

Language Portfolios, Multilingualism and the Deaf: Can we find a synergy in language assessment?

Our goal: to create assessment tools for measuring academic literacy competences of deaf Italian adults in a distance learning university course.

Introduction

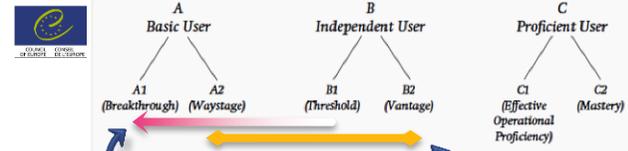
In Italy, many d/Deaf Italians are not proficient enough in Italian to take advantage of higher educational opportunities, including university studies. Without this proficiency, it is difficult for d/Deaf Italians to capitalize on new opportunities becoming increasingly available to them in the professional, academic, and social arenas that are breaking down geographical barriers in Europe, allowing them to travel and interact with others in international settings. The *E-learning, deafness, written language: a bridge of letters and signs towards knowledge society* (VISEL) project, funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, aims to enhance written Italian skills in the academic setting via an e-learning platform designed for d/Deaf visual learners, regardless of their communication mode.

During the research phase, we realized:

- There are no assessment tools in Italy for teachers to assess d/Deaf literacy skills
- A majority of d/Deaf learners cannot meet many of the high school academic standards for Italian literacy
- The PISA assessment test gave us a “baseline” of literacy skills d/Deaf adults need to have to compete for basic jobs
- The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a powerful guideline, but is still not applicable for many d/Deaf learners due to their different communication needs (conversational skills/strategies are different for visual communicators, for example)

We decided to try to adapt the CEFR guidelines as an assessment tool for d/Deaf language learners, as it is widely used in Italian universities for non-native Italian speakers, and the guidelines would benefit d/Deaf students.

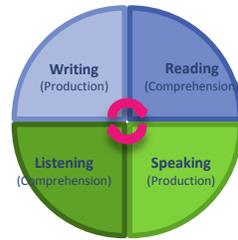
CEFR - Levels of Language Proficiency



Preliminary assessment of 15 d/Deaf Italian teenagers (aged 15-19) using the CEFR measured their skills to that below the B1 level.

With this finding, we focused our attentions on the A2, B1, and B2 levels of the framework for our platform, developing lessons that provide support through text easification strategies (Bhatia, 1993) and activities that provide instruction unique to aspects of linguistic competences (lexical, syntactical, phonological) of each level.

Considering Speaking and Listening Processes



The four processes of the CEFR

Many aspects of the speaking and listening processes within the CEFR are reflections on a person’s ability to process and participate in instantaneous communication. We saw a need to modify some of the processes to consider d/Deaf communication skills and needs, focusing on the use of Italian on an e-learning platform.

Visual Access to Communication

For d/Deaf people, visual access to communication is critical for obtaining information.

How do we show the visual form of spoken communication? What is the difference between this and written communication?

The most common visual forms of spoken communication are subtitles (with and without descriptions of auditory content) as well as transcripts.

However, spoken communication can sometimes vary from written communication in its lexicon (including the use of vernacular) and tools such as inflection, pauses, gestures, pitch. Some of the grammatical rules that are tied to written communication (often to an unseen audience) are not necessarily tied to spoken communication.

As many deaf people have less access to incidental information including ways of using speech to convey messages, this needs more research to understand how to best support deaf students in this area of language competence.



Subtitles showing auditory descriptions

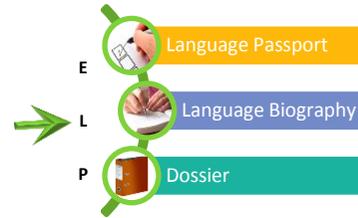
Considering that d/Deaf people have limited access to auditory input, does this mean 50% of the CEFR is inaccessible to the d/Deaf? Our hypothesis is that it does not, however our question is: **How can we make them applicable?**

Transcript of audio or video



Considerations for the future

Our current European Language Portfolio (ELP) model is used by the research team for developing learning paths. There needs to be more work to develop an ELP that is suitable for use by students and teachers.



The boundary between written text and textual representations of speech needs to be further defined, and the concepts of spoken language skills needs to be studied and ‘re’defined for attainable abilities in deaf students, beyond the pathological model of speech and listening.

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 <http://www.coe.int/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf>
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Abstract

Increasing opportunities for people, including the D/deaf, in the professional, academic, and social arenas are breaking down geographical barriers in Europe, allowing them to travel and interact with others in international settings, requiring multilingual competences. To provide an accurate view of language competences across Europe, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is used as a valuable guideline by individuals, employers, academic institutions and policy makers. Regardless of the mode of communication D/deaf people choose to use – speech and lipreading only, sign only, or a mixture of both, D/deaf people perceive the world primarily through their visual sense.

At the moment, only a few attempts have been done to adapt European Language Portfolios (ELPs), used to document language learning based on the CEFR guidelines, to the particular way in which D/deaf people acquire language. However, there has been little attention paid specifically to measuring written language competences of D/deaf people using the CEFR as a guideline. The Italian-funded FIRB-VISEL 'E-learning, deafness, written language: a bridge of letters and signs towards knowledge society' project did a preliminary examination of the CEFR for D/deaf learners. We concluded that specific ELPs are needed to meet the language usages of D/deaf people, particularly in regards to the areas of listening and speaking, which need to be reworded to allow D/deaf people and educators to accurately measure language abilities as opposed to communication abilities. In this paper we introduce the work that the Institute for the Deaf in Rome has done in the attempt to create an ELP to fit the language use by Italian D/deaf people without deviating from the original purpose of the CEFR as a standard guideline for European language assessment

Key words: Bimodal multilingualism, European deaf people, European Language Portfolio, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Multilingualism

Aim of session: Discussion of initial findings and hypothesis for continued development

The research focus: Language assessment of D/deaf multilinguals in Europe (primary: Deafness and Literacy acquisition, secondary: bimodal bilingualism)

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FIRB-VISEL
(2009-2012)
www.visel.cnr.it



DEAL & DEAL-TOI
(2006-2008/2009-2011)
www.toi.deal-leonardo.eu



SIGN-LEF
(2011-2013)
www.issr.it/sign-lef.html

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