

Sign language as a mediator in multilingual education environments for deaf people

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There is a pan-European problem in addressing deaf people's need of literacy in the national language. Many deaf adults are not capable to read a simple journal article or write an email in a correct written form. Another main issue is also the existence of cultural barriers dividing hearing people from deaf communities. This problem obviously extends to learning foreign languages.

Most researches says that deaf people learns their national language as a second language. Therefore there is a possibility to develop new methodologies in teaching the national and foreign language as an adaptation to target (deaf people) of existing approaches in foreign language education.

In considering the need of multilingual competences in European young people, there is also the need to consider the special needs of people with disabilities and specifically deaf people. This is particularly important in the light of the European Union's "SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN EUROPE. THE TEACHING & LEARNING OF LANGUAGES" published in 2005 and outlining the special role of sign languages in the education of people with hearing disabilities.

Our contribution aims to introduce a bilingual/bimodal approach to language teaching making a heavy use of sign language as a mediator and regulator. We have proven that the use of sign language, based on specific protocols that will be outlined in the paper, is functional to the development of deaf people's linguistic competences. Our data comes from specific teaching experiences gathered in both real classes and e-learning environments (DEAL project, www.deal-leonardo.eu). DEAL project has created educational paths for the insertion of foreign language in an enterprise environment keeping in great consideration the specific cultural environment of deaf learners. (deaf culture)

The application of methodologies inspired by the lexical approach (Lewis Michael, Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theory into Practice, 1997) and enriched using sign language as a mediator in educational communication has produced an evident increase and amelioration in learners competences in the national and foreign written language, and consequently a higher integration with the local hearing community.

Areas of the conference that fits our proposal.

- Language Awareness and Literacy Development in Language Learning and Teaching
- Language Awareness in Language Learning and Language Teaching in multilingual and multicultural contexts
- Language Awareness and Professional Literacy Development

Keywords: deafness, multilingual education, lexical approach, sign language, cultural integration.