

The CEFR and Deafness: Redefining the Can-Do Approach to Language Competence

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Abstract

Language learning by deaf people is strongly influenced by the way in which language is conveyed through the visual channel and the amount of access made possible to the learner. This is the case for both deaf users of sign language and oral deaf people. The CEFR was designed to evaluate European language competences, but it proves unsuitable for deaf people using different channels to access language. Instead of supporting “Can-Do” abilities, the CEFR inadvertently supports a deficit perspective on (in)abilities. Work within the Italian-funded VISEL project resulted in preliminary language descriptors focusing on academic language skills of Italian deaf students. This study considered the CEFR from the point of view of deaf learners and their educators in distance learning situations with a focus on visual access to information.

Key words: Deafness, Can-Do descriptors, CEFR, language competence, language portfolio, literacy development, accessibility, distance learning, e-learning.

1. Introduction

Deaf¹ learners, especially those who lose their hearing before the third year of age (prelingually deafened), access verbal language in a different way compared to their hearing peers (Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002; Grushkin, 1998). Exposure to spoken language is done in a formal rehabilitation context, and most of it is conveyed using visual support to learning.

However, most educational systems and methodologies base their structure on the oral transmission of content and concepts. This also extends to assessment and evaluation, which are often given in a way that follows spoken language structures and rules, making it hard for the learner to fully understand them receptively, and for teachers to properly assess their students. One of the first consequences of this situation is the difficulty for the teachers to fully respond to their students' needs, and for many deaf learners to gain full literacy skills upon completion of compulsory schooling.

The issue of language evaluation of deaf learners remains problematic when taking into consideration the various communication needs and habits of deaf people, and the variation in existing abilities when they enter the academic environment. The consequences of the lack of appropriate guidelines to describe linguistic skills of the deaf are reflected in both the educational and professional domains. In the field of education, teachers of the deaf are required to adapt their methods to national standards, which often do not consider the unique learning and communication needs of their students. In the professional environment,

¹ Note on terminology: in this paper we use the term "deaf" to refer to all deaf people, regardless of their level of hearing loss, age of loss, their preferred mode of communication and membership in a Deaf Community.

potential employers, often facing deafness for the first time, lack the tools to accurately and efficiently evaluate the capabilities of their candidate, the result of which is often an inaccurate measurement of the vocational skills of the deaf job applicant, based on their language skills rather than their vocational skills. Furthermore, deaf people have no way of accurately self-evaluating their language competences, with the important consequence of a general uncertainty on which strategies to use to improve their literacy and where to focus their efforts in the obtainment of higher and diverse linguistic skills necessary to achieve personal and occupational goals.

The Vision, Deafness, Signs and E-Learning project (VISEL, code RBNE074T5L), funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, was created with the goal of providing adult deaf Italians with materials for improving their academic literacy skills in the Italian language. Considering the lack of guidelines in Italy for measuring language competences of deaf learners designed for use by teachers and developers of didactic materials, the Council of Europe's (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth, CEFR) has proven to be a valuable model for the assessment of "Can-Do" abilities instead of taking a deficit approach for gauging language abilities.

Conducting research on the CEFR and its applications to deaf learners, the EU project Deaf Port (LLP, 2008-2010, <http://www.deafport.eu/EN/>) was examined as a possible guideline for the target audience of the VISEL project. Deaf Port focused on the development of a specific European Language Portfolio for deaf learners, also measuring competences in the spoken language. However, further analysis and study is needed to understand the approach of the project consortium in describing the capacities of deaf learners in the use of spoken

language, in both production (speaking) and reception (listening). Two other points that we consider important to analyze is the amount of attention focused on other ways to convey meaning of spoken language through the visual channel (i.e. sign language, subtitles, etc.) as well as consideration of the particular uses of the written language by deaf people.

In this paper, we will provide an introduction to the difficulties in evaluating literacy competences in deaf adults and the problems tied to the use of the CEFR as a reference text. We will explain the work done within the VISEL project, in which we confronted the guidelines contained in the CEFR for the description of language behaviors and as an assessment tool for deaf language learners, generating examples of guidelines that would benefit deaf students – regardless of their communication mode. In this way, we aim to retain the “Can-Do” approach of the CEFR while keeping in mind the communication needs and usages of deaf language users.

2. Literacy competences in deaf learners: a measuring problem

A review of literature on deafness in Italy (Caselli, Maragna, & Volterra, 2006; Fabbretti & Tomasuolo, 2006) and at the international level (for example: Marschark, et al., 2009; Gregory, 1996) has widely shown that prelingual deaf children encounter serious challenges in the acquisition of the national spoken language, not only for that concerning speech and hearing rehabilitation through the use of hearing support, but also for that concerning mastery of the written language in both the grammatical and lexical dimensions.

The literacy level in prelingual deaf people (including adults) often reaches a level comparable to that of children aged 10-13 (Leeson, 2006)². Within the VISEL project, preliminary assessment of 15 deaf teenagers aged 15-19 showed language competencies below the B1 level in written text comprehension based on the descriptions of the CEFR reading and writing competences (La Grassa, 2011). Most universities have a requisite of language competence of at least level B2 of the CEFR in order for students to successfully comprehend academic materials, thus confirming the difficulties of these deaf people to access higher education.

Considering that the written language pertains to the visual domain, literacy problems in deaf learners could appear as a contradiction. The debate on this issue is ongoing within the deaf education field, with different positions often polarizing around two main rehabilitative and educational paths: the first using sign language as a bridge to educational and cultural integration, the second based on language acquisition via oral training and education.

In the case of deaf people educated orally, a great amount of attention is given to their speaking and hearing abilities with the support of hearing aids and/or cochlear implants, for which they are often discouraged from the use of sign language. In deaf bilingual education, sign language is considered mainly as a first language, while the spoken/written language is used as a second language (L2). Many of the strategies used for the development of the literacy skills of deaf learners are based on L2 teaching strategies (Berent & Kelly, 2009; Gregory, 1996).

² Note: not all deaf people encounter the same linguistic challenges. There are many who occupy such professions as medicine, law, higher education, and engineering. This paper addresses the needs of the deaf population who have missed opportunities for quality education suited to their learning styles.

Regardless of the chosen rehabilitation path, however, the printed language provides a crucial window for most deaf people into a world that is not as easily accessible through the auditory channels (Grushkin, 1998). However, the fact is that many deaf adults are not capable of reading a newspaper article or writing a grammatically correct email.

While the fact that literacy competence remains a challenge in many countries confirms that this is an issue regarding the quality input and access rather than language-related, it is important to remember that some of the language learning issues are unique for each culture and language, and therefore the literacy issues faced by deaf learners are not always comparable. In the Italian language, for example, deaf people have difficulties in the use of pronouns, prepositions, articles and the verb system (Caselli, Maragna, & Volterra, 2006; Fabretti & Tomasuolo, 2006).

As a consequence, any possible solution to the challenge of literacy development in deaf learners has to adapt both to the type (prelingual or postlingual) and degree of deafness (profound, severe, moderate, mild), as well as the cultural and communication background.

2.1 Deaf learners = visual learners

Despite the wide range of communication methods used by the diverse deaf population, there remains one common factor: visual access to communication is critical for obtaining information. In order to access the spoken language, some degree of lipreading is used in conjunction with residual hearing; access the signed language requires visual perception.

The challenge with lipreading, however, is that only a small percentage of all utterances are clearly visible on the lips, while some sounds visible on the lips are formed similarly, such as |b| and |p|, |d| and |t|. Thus, lipreaders often have to rely on guesswork aided by an extensive

lexicon and understanding of how sentences are structured. In the previous section we discussed briefly about the risk of evaluating not the language competence of the deaf language user but his/her physiological ability to utilize residual hearing and the amount of lipreading skills he/she has.

Therefore, how can spoken communication be made more accessible for deaf people in order to emphasize language comprehension? Technology often plays a prominent role in providing access to visual forms of spoken communication, with subtitles (with and without descriptions of auditory content), live chat programs, and transcripts as some examples. Subtitles are often used in conjunction with video; in the case of live communication situations, transcription of spoken communication made visible on a TV screen or computer/laptop monitor, or with the use of speech-to-text software, also visible on a TV screen or computer/laptop monitor. Live chat programs would provide the ability for instantaneous text translation of spoken dialogue, or to provide a textual format of conversation; it is important to remember that the language uses in these situations are often informal and not representative of formal language use.

3. Searching for an appropriate language measuring tool

Guidelines for language development were needed in order to create educational paths for the VISEL project that provided constructive benchmarks building on existing competencies. The search for standards and guidelines started with an analysis of national and international

standards for language learning, including ministerial documents on language learning, the PISA test³ and the CEFR.

Examination of Italian literature standards for high school students did not provide us with a detailed measurement of literacy skills. The standards provide a description of the contents to be taught, for which many deaf students are poorly equipped, both linguistically and in appropriate resources, to access these contents.

Since the VISEL project focuses on reading and writing skills in the academic environment, the PISA test for literacy skills was taken into consideration. The results provided us with a “baseline” of literacy skills deaf adults would need to have to compete for basic jobs, however it still didn’t provide us with measureable benchmarks which language learners could follow while developing their academic language skills.

Considering the fact that deaf learners often behave as second language learners, the CEFR appeared as a natural choice, not only for its being a widely used international reference document in second language education, but also for its constructivist approach to measuring language competence.

However, in-depth analysis of the descriptors revealed several contradictions. From a deaf perspective, the CEFR descriptors of learning behaviors do not take into consideration the different channels used by deaf people when accessing language. Instead of supporting “Can-Do” abilities, they inadvertently support a deficit perspective on (in)abilities.

³ Administered by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development: <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/>

3.1 Considering Speaking and Listening Processes

Looking at the CEFR-defined learning behaviors from the mode of input – reading and listening – and output – writing and reading – it seems that 50% of the CEFR is already inaccessible if we consider the limited access to auditory input by deaf language users. However, many aspects of the listening and speaking processes within the CEFR are reflections on a person’s ability to process and participate in instantaneous communication rather than the physiological aspect of listening and speaking.

For example, if we look at a descriptor from the A2 level focusing on the comprehension of conversation between native speakers: “Can generally identify the topic of discussion around him/her, when it is conducted slowly and clearly” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.66). Looking at the physiological aspect of the behavior, we would be measuring how well the deaf language user could lipread the target language. It is possible to deem such behaviors invalid for our purposes, until we remember that in the classroom environment, discussion is a necessary part of the learning process.

Within the B2 level, descriptors regarding language behaviors in academic contexts describe the ability to “take notes during a lecture which are precise enough for his/her own use at a later date, provided the topic is within his/her field of interest and the talk is clear and well-structured” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.96). Anecdotal evidence has shown that note-taking during a lecture is very difficult to do without taking attention away from the speaker to write notes. It is often the case that deaf students must ask for someone to take notes or make a transcript of the lecture. However, note-taking skills are an important aspect of study behavior in which the learner is able to summarize concepts for future reference.

4. Filling the gaps in the “Can Do” approach

With the preliminary data of the VISEL project (La Grassa, 2011), we focused our attention on the A2, B1, and B2 levels of the framework, particularly on the skills to be developed by deaf learners accessing texts. Development began with an examination of the existing descriptors of learning behaviors relevant to written language use for academic purposes and highlighting the descriptors that are particularly problematic for deaf learners, examples of which we saw in section 3.1. Many descriptors can be adapted from the listening and speaking skills due to the visual way in which deaf people approach language. Subtitles, transcripts and other forms of making sounds visible should also build the definition of writing skills in deaf people.

The language learning environment of the VISEL project exists within an online platform designed to imitate a university course (for further discussion, see Capuano, DeMonte, Roccaforte, Tomasuolo, & Groves, 2011). Our descriptors were modified to be inclusive of the visual communication usage and needs of our target audience and to fit the context of the online platform. For example, the descriptor, “Can generally identify the topic of discussion around him/her, when it is conducted slowly and clearly” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.66) was modified to fit the language situations faced by deaf students in the virtual environment, thus: “**In online chat**, can generally identify the topic of discussion around him/her, when it is conducted slowly and clearly” (DeMonte, Groves, & Nuccetelli, 2011).

Looking more specifically at the academic language context, “Can take notes during a lecture which are precise enough for his/her own use at a later date, provided the topic is within

his/her field of interest and the talk is clear and well-structured” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.96), the descriptor was changed to “**In a subtitled online lesson (given by a teacher or a tutor), can take notes which are precise enough for his/her own use and shared at a later date, provided the topic is within his/her field of interest and the talk is clear and well-structured, and with the possibility that the learner could interrupt the teacher to take notes**” (DeMonte, Groves, & Nuccetelli, 2011).

However, the modifications to the descriptors within the listening and speaking domains raise the question of whether or not the nature of the language behavior changes from listening to speaking to that of reading and writing (DeMonte & Groves, 2011). Does a textual version of spoken dialogue, following the conventions of spoken language usage, stimulate reading behaviors or is it still a listening behavior? This challenge of addressing the fact that deaf people need more visual support to access the spoken language both at the reception and production levels deserves attention for future study.

The modified descriptors have been used in the development of the educational paths within the VISEL project’s Deaf-Centered E-Learning Environment, showing its effectiveness in the construction of materials specially designed for deaf learning in online environments.

4.1 Considerations for the future

Further study in this area needs to consider a wider range of feedback on the descriptors from not only deaf language users, but also language teachers and assessment specialists. Both the feedback of the modified descriptors and an analysis of existing work such as the Deaf Port project will allow us to proceed to the next step towards developing European Language

Portfolios for use by deaf language users themselves. Another future focus is to develop a toolkit for teachers in the use of the CEFR with deaf learners, focusing on “Can-Do” abilities inclusive of the visual nature of deaf learners and the variety of language situations they face.

5. Conclusion

Many deaf learners are not proficient enough in written language to take advantage of higher educational opportunities, including university studies. This is a recurring situation not only in Italy, but in international contexts as well, with variations related to specific cultures and languages. Without this proficiency, it is difficult for these learners to capitalize on new opportunities becoming increasingly available to them in the professional, academic, and social arenas. Consideration of improved education and evaluation methodologies based on international standards such as CEFR could lead to empowerment among deaf learners and their teachers, ideally improving inclusion of the deaf in all domains, at home and abroad.

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