have special education and teaching qualifications.

Searching for literature on foreign language teaching to Deaf students, I had to realise this field has not been fully discovered and discussed yet. There is no designed and elaborated methodology for teachers who want to teach English to Deaf people. Based on the studies and articles offering methodological tips I would like to provide a brief summary of the existing literature on how to teach English to Deaf students.

Use of Sign Language

In a mainstream classroom Deaf learners have to rely on lipreading, which means that only 40% of information is accessible for them. As the result of the oralist approach, Deaf students have poor vocabulary in Hungarian and they have major difficulties with understanding Hungarian texts (Kárpáti, 2002; Merics, 2010). Providing instruction in HSL could not only assure full comprehension of information, but combining English words with signs in HSL and also providing the Hungarian translation could develop the Hungarian vocabulary of Deaf students as well (Kárpáti, 2002). According to Kárpáti, beyond building students' Hungarian and English vocabulary, HSL also facilitates a better memorisation and comprehension; or as she says: "[words] stick into their minds better" (Kárpáti, 2002:51). Results of a pilot study carried out by Padden and Ramsey proved that there is a connection between sign language proficiency and spoken language proficiency; in the study they researched the connection between ASL and English. The study showed that students who had the opportunity to master ASL either from their parents or at school, had better writing skills in English. Therefore, the suggestion that using HSL would inhibit Deaf students from achieving mastery in Hungarian lacks research support. Csányi (1993) states those that Deaf people whose mother tongue is Hungarian Sign Language are bilingual, as they use HSL and Hungarian simultaneously. Researchers of Deaf education agree on that introducing bilingual education in schools for the Deaf would be beneficial and would serve as a solution for the problems caused by language planning and linguistic discrimination.

Visuals

For Deaf people the main channel for receiving information is the visual one. Sign languages are also based on visual and gestual perception, which means that the aural and oral channels are blocked or neglected hence, Dotter (2008) states that all the information should be presented visually. The results implicate that visual materials are extremely important in teaching Deaf students and that their exceptional skills should be involved as an aid in their learning process. In other words, building on the visual abilities of Deaf students can allow us to explore a palette of visually-based tasks. An exciting opportunity arose at a class I observed in one of the 7 Hungarian Schools for the Deaf. The teacher gave the word 'danger' as a synonym for hazard and one of the students said that she had seen the word on a street sign once. This instance also justifies that visual representations help students to learn and memorize words easier. Teachers could assist comprehension by providing visual illustrations of the meaning of the words; a task can be improved by using realia, such as pictures of street signs and warning signs. Another opportunity lies in colour coding; colours stimulate students' visual channel and facilitate memorising.

ICT in the classroom

The use of the interactive white board (IWB) or other tools of information and communication technology (ICT) does not only offer the above mentioned advantages of an OHP but provides further benefits and possibilities. *Khwaldeh, Matar and Hunaiti* (2007) highlight the possible beneficial effect of the use of ICT tools on the learning process of Deaf students. According to them, ICT can improve teacher-student interaction which is essential for a successful learning progress. *Dotter* (2008), referring to *Hilzensauer*, states that information and communication technologies facilitate Deaf students to reach educational goals. *Carter* adds that the use of IWB increases students' self-esteem and pride which might motivate the students to accept a more active role in a lesson (as cited in the *SMART* (2006) white paper). Research by *Miller and colleagues* (2005) proved that IWB helps students to overcome the possible distractions and keeps them focus during a whole lesson. In conclusion, the use of IWB can be a helpful tool to activate students and also to provide Deaf students with visual and kinaesthetic experience, too.

Method

Due to the nature of my research questions, qualitative research instruments have been selected in order to gain richer and more detailed information. In the following I would like to list the applied instruments and provide reasons for selecting them.

After exploring the theoretical background, the next step in my research design was to find and analyse the existing teaching materials. Despite the fact that there are some English teaching materials for Deaf students, there are no materials especially designed for Hungarian Deaf learners of English, as the market for these special teaching materials is extremely narrow. There are excellent projects for speakers of other languages, like German, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, Greek and Dutch, but there is an urgent need for Hungarian materials. As in the title of *Dotter's* work, we have to conclude on that teaching English to Hungarian Deaf learners is still a challenge.

There are some ICT materials, however, which should be analysed in order to receive some kind of guidance for creating similar materials for Hungarian Deaf people in the future. *Dotter* (2008) mentions a project launched for users of ASL; the *HandsOn* project, which is an interactive teaching material. *HandsOn* is a digital platform which offers activities to develop reading and writing skills in English. The user can see a story in ASL which is also available in English. *HandsOn* is designed for Deaf people who are proficient in ASL and want to improve their English. *Promotics* is also a multimedia product designed for the spoken and also written form of several languages, such as English, French, German, Italian and Spanish (*Dotter*, 2008). What is essentially new in this project is that it focuses on developing communicational skills and the language level of the materials corresponds to the CEFR. The aim of the project was to develop communicative, social and intercultural skills of the learners. *Dotter* (2008) also gives an account of an EU-project, called *SMILE* (Sign Language and Multimedia Based Interactive Language Course for Deaf for the Training of European Written Language).

The other project, *SignOn!*, designed for teaching English as a foreign language to Deaf learners. The *SignOn!* Multimodal language tool aims to teach written English in a visual, interactive way. In the same volume,

another project is presented, as well; *Van Den Bogaerde* (2008) describes The Dedalos Project, which is an online course for Deaf learners of written English. The materials presented in the project are very similar to modern language teaching materials. The material contains gap filling exercises and uses pictures to help comprehension.

As part of my study I decided to gain first hand experience of what is happening in Deaf schools regarding foreign language education. I had the opportunity to visit one of the seven Hungarian Schools for the Deaf. The focus of my observation was teacher-students interactions and communication in the classroom in general. After analysing my lesson observations, the difficult situation of teaching Deaf students became clear for me. It was edifying to experience in real life what I have only read previously in *Muzsnai's* (1999) reports. I observed several difficulties during the lesson. The main obstacle was the language barrier between the teacher and her students. As the English teacher did not sign, the language of instruction was spoken Hungarian. She used the board to provide written Hungarian explanation and she also wrote the tasks on the board. She mainly spoke in Hungarian and when she used English words, she wrote them on the board and she also wrote them down phonetically.

The pilot plan

As there is a lack of official methodology for teaching English to Deaf learners I have decided to design a 20-hour English course specifically for 2 Deaf Sign Language teachers. After finishing the analysis of my observations, I chose to make use of two possibilities I noticed during my observations. One of them was the use of sign language and the other one was the application of digital materials in class. My aim was to investigate whether these focus areas have a beneficial or facilitating effect on the learning process and with what techniques can they be integrated into the lessons. In the following I would like to present the details of my experimental teaching I decided to carry out.

To document the results of my study I decided to lead a reflective journal throughout the pilot teaching. After each lesson I spent time on evaluating the lesson and the feedback I received from my students. A reflective journal helped me to keep a distance from the perspective of the teacher and allowed me to analyse my experiences as a researcher, as well. As the final note to my study I have done an interview with my students respectively, which was essential to gain a closer view of the personal experience of my students.

Participants

The participants of the pilot study were two HSL teachers. Both of them are profoundly Deaf bilinguals. They lead HSL courses at the university I am currently studying at, so when they found out that there is a free opportunity to learn English, they applied for the course. In the following I would like to introduce my students individually. Throughout this paper I am using pseudonyms when I mention my students to respect their personal rights. At the beginning, of the course, I carried out an informal needs analysis with both of my students and at the end of the course they also agreed to give an interview. Most of the information I share about them is either from the needs analysis or the interviews. The interviews were held in HSL with the help of an interpreter. I asked the questions in Hungarian which were interpreted into HSL. In my paper the quoted extracts from the interviews

are translated to English, which means that the answers of the participants have been translated in two steps. Hence, a deep, linguistic analysis of the transcript is almost impossible.

Anna is in her late thirties, member of a multigenerational Deaf family, which means that her mother tongue is HSL which she learned from her parents. She works and teaches HSL at SINOSZ, the Hungarian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Anna shared her English learning history with the following words:

When was the first round when I started learning English? I was around 16. It was a coincidence, the neighbour was a special education teacher and I asked her to teach me English. Then, a half a year later I gave up, I got bored with the whole thing. Then later on, not long ago, in the summer I started learning again. It was good to start again, and it turned out that I know a lot of words and I remember a lot (interview with Anna).

Anna's main motivation for learning English was that she has travelled to several countries and she felt frustrated when she had to "communicate with hands and feet" as she said in the interview. She said she would mainly use English at work, rather than in her private life. *"In the summer I restarted learning English because I have a position at SINOSZ, so I thought it would be good if I could speak English a little"* (interview with Anna).

Cecília is in her fifties and also teaches Hungarian Sign Language at SINOSZ. She comes from a hearing family, therefore, she had to learn HSL at school from peers. She had no foreign language learning experience when the course started. Cecília's interest in learning English is manifested in rather personal goals, and as a consequence, in the needs analysis she expressed no special requests regarding any topic.

Although Anna regarded herself as a beginner, knowing her learning history and seeing her performance in the lessons it turned about she is a so called 'false beginner' being closer to an A2 level, while Cecília was a real beginner with no foreign language learning experience. The fact that the two students were on different levels made the process of materials design more difficult.

Results: Sign language in the classroom – HSL

HSL is the first or preferred language of Hungarian Deaf people (Hattyár, 2008), choosing sign language to be the medium of instruction in my course was crucial. Three languages were constantly present during the lessons: HSL, Hungarian for taking notes and written English. In the presentation phase, the new written English words were illustrated with pictures, and then I gave the sign equivalent in HSL, and I also provided the Hungarian written form on the board. Preparing for the lessons took twice as long as for an average lesson, as I had to look up all the words I would use in the lesson in HSL. I was quite concerned because of my basic signing ability, therefore I included a question in the interview which referred to the statement that some people say that only those teachers should teach English to Deaf people, who sign at least at a B2 level. The answers to my question were quite interesting and promising, as one of the interviewees disagreed with the statement, the other was also hesitant. When I asked Cecília if she had encountered any problems regarding communicating with me in HSL, she said:

No, there wasn't any problem. I do not demand that the teacher should sign at a proficient level. I learn English at a basic level, you also sign at a

basic level, that was fair enough.(...) It depends on the teacher whether she or he can teach or not (interview with Cecília).

When I asked her whether a teacher should only teach Deaf students if he or she can sign at a proficient level, she said:

Well, it depends on the group. Let's say Cecília and I are at the same level, or we would be in a group at the same level, it would not be necessary [for the teacher] to be at a proficient level, although teaching a person with lower competences [than the interviewee], it might be necessary. Well, you have to consider whether the person has taken the final examination or not, it might be different, too (interview with Anna).

What Anna said confirmed Muzsnai's (1999) reports and my observations. Some teachers have to face the difficulties of a communication barrier and they should be prepared to communicate with their students in the students' L1. It is important to note that both of my students are highly educated teachers, who work with hearing people; therefore they have exceptionally good communication skills. Therefore, this study is not a representative one; I have only access to a limited slice of the truth about the foreign language learning of Deaf people. Although, it is inevitable, that sign language should have an important place in the lesson.

Teaching materials

Visuals

As it has been discussed in the literature review of this paper, the use of visuals in teaching Deaf students is essential. The interactive whiteboard (IWB) offered a wide palette for the different uses of visuals and pictures. As I mentioned previously, I designed materials in a notebook file for every lesson, which meant that we used the IWB at each occasion. Adding pictures to a material allows the teacher to add a personal touch to the lessons. For example, in the lesson when the topic was introducing ourselves, I brought in some pictures of famous Deaf people. Pictures in an average classroom might raise interest and make the lesson more colourful, however, using visuals with the written form of the words in a group of Deaf students would facilitate comprehension as *Cordero-Martínez* (1995) and *Dotter* (2008) also point out.

Using pictures could also help the teacher to mineralise the number of languages used during the lesson. If only the English equivalent and the picture are presented on the board, it is enough for Deaf students, because the visual channel provides an immediate connection to the meaning for them. Creating such connections results in solid memorisation and immediate, confident answers. Throughout the course I applied several types of activities with pictures. The most typical use of pictures was, of course, the presentation of new vocabulary, as it has been mentioned. My students also enjoyed matching parts of a dialogue with illustrating pictures. In the interview *Cecília* summarised and explained the benefits of using visuals in class:

"The IWB was really good, because I could see things visually. This is really good for Deaf people, we process visual input much faster. Very good... So with the help of it it is much easier to learn, than without a board and paper. I would be lost...Such a lesson would be boring and dry. This way it is more interactive." (interview with *Cecília*).

As Cecília highlighted, the use of interactive materials turned out to be excellent tools for me as a teacher. As I was only a basic user of HSL, I relied a lot on visual materials. In the following I would like to share the digital resources I found useful.

Providing a printed outcome after each lesson helped my students to revise at home and it also made them realise how much they know. So as the pile of handouts grew they could have a sense of development. Handouts had an important role in the lessons. They did not only function as an aid for homework revision, but they also assisted classroom work. For example, near the pictures I usually left a generous margin for notes and I also included exercises for practising the presented language.

Digital materials

One of the congenial online resources I found was Quizlet, which is a webpage designed especially for learning purposes. After a simple registration a teacher can start a virtual classroom where it is possible to create and share vocabulary 'sets', which are collections of words and expressions. Creating a classroom is also great, because this way the teacher can monitor the development of students as this option has a section which contains all the reports on who used the particular vocabulary set and what score that student achieved. I created a classroom for my students and added some vocabulary sets for them to practice. I chose Quizlet for at home revision, because this website allowed me to create printable flashcards with connecting the English written form with a picture. This way I provided my students with a lasting handout, a virtual vocabulary collection. One of the problematic points for my students was taking notes, because they could only do it in Hungarian. But with this site they were provided with visual notes. Cecília might not have had the opportunity to sit down at home after the lessons and spent time with exploring the website, but for whatever reasons she did not spend much time on the website. (I could see it as a teacher with the help of the reports). On the contrary, Anna absolutely enjoyed playing with the games at the site. As I see from the records, she would practise until she would get maximum scores. It was a nice feeling to know that I could recommend a source which is enjoyable for my student and beneficial at the same time. Anna told me in the interview that she found Quizlet useful, because "*it helped a lot with memorisation and learning, which is important*".

When teaching Deaf students one might assume that speaking exercises should be excluded. However, with the help of my other favourite site, »dvolver.com«, it became possible for us to substitute speaking exercises with a communicative writing exercise. I find it important, because although Deaf learners might not communicate in speaking, they still might chat or write in English. Therefore, I was absolutely excited when I found »Dvolver«, which allowed me to create a short video cartoon with the sentences of my choice. Anna's opinion on the program was the following:

I absolutely liked that. It was playful. It was a dialogue, you had to write in sentences like 'What is your name?' 'How are you?' I really like that it was working that way. It was really kinetic, it was good.

Cecília also found it useful:

I think it is a good way of practising dialogues, you know, it happened in writing actually. We practised this way with Anna. It was my turn, then her turn and so on. We had to think, write in the sentences, so it was effective (interview with Cecília).

This writing exercise was not only developing writing skills, but also communication skills, as the exercise required creativity and spontaneity which, according to *Canale* (1983) are key elements of communication. This activity also satisfies *Swanwick's* (1996) suggestion to exploit the opportunities lying in written online communication.

The IWB

As it has been already mentioned in the literature review, *Khwaldeh, Matar and Hunaiti* (2007), and *Dotter* (2008) found the use of IWB beneficial. The IWB I was working with had the SMART Notebook software which was an advantage, because from the website »www.exchange.smarttech.com«, which is the SMART market for teaching materials for IWB, I could download pictures of sign language hand shapes which I could use for example with illustrating connections between ASL and English. The notebook software allowed me to create interactive, colourful visual aids that my students appreciated a lot. Anna enjoyed working with the IWB as she also uses it in teaching HSL:

I really like the IWB...the technology of today's world, that's good. [...] I remember that there were pictures plus written texts, cities, for example I don't know Moscow or Paris...and there is the, of course, of Paris and it was written in English that 'Paris' and you had to match the pictures with the texts (interview with Anna).

Cecília on the other hand was not familiar with the IWB, but she also found it useful:

I have never seen one before, it was really sensitive, interesting. It was good, the whole thing is much quicker, I just touch it, move it, put it there, click there, you don't need to clean the board. I just push it, disappears and it's done (interview with Cecilia).

Both of my students found working with the IWB a great experience, they were as enthusiastic as little children when they worked with the board. Their evident excitement was captured in the video and pictures taken during class. Using the IWB was facilitating because it a visual aid, but as it has been mentioned my students needed written copies of the material which they could take home.

Difficulties

Although we did not encounter disturbing communicational problems, there were some factors which made the teaching process a bit more challenging. The first surprise hit me in one of the first lessons when I prepared with a silly joke practising the negation of verb be. There was a picture of a pouting girl and another one of Donald Duck and the joke was based on the fact that I expected that my students would know Donald Duck, however they were not familiar with the cartoon. So the activity did not turn out to be funny, rather awkward. The reason behind this phenomenon might be that Deaf and hearing people receive information through different channels, the focus of their attention lies on different things. As pop culture and television broadcast information via the auditive channel, Deaf children can only access the visual representation. Therefore, as a consequence, there is only a limited shared segment in the common knowledge of Deaf and hearing people that teachers can rely on in designing materials.

Even *Cawthorn and Chambers* (1993) list in their advice regarding teaching Deaf students that the teacher should “*assume that the deaf pupil knows nothing; what is common knowledge to hearing pupils cannot permeate to the deaf world so readily*” (Cawthorn and Chambers, 1993:49). I experienced the same on a different occasion when among famous Deaf people I also showed the picture of famous film stars, such as Selma Hayek or Nicole Kidman. However, my students did not recognise them.

The students also encountered other unexpected difficulties. Cecília highlighted in the interview that the syntactic differences between Hungarian and English caused the greatest problem for her.

It is interesting that Anna also said that the most problematic point was connected to syntax. She reported that “in the last lesson, we learned about longer, more complex sentences. ‘What is in my bag?’ and so on. At that point, that was too long for me. My students also related ed that being at different levels also caused them some difficulty, however, for example Cecília, who, being an absolute beginner, was at a lower level than Anna, said that learning with Anna was facilitating and motivating for her. Anna on the other hand felt slightly frustrated due to the situation. The age difference made the difference in proficiency more evident. It was quite common that the pace of the lesson slowed down because I had to explain a certain expression or grammatical structure to Cecília more than once or in more detail, which was already clear for Anna. For those occasions I usually brought her extra material, like an exercise sheet or crosswords.

A mutual learning experience

I would like to claim that this pilot course I carried out in the summer of 2012 was a mutual learning experience for my students and me. First of all, I developed a lot language wise, as my students were HSL teachers; hence, during the lessons if I was unsure about certain expressions or words, I could ask them to help me. As this experimental teaching was my first real teaching experience in a group, I have developed and gained a lot.

Throughout the pilot teaching I was writing a reflective journal, which meant that after each lesson I spent time on evaluating the lesson regarding what worked and what was less successful in the lesson. This reflective journal helped me to look at the teaching experience from an outside perspective, which was essential being the researcher and the teacher at the same time. It helped me to realise my weaknesses and highlighted the areas I should work on. The journal was also beneficial because looking through the past lessons and experiences I gained confidence and it also helped me to evaluate my work objectively. For instance, although I considered the occasion when I had to realise that what is common knowledge for me might not be common knowledge for Deaf people a failure, later it was a basis to build on. Having the opportunity to reflect on my experience made it possible to gain a constructive, a more innovative perspective.

Discussion

The focus areas of my pilot study were the use of digital materials and sign language in my lessons. Reading back the reflective journal and evaluating the teaching experience I consider choosing these focus areas a great decision, because I gained a lot from this pilot study. After analysing the interviews I did with my students and evaluating the teaching process I had to realise that some of my assumptions were wrong in some cases.

After analysing the interviews carried out with my students, it can be stated that although, the HSL was facilitative of the learning process, even in a small group such the one participating in this pilot study the opinions on the advantages of using the learners' L1 in the classroom differed. On the other hand, as Anna highlighted in her interview, choosing the right tools and deciding on the language of instruction highly depend on the group. As it has been mentioned my students are well-educated adults, which entailed that they did not represent the average Deaf learners. Cecília shared her thoughts on the use of sign language in class during the interview, and it turned out she would appreciate the help of creating connections between signs in ASL and the written form of English. It can be the objective of a further study to investigate the beneficial effect of using ASL in teaching English to Hungarian Deaf students.

The point where both of my students agreed on was the use of ICT tools: the interactive whiteboard and online materials. The participants reported that the visual materials helped the comprehension process and that they absolutely enjoyed that the IWB made the lesson more playful, interactive and kinetic. Taking the difficulties of teaching Deaf learners into consideration, the problem of communication barriers could be overcome with the help of visuals and pictures, as they constitute a common channel for Deaf and hearing people. It is highly important to consider the suggestion made by Muzsnai (1999), to concentrate on those abilities of Deaf learners that could be developed.

Possible application of study results

It is important to note that the techniques and tools I used for this pilot course are completely applicable for courses designed for hearing students. Such a visually focused course can be excellent for a group of visual learners. The results and designed materials of this pilot study could serve as a basis for a future course for Deaf learners. All the digital material and ICT tools presented in this paper might be applicable to any English course. Considering Hungarian Deaf learners of English I would highlight the opportunities offered by the online platform Dvolver, which proved to be especially useful for substituting speaking exercises with real time communicative writing exercises.

The diversity of student beliefs and learning styles has been shown in this paper and therefore, I am completely aware of the fact that my course is unable to serve the needs of all Deaf people. However, considering the high need for English materials specifically designed for Hungarian Deaf people and the lack of these materials, this study could be accepted as a first step toward a larger future study. We are in the fortunate situation that there is a programme for Hungarian Sign Language at our university. Recently, a small project team of future English teachers and Hungarian Sign Language students started to plan a possible cooperation project. It would be great to find the possibility for English teachers and Hungarian Sign Language teachers and researchers to work together in order to develop learning materials for Deaf students. Although this field is still not discovered to its full potential, joining the different kinds of experience and knowledge could lead to the solution.

Conclusion and further research

It has been proved in this pilot study that only a small effort is able to make a change. The shocking realisation of the lack of materials and practice regarding teaching English to Deaf learners led me to decide to start this pilot study.

After researching for the existing literature and materials I decided to have a closer look at what happens in schools in reality, and observed some classes in one of the Hungarian Schools for the Deaf. Analysing my observations I had the opportunity to see the difficulties described in the literature being affirmed in real life. Experiencing the challenging situation of Deaf education I was determined to try out the literature suggested approaches and techniques in a Hungarian context. Although some difficulties occurred, and sometimes it was challenging to plan the course, learn to sign and create an interactive material for each lesson, I am absolutely positive in that this pilot course has been the teaching experience of my life so far.

In conclusion, there are several fields of teaching English to Deaf students which have to be developed and a number of problems and challenges remain. However, it is of paramount importance to realize hidden opportunities and discover strengths and skills we can build on. There are exciting and brilliant treasures in teaching Deaf students which are waiting for future teachers.

References

- Act CXXV of 2009 on Hungarian Sign Language and the use of Hungarian Sign Language* (2009).
- BARTHA, Cs. (2005). Language Ideologies, Discriminatory Practices and the Deaf Community in Hungary. In: Cohen, J., McAlister, K., Rolstad, K., & MacSwan, J. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism*, (pp. 210–222). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
- BARTHA, Cs., HATTYÁR, H., & SZABÓ, M. H. (2006). A magyarországi siketek közössége és a magyarországi jelnyelv. In Kiefer Ferenc (Ed.), *A magyar nyelv* (pp. 852-906). Budapest: Akadémiai.
- BOGAERDE, B. van den (2008). The *Dedalos* project: e-learning of English as a foreign language for Deaf learners of sign language. In Kellett Bidoli, C. J., & Ochse, E. (Eds.), *English in international deaf communication* (pp. 193-209). Bern: Peter Lang.
- CANALE, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. W. (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 2-27). Harlow: Longman.
- CAWTHORNE, I., & CHAMBERS, G. (1993). The special needs of the deaf foreign language learner, *Language Learning Journal*, 7, 47-49.
- CORDERO-MARTINEZ, F. (1995). A visual-spatial approach to ESL in a bilingual program with Deaf international students. *The Bilingual Research Journal*, 19 (3-4), 469-482.
- CSÁNYI, Y. (Ed.) (1993). *Bevezetés a hallássérültek pedagógiájába*. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó.
- DOTTER, F. (2008). English for Deaf sign language users: Still a challenge. In Kellett Bidoli, C. J., & Ochse, E., (Eds.), *English in international deaf communication* (pp. 97-121). Bern: Peter Lang.
- HATTYÁR, H. (2008). *A magyarországi siketek nyelvelsajátításának és nyelvhasználatának szociolingvisztikai vizsgálata*. [Unpublished Doctoral thesis.] Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem.
- GOSS, B. (2003). Hearing from the Deaf Culture. *Intercultural Communication*, 12 (2). [1-17.]

- KÁRPÁTI, D. M. (2002). *Teaching English as a foreign language to deaf learners*. [Unpublished Doctoral thesis.] Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem.
- KELLETT BIDOLI, C. J., & OCHESE, E. (2008). Introduction. In Kellett Bidoli, C. J., & Ochse, E. (Eds.), *English in international deaf communication* (pp. 9-34). Bern: Peter Lang.
- KHWALDEH, S., MATAR, N., & HUNAITI, Z. (2007). Interactivity in Deaf Classroom Using Centralised E-learning System in Jordan. *PGNet Liverpool John Moores University*, (8). Retrieved from <http://www.cms.livjm.ac.uk/pgnet2007/Proceedings/Papers/2007-032.pdf> [05.03.2012]
- MARSCHMARK, M., & SPENCER, P. E. (Eds.) (2003). *Oxford handbook of deaf studies, language, and education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MERICUS, B. (2010). *The need for special educational materials for deaf EFL learners*. [Unpublished Doctoral thesis.] Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem.
- MILLER, D., AVERIS, D., DOOR, V., & GLOVER, D. (2005). How Can the Use of an Interactive Whiteboard Enhance the Nature of Teaching & Learning in Secondary Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages? *Becta ICT Research Bursary, 2003-04, Final Report*. Retrieved from www.becta.org.uk/page_documents/research/bursaries05/interactive_whiteboard.pdf [10.03.2012]
- MUZSNAI, I. (1999). The Recognition of Sign Language: A Threat or a Way to Solution? In Kontra, M., Phillipson, R., Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Várady, T. (Eds.), *Language: A Right and a Resource. Approaching Linguistic Human Rights* (pp. 279-296). Budapest: CEU Press.
- SMART Technologies Inc. (2006). *Interactive whiteboards and learning. Improving student learning outcomes and streamlining lesson planning. White paper*. Retrieved from http://downloads01.smarttech.com/media/research/whitepapers/int_whiteboard_research_whitepaper_update.pdf [01/03/2012]
- STEWART, D. A., & AKAMATSU, C. T. (1988). The Coming of Age of American Sign Language. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 19 (3). 235-252.
- SWANWICK, R. (1996). Deaf children's strategies for learning English – how do they do it? In Knight, P., & Swanwick, R. (Eds.), *Bilingualism and the Education of Deaf Children*. Leeds: University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000304.htm> [19.12.2012]