Insights into Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Deaf Students

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Abstract

Many deaf students are coming into English classes as part of the integration and openness of higher education in Venezuela. According to newly established legislation teachers must adjust their teaching strategies to fulfill the needs of hearing-impaired students. However, this situation has been unexpected for some English teachers who feel unprepared to deal with this special population. There has been a dearth of information or research done on this subject and some current methods of teaching English to deaf persons are based more on personal assumptions than on scientific grounds. This paper is aimed at both demystifying misunderstandings that may lead to malpractice in teaching English to adult deaf students and to provide insights from the field of psycholinguistics as foundations for the creation of teaching strategies to suit their learning needs. Furthermore, this article is written to serve as a methodological starting point for those professionals interested in teaching and supporting the learning of a foreign language to the deaf, and especially for teachers who lack knowledge of Sign Language or a classroom interpreter. Key concepts such as bimodal bilingualism, the value of visuals in the teacher’s speech and the incorporation of technology into the classroom will be detailed with the hope of empowering teachers with the essentials to help their deaf pupils and promoting further research.

Keywords: hearing-impaired, bimodal bilingualism, EFL, deafness.
Perspectivas sobre la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera a estudiantes con discapacidad auditiva

Resumen

El movimiento de integración y apertura a la educación superior en Venezuela en pro de las personas con discapacidad han elevado el número de estudiantes sordos que inscriben inglés. Según la reciente legislación para las personas con discapacidad, los profesores deben ajustar sus estrategias de enseñanza para satisfacer las necesidades de los estudiantes sordos. Sin embargo, esta situación ha sido imprevista para muchos docentes de inglés quienes no se sienten suficientemente preparados para atender esta población especial. Sobre esta materia ha habido escasa información o investigación por lo que algunos métodos para enseñar inglés como lengua extranjera a los sordos han estado apoyados más por convicciones personales que por razones científicas. Este artículo se propone por una parte desmitificar malentendidos que podrían conducir a una mala praxis en la enseñanza del inglés a estudiantes con discapacidad auditiva, y por otro lado, aportar insumos orientativos desde la psicolingüística que pudieran sentar las bases para crear estrategias didácticas que satisfagan sus necesidades. Además, se espera que esta investigación sirva de punto de partida metodológico para quienes se interesen en la enseñanza y el apoyo del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, y es especial, a los profesores que no manejan la lengua de señas o no tienen un intérprete en su aula. Se detallan conceptos claves como el bilingüismo bimodal, el valor de las imágenes en el discurso del maestro y la incorporación de la tecnología en el salón a fin de capacitarlos con las herramientas esenciales y promover futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: discapacidad auditiva, bilingüismo bimodal, Lengua extranjera, sordera.

Introduction

This article aims at providing language teachers with grounded insights on how to teach English as a foreign language to deaf students in Venezuela. Research on teaching foreign languages to deaf people is very sparse in the field of education due to several factors: (a) the teaching of spoken language to deaf students is generally considered as a task devoted to language pathologists or the area of special education; (b) the fact that most theoretical development in ESL/EFL has been dedicated to hear-
ing students and (c) sign language analysis has not traditionally been a topic of interest in linguistics until recent years. It follows that there is a pending need in research to fulfill the needs of deaf people in this respect as they also have a rightful interest in learning foreign languages, especially, English which has become the world’s lingua franca.

This vacuum of research in foreign language teaching has led to a certain degree of uncertainty on how to proceed from a solid theoretical background in the development of syllabi or programs to teach English to hearing-impaired students. Furthermore, ESL/EFL professionals do not receive enough input on this situation during faculty training. Under this circumstance, it should not be surprising to see many methods struggling to stay afloat. Proposals have been made as to whether to teach American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language, to train students in ASL and English in parallel, or to teach spoken English including its phonology. This confusion in didactics associated with lack of proper training gets worse when unprepared English teachers face the reality of having deaf students in their regular classroom due to new inclusion regulations in education.

In order to propose specific practical teaching strategies, we have attempted to review sources from recent studies on sign language from a linguistic perspective in Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006), Fox (2007) and from a psycholinguistic point of view Corina and Knapp (2007). The analysis on the literature and the overall research are intended to serve as insightful material for English language teachers hoping they can find a scientific value in it for their own class planning and knowledge. From this it follows that this article could be considered a proposal from applied linguistics.

This investigation is focused on deaf students in higher education who enroll in English for Specific Purposes courses at the Universidad del Zulia in Venezuela. Particularly, this paper was inspired by a small group of deaf students registered in the English class of one of the authors of this research. Therefore, a more regional description of the teaching to the deaf was considered through Garnica (2012) and Arenas et al. (2011). Based on the above, our view is to provide assistance to the teacher of deaf adults. However, the insights can also be used for preparing an English class for children.
Legal framework for higher education access

In recent decades there has been an attempt in Venezuela to guarantee the rights of disable people to access a higher education. Initially, two constitutional articles –81 and 103– that spell out the rights of physically handicapped persons were established in 1999. Thereafter, the People with Disability Act was passed in 2007 which was a great first step toward ensuring a barrier-free life for people with disabilities. In the same year, another set of official guidelines were focused on the civil rights of physically challenged people for quality assurance in higher education. Then, in 2009 a bill of Affirmative Action was enacted to ensure the access to higher education which specifically requires setting aside 1% of available slots in every university in the country for disable persons.

This legal framework sets out the vision for higher education access policy in which provisions for the deaf call for designing specially-adapted distance learning courses, adequating teaching strategies to facilitate comprehension, hiring sign language interpreters and the incorporation of technology into the classroom to suit their learning needs (Official Gazette No. 38731, Art. 1§9 [a-i] (2007)).

Common misconceptions

In an effort to dispel misunderstandings that are commonly assumed as truths, we address these issues from the perspective of psycholinguistic research in order to straighten notions as a way to lay a sound foundation for increased insight upon which teachers may find support for pursuing clever practice.

One of those misconceptions is the so-called universality of the hand sign. According to Corina and Knapp “just as there are many spoken language communities around the world, there are many different sign languages.” (2007:1001). There are more than 150 different sign languages being used in the world and some 70 million people worldwide communicating with sign language, according to The Wycliffe Bible Organization. In fact, there is a diversity of dialects within signers of the same country (e.g. users of Venezuelan Sign Language (VSL) may vary their signs in distinct geographical locations; the deaf in Maracaibo use many signs difficult to understand for users in Caracas).
A second generalized confusion is the degree to which a sign corresponds to spoken language. In this respect, “signs are not invented hand symbols that simply represent the words of a spoken language, nor are they pantomime[s]” (Corina and Knapp 2007:1002). This means that Sign Language (SL) arises independently from the spoken language and from within a community of signers; they are autonomous systems of communication with their own linguistic features. Therefore, trying to pantomime a message without knowing proper SL could be interpreted as wrong.

The third misconception that concerns us is the assumption that bilingual-speaking students and deaf students are learning in the same manner. The majority of deaf people who are taught sign language early in life in addition to the official language of their community are inclined to be bilingual to some degree. They use sign language to communicate with other deaf people and the official language to communicate with the non-deaf members of their community. While bilingual deaf people share many traits with other bilingual speakers in the fact that they all know at least two languages, the bilingualism of deaf people is unique, as they know two languages that are distinct from each other due to their different modalities. When users are able to communicate in these two distinct versions, they are known as bimodal bilinguals.

**Bimodal bilingualism**

Sign language requires the extensive involvement of hands, face, and body to form expressions while spoken language requires voice. They each exploit a different modality to produce expressions. As deaf people are compelled to acquire the official spoken language of their community in addition to their sign language, the majority of signers are considered bimodal bilinguals, although they may differ in the respect of using the spoken language. An individual’s degree of hearing loss, whether he or she is pre-lingually or post-lingually deaf, the use of language in their education, and their family background may influence their use of spoken language (Lucas and Valli, 1992). Some deaf people can speak in addition to their sign language while others know only the written form of the spoken language due to the incompetency of their vocal ability.
Sign languages and spoken languages are clearly different because they use different modalities to express thoughts—sign languages are expressed through hands while spoken languages use vocal sounds to express. Based on this fact, bimodal bilingualism is proposed as the term for people who are bilingual in two different languages whose modality is distinct from each other. It is usually applied to children of deaf adults who grew up using sign language and spoken language. Most deaf people are said to be bilingual to some extent in an oral language in some form, as in written form, along with their native sign language. Sign-print bilingualism is the other term applied to deaf people who are fluent in sign language and written form of an oral language.

Taking a sign language as the first or preferred language of deaf people, a written/spoken national one is already their second language; any other written/spoken language becomes the third one. As there is very little instruction on structure/grammar of sign languages for many deaf people, it is difficult for them to grasp all the linguistic information on a second or third language. English, the lingua franca of the European community, therefore, in the best case is the third language of deaf people. If the learning of the first written/spoken language was already restricted in quality and/or extent, this may also affect English as the second written/spoken language (Dotter 2008: 100).
The implication of this bimodal bilingualism is a significant factor for a deaf person’s learning a foreign language. Because they are already bilingual prior to learning a foreign language, any other language would become their third language.

**Linguistic features of sign language**

Sign languages are highly sophisticated, complex, and full-fledged languages in their own right—they are not at all similar to oral languages. According to Petersen (2013) “there’s not usually a close relationship between the spoken language of a country and the signed language. For example, Mexico and Spain both speak Spanish, but their signed languages are very different.” The nature of this “Sign Languages are used for everything that spoken language are – within the family circle, for social interaction […] for introspection and dreaming, story-telling, and poetry”. (Lane and Phillip 1984, Padden and Humphries 1988 cited by Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006)). It has been confirmed that “these languages are known to have evolved spontaneously in isolated communities where there has been a preponderance of deaf individuals” (Corina and Knaap 2007:1001). One of such cases has been well documented in a study describing “an isolated Middle Eastern village whose inhabitants “speak” sign language – a language unlike any other of the world, witnessed by few outsiders” (Fox 2007: 1).

William Stokoe (1976) pioneered research on the physical traits of signed languages and demonstrated the natural character of these languages in contrast with the conventional view of eminent linguists such as Leonard Bloomfield (1936) who “lumped sign language together with other gestural systems and summarily dismissed them all” (Fox 2007:17; Corina and Knaap 2007:1002).

The main lesson of our review is simple but important: sign language is essentially a natural language and it accounts for all the structural features of spoken languages; the main difference lays in its non-acoustical channeling. In recent years, scientists have developed models that take account of all aspects found in spoken languages (i.e., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics; since these properties are not the focus of this analysis, for a full review see Sandler, W and Lillo-Martin, D, 2006). Our purpose is to raise awareness of this important fact.
among language teachers and to promote reflections on the implications that this recognition may have on understanding the linguistic performance of the deaf in our language classes.

One question that may arise from this finding: whether it is better to teach American Sign Language (ASL) or spoken English to deaf people living in a Spanish-speaking country? This inquiry is based on the fact that ASL is the natural language of the people who live in an English-speaking community. This is a debatable topic among some language specialists (Wilcox and Peyton, 1999). On the other hand, there are others who support the view of paralleling Spoken language teaching with Sign Language.

We believe that learning a foreign sign language is definitely a great motivator behind a student’s foreign language studies; however, it may not play a vast role in helping the student cognitively proceeding the written language itself. Besides, even though ASL is indigenous to the United States and Canada, it is not used in other English-speaking countries like England, Australia, New Zealand, etc, all of which have their own sign language. Therefore, we support the view that teachers should focus on spoken English as the subject of teaching.

Although it is not a prerequisite, it does help a lot, for obvious reasons, if the teacher knows sign language through which most of the teaching will be accompanied. Arenas et al. (2011) considered that having an interpreter in the classroom to achieve a harmonious inclusion into the classroom. However, it is the purpose of this paper to suggest practical strategies for teachers who do not know sign language as well. Proficiency in communicating in sign language is highly recommended for teachers who seek dedication in this special vocation.

**Sign language effects on written production**

Traditionally, it has been argued that the weaknesses shown on the written practice among deaf students is due to the quality of education delivered to them in the Venezuelan context, according to Garmica (2012:124). As much as this can be true, we believe there are other factors that may account for this poor performance in their written practice. One of the possible explanations may be found in the way syntactic patterns in their first language (SL) contribute or compete with its spoken counterpart in the configuration of written messages. Consider the findings in syn-
tax by Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006) who reported the possibilities in word order in SL as: SVO, OSV, VOS. Another feature that has received a fair amount of attention is embedding which is a process whereby elements such as articles, pronouns, and prepositions are integral with the signing of verbs and nouns. On this respect, in a study directed by Fischer (1970) described in Fox (2007), it was found that when asked to translate a sentence into American Sign Language, a group of deaf informants suppressed many linguistic elements expressed in the original: “It’s against the law to drive on the left side”. Of these ten words, it´s, to, on, and the, function words were not shown in the resulting translation: “ILEGAL DRIVE LEFT-SIDE” (2007:25). Fox argues that “the information is preserved, but in a kind of condensed form, and all the elements which are not essential to convey the message have been eliminated” (2007: 26).

Further evidence of this trend comes from Michael Strong (1988) who found some of the manifestations of SL in spoken English:

- Reading: “The results of numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that the reading comprehension skills of hearing-impaired students are considerably lower than those of normally-hearing children of comparable age” (Strong, 5:1988).
- Writing: “Sentences written by deaf children and adolescents tend to be shorter (i.e., contain fewer words) than those written by children of the same age”. “The misuse of function words (i.e., articles and prepositions” (Strong, 6:1988).
- Grammar: “Articles, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, verbal auxiliaries, and inflexional and derivational suffixes are among the most persistent and pervasive sources of errors observed in their spoken and written English (Bochner, 1982; Quigley and Paul, 1984 cited by Strong, 6:1988).

**Some practical teaching strategies**

Based on the notions form interdisciplinary fields like psycholinguistics and applied linguistics we suggest, firstly, a set of teaching tips for the teacher who is not skilled in sign language
or lacks an interpreter in the classroom. Interestingly, the second round of recommendations comes directly from the deaf’s own perspective on the teaching and learning of Spanish writing which was gathered in a research paper by Garnica (2012) and that could be adapted for teaching written English as well. It is hoped that these proposals may be used as references in the creation and delivery of courses and teaching materials in order to make all students enjoy their learning experience of a foreign language.

1. From applied linguistics

- Understanding of spoken information is increased if it is accompanied with images.
- Do not use visuals aimlessly. Insert images in a sequential manner. “For example, a PowerPoint must be in a teachable sequence of visual information, all of which gradually adds up to the whole of a course.” (Dotter, 107: 2008).
- Try to create topical lessons to accommodate visuals (family, food, transportation, etc.). This is best achieved by using flash cards.
- Special emphasis should be given to help the acquisition of function words such as articles, pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions through attractive images that stimulate the processing of these features in spoken language.
- Allow time to digest the information among them if they come to the classroom as a group.
- The classroom environment plays a huge role –there must be a lot of visual input within the classroom to help deaf students to learn– such as foreign-language movies with subtitles, PowerPoints, posters, transcripts, etc. The more visual input you give to deaf students, the more likely the will learn better.
- Do not expect them to lip-read in English. Lip reading is not considered full access to such information as the ability to lip-read requires guesswork and familiarity of content, which will only add more challenges in learning when students are expected to learn a language not familiar to them. Needless to say that Spanish represents their second language and they are more likely to be used its
mouth articulation than any other language. However, some deaf people like to see the mouthing of a foreign language.

- “huge bulk of language learning materials for English exist. Don’t need to invent all things anew for deaf learners; rather, we may adapt existing materials for deaf people” (Dotter 2008: 112).

2. From the perspective of the deaf

As mentioned earlier, the following teaching ideas were taken from a study conducted on a group of deaf participants who were asked about the aspects they consider important and necessary in the teaching and learning of reading and writing of Spanish. The results are these set of interpretations labeled as learning resources: “(a) didactic games, (b) variety of materials for reading, (c) using visual material in the teaching and learning process, (d) creation of educational software and multimedia resources, (e) using attractive learning resources for deaf children (f) story-telling as a genre of text, (g) making of a sign language dictionary” (Garnica 2012: 135). Taken together, these views are consistent with our previous proposals.

Incorporating technology into the classroom

As detailed earlier, deaf people experience on the perception of signing make them more inclined to the visual dimension of communication. Therefore, based on that evidence, teachers should take advantage of the current technology which has become not only user-friendly but it also provides teachers with an almost infinite number of new possibilities for creating or designing teaching and learning materials from freely accessible sources on internet. The benefits of using ICT tools to teach and support literacy to deaf are well attested (Domagata-Zysk, 2010).

Interestingly, one of the proposed learning resources suggested by deaf students in the research led by Garnica (2012) was the creation of educational software and multimedia and the development of a sign language dictionary. One the authors of this article, teamed up with his deaf students at the Universidad del Zulia, Cabimas, Venezuela in order to create a sign language video dictionary illustrating the learning of specialized vocabulary: Computer parts in English. It is worth mentioning that such
experience was prepared as a paper and presented at the annual VenTesol convention in 2013. In this project, Palma (2013) designed a strategy which fulfilled two learning needs of his deaf students: firstly, the learning of vocabulary for computer parts because these pupils were studying Computer Science and they did not know such lexical items in the English language; secondly, they did not have the proper signs in their natural Venezuelan Sign Language to express these technical words. Therefore, that investigation was made to meet this linguistic compensation in their signing as well. (See apprentice for a web link to that video).

Language teacher should be aware of the enormous potential Information and Communication Tools (ICT) offer to create learning projects for the advancement of the deaf education. Furthermore, it is of critical importance that deaf students should engage in the planning and creation of interactive tasks so that they can gain virtual experience and promote their digital literacy skills needed for the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The complexities of teaching English as a foreign language to deaf adult students are such that a homogeneous theory that incorporates input from interdisciplinary disciplines, in particular linguistics, remains to be completed. We have attempted to provide an overview of the most important issues to take in consideration regarding sign language and its implications to teaching English as a third language to the deaf in the context of a Spanish-speaking community. We hope to have contributed to compensate a lack of scientific judgments in this field for the improvement of teaching practice. Further empirical research is needed on areas left untapped in this paper like the role of Manipulative Visual Language (MVL) developed by Jimmy Challis Gore at Gallaudet University, in the learning of reading and writing of English in foreign students in the Venezuelan context. Reversing the shortage trend in research requires commitment to taking the road less traveled.


Medidas de Acción Afirmativa a Favor del Ingreso de las Personas con Discapacidad a la Educación Universitaria Venezolana. Publicada en Gaceta Oficial de la República de Venezuela, Nº 39240 Agosto de 2009.


Appendix

QR Code for the video Project made at the Universidad del Zulia, Cabimas, Venezuela for computer parts. URL: goo.gl/2Z2nX