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Teaching English to deaf/hard of hearing students in primary education: A suggested methodology

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The paper focuses on the area of teaching English to deaf and/or hard of hearing students and investigates whether and the extent to which these students in special primary education can be taught English. It presents a part of the research conducted within the framework of the postgraduate programme 'The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language' of the Hellenic Open University (Seliami, 2021). The research project was conducted in two phases with a combination of a qualitative and a quantitative approach. Specifically, during Phase 1 (observation phase), the study explored the methods that the teachers of a Special School in Athens, Greece, applied in vocabulary teaching, reading comprehension, and writing production. Diaries were kept for this purpose. In Phase 2, a questionnaire was completed –not only by the school teachers- but generally by teachers who specialise in teaching students with hearing impairment. For the purposes of the research, the findings from Phase 2 were analysed in combination with the results of the observation phase to create a syllabus for the teaching of English for deaf and hard of hearing students. However, this paper focuses on the Phase 2 results regarding teachers' strategies and methods when teaching the particular group of students as derived from the online questionnaire. Teaching ideas for future reference are provided at the end of the paper which may give confidence to pre and/or in-service English teachers who usually feel frustrated and discouraged from teaching deaf and hard of hearing students to carry out this challenging task.

Key words: deafness, hearing impairment, primary education, vocabulary development, reading and writing production

1. Introduction

Marschark and Spencer (2009, p. xiii-xi found in Csizér and Kontra (2020, p. 234) inform us that the term 'hard-of-hearing' is used to refer to a hearing loss at a level that significantly limits but does not preclude perception of spoken language through audition alone. On the other hand, the term 'deaf,' refers to "the condition of having a hearing loss in the severe-to-profound or profound range" and to a "member of a community that uses a Sign Language and shares a common bond of identity" (ibid).

In addition to these definitions, according to Paul & Whitelaw (2010) hearing loss is grouped in five categories: normal, slight and mild where the person is defined as hard of hearing with a degree of hearing loss up to 54 in dB (the measurement unit of hearing loss). If the hearing loss appears to be 55-69 dB (moderate hearing loss), the person may need a special class and treatment whilst if the hearing impairment is more than 90 dB the hearing loss is severe and the person is considered to be deaf. Deafness has an effect on language which the deaf and hard of hearing need to acquire in order to cultivate certain communicative skills (Hall et al, 2019) with the use of sign language as deaf and hard of hearing L1 or the officially spoken as an L2 (ibid). In this case, the deaf and hard of hearing people are commonly considered to be bilingual or multilingual and the development of their literacy skills are questionable as the difference in grammar and syntax raises questions as far as the transfer of information between the two languages (Pozos, 2014). Furthermore, the hearing deficit leads the deaf and hard of hearing students (D/HH henceforth) to a lack of any phonological awareness (i.e., the ability to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of words and sentences). Consequently, D/HH students may make lexical, grammatical or syntax errors (Seliami, 2021; see also Kontra, et al. (2015) for a detailed clarification of terminology).

In this framework, teaching English to D/HH can be considered a difficult task not only for the students but also for the teachers who may not be trained to teach English to this group of students. As Csizér and Kontra (2020, p. 235) inform us, there is some research available that “can guide teachers, curriculum designers, and policy makers in non-English speaking countries” but the problems (cf. Khasawneh, 2021) that a teacher of English has to face needs to be considered. In this respect, the current research attempts to investigate whether and the extent to which D/HH students in primary education can efficiently be exposed to the English language and whether English can actually be taught to them. Taking into account that language institutions and sign language scholars aim at reinforcing D/HH students throughout both as students and later on, as adults (Marschark & Spencer, 2016) while interacting with people all over the world, the research, which focused on the Greek context, attempted to investigate which strategies and methods can be applied while D/HH students are taught English. The productive and receptive skills such as reading and writing they can acquire are, also, under investigation.

As Seliami (2021) suggests, the inclusion of D/HH students by specialists who work in Special Education in the design of syllabi is of crucial importance to the teaching of English as an L3. Unfortunately, up to recently, D/HH students were now taught English in Greek Special Primary Schools, which is the context of the study presented in this paper, since there were no English teachers certified in sign language while the teaching of a foreign language was considered as a burden. This is a gap that the current research attempted to address. Phase 1 involved an observation of the teaching practice in order to explore the methods that the teachers of a specific school in Athens, Greece, applied to vocabulary teaching, reading comprehension, and writing production. Diaries were kept for this purpose. In Phase 2, a questionnaire was given to teachers who work with D/HH students. The findings from Phase 2 were analysed in combination with the results from the observation phase with a view to creating a syllabus for the teaching of English for D/HH students. However, this paper focuses only on the questionnaire results and summarises teachers’ strategies and methods when teaching the particular group of students.

2. Teaching Deaf and Hard of hearing students

2.2. Characteristics of D/HH students

Niemann et al. (2004) explain the effect of hearing impairment mainly in relation to difficulties understanding the world and in expressing their inner world. Certain skills such cognitive, language or social, are affected and consequently social interactions become restricted and many people have

feelings of isolation and loneliness. It is thus crucial to recognize the hearing impairment the earliest possible; otherwise the child will miss important educational experiences—meaning any interaction where learning and socialising can take place (Pagliano, 2005).

According to Lehrer (2016), there is a growing interest for early intervention programs for D/HH students' intellectual development (Bornstein & Tamis-Lemonda, ~1989) in order for children to reach a level of appropriate language and cognition as they enter primary school. These are basic for the acquisition of the core knowledge and skills for communication and interaction (Hitchins & Hogan, 2018). Teaching English to D/HH students in non- English speaking countries has proven to be a challenging and demanding task. As Cameron (2003) puts it, English should be introduced to special primary schools since early exposure to language can enhance language acquisition (Lehrer, 2016). Within this framework, the English teacher in an EFL classroom with D/HH students is vital to develop their motivation (Csizer & Kalman, 2019) and should show helpfulness, empathy, care and patience, both as a person and as an educator.

2.2. Effective educational approaches and teaching methods

In order to teach D/HH students, one must be able to use sign language in the visual-gesture modality, relying mostly on the use of hands, facial expression and the upper torso. Sign language, a language with its own structure and grammar, is of crucial importance for D/HH students in their everyday communication. In fact, for some D/HH children, it is their first language (Seliami, 2021) while the contact with fluent signers can facilitate the access to language acquisition (Kontra and Csizer, 2013; Staden, 2009). D/HH students who are exposed to a code-blending system of communication, comprising sign language and the official spoken language through speech, can reduce the communication and social barriers that D/HH face in every day interaction (ibid).

In special education, 'differentiated instruction' focusing on the individual's needs in comparison to the group's dynamics (Kaufmann et al. 2017) is a frequently adopted approach. Small classes facilitate learning as the teacher can monitor the D/HH students' performance and thus provide them with immediate feedback. Differentiated teaching is based on the students' characteristics, needs and styles and aims at enhancing their achievements (Lou et al, 1996; Reis et al, 2011 as cited in Marschark et al, 2016). In the case of D/HH students, emphasis is placed primarily on the development of their phonological awareness (Kyritsi & James & Edwards, 2007a, 2008, 2007b as cited in Seliami 2021) through word recognition and dictation.

Through mental imagery and visualisation, D/HH students form pictures in their minds -with the aid of the other senses such as taste, sound or touch (Schrimmer, 1995). Images can be a useful tool in language understanding since they depict what the eye can see and help the D/HH students to make associations with the real world. Matching activities of pictures, sounds or symbols thus seem to be more helpful than the direct exposure to whole stories at once (Liu et al, 2014). In the case of DHH, non-verbal language is superior to verbal language (Obosu et al, 2013). Taking into account that visualisation facilitates learning in D/HHS' education, assistive and instructional technology can improve the students' language and cognitive skills. For instance, the use of instructional games, software boards, videos, or multimedia based simulation are tools that the teacher can make use of (cf. Lidstrom & Hemmingsson, 2014).

Last but not least, presenting effective learning strategies to learners as well as acquainting them with autonomous ways of practising the target language should be incorporated in the teaching practices (Csizér and Kontra, 2020).

3. The study: aim, context and method

The study focused on a relatively unexplored area, that of teaching English to D/HH students and investigated whether and the extent to which these students can effectively develop certain skills such reading or writing at an A1 level in English as an L3. The research questions addressed are:

1. What methods, tools and strategies teachers of D/HH students apply in a specific primary education special school?
2. Through what types of techniques do teachers develop these students' vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing production skills in English?

To that end, the study was conducted in two phases, and the data gathered from both stages were analysed in relevance to the strategies that were used while teaching D/HH students. As already stated, the first phase of the research (observation phase) took place in the Special Primary School for D/HH students in Argyroupoli. Thirty-two (32) students attended the school during the 2020-2021 school year. Twelve (12) permanent and substitute teachers, worked at the school, alongside with a Physical Education teacher, an English teacher who conducted the survey and an Information Communication Technology teacher. During Phase 1, the study explored the methods that the teachers apply (with respect to the students' learning styles and preferences) regarding vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and writing production as well as the students' attitude and behaviour during the learning process. All these aspects were noted down in diaries which were kept daily. In parallel, an interview with the school psychologist, who provided useful information regarding the students' sociocultural background, took place. The students who were observed were twenty (20) in total, four (4) girls and sixteen (16) boys aged from seven (7) to twelve (12) (Seliami, 2021). The learners formed two groups of six (6) and fourteen (14) students with their hearing ability as the basic criterion.

The second phase involved the design and distribution of an online questionnaire which was completed by 30 teachers who worked with D/HH students. Generally, 40% of the teachers had worked in general primary schools for up to 5 years. The majority of them had 6 to 30 years of experience. The questionnaire was designed on Google Forms and the questions were based on a 5-point Likert scale ("I strongly agree", "I quite agree", "I agree", "I quite disagree", "I disagree". It also, contained open-ended questions providing us with unlimited information and unexpected insights regarding aspects which were not addressed through the closed questions (see Appendix). The questionnaire consisted of two main parts. In the first part, it included some demographic questions on the level and the working experience of the participants, while the second part was divided into four sections addressing vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and writing production teaching (see Appendix). It was piloted by teachers who teach Greek and was checked for both its reliability and validity. The findings derived from the questionnaires were analysed in combination with the results from the observation phase (see also Seliami, 2021).

4. An overview of findings

Taking into account the results from both phases of the survey, one can draw useful conclusions regarding both the teaching of the Greek and the English language to D/HH students. However, this paper focuses on the responses of the teachers who participated in the research through a questionnaire (Phase 2) (see Appendix, parts B-D). The section below presents the main results which focus on the three areas of investigation: vocabulary building and the development of reading and writing ability.

4.1 Vocabulary development

Regarding vocabulary teaching, the participants stressed the need for the development of students' phonological awareness (Webb & Ledeborg, 2013) as an important element for language acquisition.

According to the participants, phonemic awareness can be achieved through the visualisation of the word and the use of technology. Since learning a new word directly is difficult for D/HH students, the connection with visual aids and prior acquired vocabulary can contribute to the acquisition of new vocabulary (Gallion, 2016). This finding has also been confirmed by Birinci & Saricoban (2021) who investigated the effectiveness of using visual materials in teaching vocabulary to 80 deaf students of EFL from a state special education vocational high school in Turkey. They actually found that in teaching lexical items to deaf learners who learn English as an additional language, visuals were more efficient than using just the sign language.

The findings of our research also indicated that the teachers turn to speech reading (when someone with hearing impairment watches the speaker's mouth and face in order to understand what the speaker is saying) to teach vocabulary as well (Seliami, 2021). Some of the participants' suggestions for vocabulary building included role playing, dramatisation, group words, words in sentences so that they can be used in context (ibid).

4.2 Developing reading comprehension

The second section of the questionnaire focused on the teaching of the reading skill. Regarding reading comprehension, the findings showed that the participants monitor the students' performance throughout the teaching process through question and answer activities thus confirming previous research results (see Benedict et al, 2015).

The participants also stated that they should incorporate texts relevant to the students' level and interests in order to motivate them to take part in the learning process. Finally, the teachers stressed the benefits of experiential learning, dividing a text into parts, providing side heads and creating intersectional activities such as comprehension questions, or the provision of a summary stating the main points of each paragraph of a text. These activities will help the teacher understand whether the students can acquire the necessary inferential and affective information in the pre- and while reading stage and the extent to which they can use it during the after reading process.

4.3 Developing writing production

The last part of the survey focused on writing production. The results showed that the teachers follow the strict structure of the sentence Subject –Verb-Object. Each sentence is based on vocabulary, grammar and notions the students are familiar with, in order to encourage them to produce very simple sentences which they can negotiate according to their level.

The majority of the teachers who participated in this study claimed that they use classifiers (for instance, the word "huge" is used to describe an object to determine the size of it) and adverbs only when they are certain that the students are aware of their use and their place in the sentence (Seliami, 2021). The findings showed that the participants advocate experiential learning and that is why they urge their students to produce sentences with basic structures such as Subject-Verb-Object.

As for substitute clauses or clauses in the passive voice, according to the teachers, these are structures that the D/HH students do not feel confident to use. Furthermore, the participants support that the use of mind maps for writing production as a brainstorming technique led to the production of ideas. Dramatisation, or role-playing, are strategies that teachers also employ in the teaching of writing with the majority agreeing that they constitute effective ways of teaching D/HH students in primary education.

5. Implications for the teaching of English to Greek D/HH primary school students

The results of this survey can guide pre- and in-service English teachers who intend to work with D/HH students in primary education, while designing a lesson and delivering it in class.

Vocabulary can be presented through pictures, charts or videos which, as this study has indicated, can be highly motivating for learners. Multimodality is actually a core element when teaching English to D/HH students (Kusters et al, 2015). Regarding vocabulary personalization (creation of learning outcomes based on individuals' traits), the lexical items that are taught should be relevant to the students' needs, interests and preferences. Also, the words that learners are exposed to should be used in everyday interaction, as this can contribute to the assimilation of a greater number of words. It is common for D/HH students to substitute words or structures with those they are familiar with or words that they sign in their everyday communication in simple sentences (S-V-O) since according to Albertini & Schley (2003), deaf learners are primarily visual learners. Another strategy for boosting learners' vocabulary development can be vocabulary emotionalization (Semiami, 2021). When students feel familiar with a word or a notion, they can emotionally bond to them and wish to put them into practice. By working with the acquired vocabulary as well as revising prior knowledge, new vocabulary can be learnt. As Zysk and Kontra suggest (2016), emphasis is placed on using the old and new vocabulary in social contexts in contrast to the traditional way of being exposed to isolated sets of words. Inferencing and guessing are also two of the strategies that are applied when teaching D/HH students.

As far as grammar is concerned, complex items such as the use of classifiers should not be attempted (Dewi et al, 2019) and activities should be such that keep learners interested. D/HH students in primary education tend to use the strict structure S-V-O and they are less familiar with comprehending structures such as converting sentences into questions, passive forms, or joining two sentences into one with the use of a pronoun (Berent, 2011). D/HH students are familiar with the sentence "He washes the car" but when it comes to "Does he wash the car?" or "The car is washed", things become more complicated (Seliami, 2021), an aspect that the teacher should be aware of. In addition to this, D/HH students find it difficult to associate a written word with its spoken form (Zysk & Kontra, 2016). According to Marschark (2006), the mistakes they make regarding reading and writing were the same as those that their hearing peers made while learning English as a foreign language.

Regarding writing, the fact that D/HH students lack a wide range of vocabulary and their weakness to express their ideas, make it difficult to elaborate on complex ideas (Brokop & Persall, 2009). They actually tend to use fewer and simpler words than their hearing peers. Writing development can be achieved through purposeful writing. Moreover, brainstorming through mind mapping can be incorporated in every step of the writing process. Experiential learning is encouraged by using their personal experiences for meaning making throughout the writing process. Students' vocabulary can be enhanced through the use of technology such as powerpoint presentations or videos which in turn can lead to effective writing production. Mapping/matching activities activate schemata and prior knowledge that can be used in context. It is suggested that instructions be given in printed form so that the students can resort to them as many times as they wish.

6. Conclusion

This research has focused on the teaching of English to D/HH students in primary education with a view to developing their vocabulary, reading and writing skills. D/HH students in primary education can actually become basic users of the language. Through one-to-one teaching in small sized classes, the students are usually provided with constant encouragement and feedback. They can thus be successful both in reading comprehension and writing production although the difficulties linked to these two aspects of language learning and use, are not limited (cf. Kontra et al., 2015). We hope that

the conclusions of this study will encourage pre- and -in service English teachers to work with D/HH students in primary education. What has to be pointed out, however, is that further research should be conducted, and a curriculum targeting these groups of students must be designed, which curriculum should take into account their preferences and interests (Seliami, 2021). Teaching English to D/HH students is still a challenging but not discouraging task for English teachers who will be called to help learners adapt in a globalised society. Besides, the deaf community has stressed the necessity for the teaching of English to this group of students as an international language in order for them to be more efficiently integrated into society and have the same benefits as the hearing students of their age (Zysk & Kontra, 2016 as cited in Seliami, 2021). Last but not least, we should refer to the crucial role of teacher training. It seems necessary that FL teachers of D/HH learners be given pre- or in-service training opportunities where methods and materials can be shared (cf. Kontra, et al, 2015).

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