

Foreign Language Learning of Hearing Impaired Children



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Abstract

In my discussion about the foreign language (FL) learning of Hungarian hearing impaired children, I intend to prove that it is not self-evident that verbal Hungarian is their mother tongue just because their nationality is Hungarian, thus it is not necessarily worth teaching a FL through spoken Hungarian. I focus on the question of mother tongue, as teaching a FL is affected by one's native language (Kárpáti 2004:166). I am interested in why it is so difficult to define a hearing impaired child's mother tongue, and why it is so difficult to teach a hearing impaired student his or her native language and / or a FL.

Keywords: hearing impaired, deaf community, foreign language learning, verbal Hungarian, Hungarian sign language, bilingual.

Introduction

Language itself is a complex structure and a natural means of communication. It can be written or oral depending on the context, the message, the channel, the producer and the receiver. When we – and from now on “we” refers to members of the hearing community - learn our first language(s) it happens unconsciously. We do not learn our first language from course books, we learn it through imitation: we try to repeat what our parents, grandparents, siblings, kindergarten teachers etc. have said before, so those utterances or utterance fragments that we have heard from our environment. Then, we

usually learn (a) foreign language(s) as well. We can clearly differentiate between the first, second, third etc. languages and name them L1, L2, L3 etc. Languages are natural parts of our lives, and we consider their use obvious. We only start thinking about their difficulties and importance when we are somehow restricted to use them.

This idea serves as a basis of my present paper, which intends to answer questions on foreign language (FL) learning of Hungarian hearing impaired children. It is very important to define the mother tongue of a hearing impaired child as it is not necessarily verbal Hungarian, and “it is worth teaching a foreign language via one’s native language” (Kárpáti 2004:166). However, it does not mean that it is impossible to learn a FL through the FL itself as there are many successful English language courses held in English. The main problem is that a hearing impaired child is very unlikely to have an advanced language command of verbal Hungarian, the language assumed to be his or her mother tongue.

In verbal Hungarian two out of the four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – are likely to be missing for students with hearing impairment or used at a very basic level. These language skills are the oral ones, i.e. speaking and listening. Thus, teaching speaking and listening in English seems a very difficult or even an impossible task, as these language learners cannot use oral skills in Hungarian either.

In relation to language acquisition, my first intention was to find out why it is so difficult to determine a hearing impaired child’s mother tongue. Second, I was interested why it is so difficult to teach a hearing impaired student through his or her native language. The third question which I meant to answer was whether it is worth teaching verbal English for them or we shall teach English sign language. In my discussion, I intend to prove that it is not self-evident that verbal Hungarian is the mother tongue of a Hungarian hearing impaired learner just because his or her nationality is Hungarian, thus it is not necessarily worth teaching a FL through spoken Hungarian.

I will explain and clarify these seemingly controversial questions on the basis of literature, i.e. provide the theoretical background, then I will present my data collected in an institution for hearing impaired students, and the interview conducted with a teacher of that institution whose classes I was allowed to visit.

In the first part, I will introduce the clinical and cultural perspective of deafness, and put an emphasis on the cultural aspect. Regarding the cultural aspect, I will present the changes in social attitudes towards hearing impaired and the legal measures regulating the rights of the deaf community. I will also describe the issue of bilingualism affecting the lives of deaf people.

In the second part, I will introduce my classroom observations carried out in *Klúg Péter Kindergarten, Primary and Vocational School* in Szeged. I visited three English lessons held by a teacher with whom I conducted an interview as well, and from whom I have learnt a lot. The full version of the interview is available in Appendix 2.

In the following part, I will summarize the results of the questionnaires filled in by 21 hearing impaired students of the Klúg Péter institution. I will discuss the results and via them I intend to present the difficulties of teaching a FL for hearing impaired children. I will focus on the question of mother tongue and the language of instruction.

As a future English teacher, I have decided to examine the present situation of FL learning of Hungarian hearing impaired children, and I intend to introduce the difference between practice and the theory behind it.

Literature Review

In this section, I will introduce the most important sources I relied on while I was studying the theoretical background of hearing impairment. Regarding the clinical perspective of deafness and the methodology of teaching hearing impaired students, I presented the ideas of Dorottya Kárpáti from 2004. Her article *Az angol mint idegen nyelv tanítása siket nyelvtanulóknak* summarizes the two possible methods of teaching hearing impaired language learners, so the oral and the manual method. I refer to this article when I introduce my classroom observations. Kárpáti also writes about the difference between prelingual and postlingual deaf children that I used during the data analysis. What is more, I refer to Kárpáti as well when I say that teaching a foreign language is the most beneficial through one's native language, which raised my attention to the importance of defining one's mother tongue.

The second source I will highlight is Tove Skutnabb-Kangas's book *Bilingualism or Not: The Education of Minorities* where she introduced her criterion system on which basis one can define his or her native language.

The first criterion is origin or genealogy (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:14; 18) which implies that one can consider the first learned language as his or her mother tongue. In fact, this is not necessarily one language; a person can be bilingual since birth if, for example, his mother and father speak different languages and the child gets two different language input from the very beginning.

The second criterion according to Skutnabb-Kangas is identification (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:15; 18). Identification can be internal and external (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:15-16; 18). If it is internal, then I say that the given language is my mother tongue, but in case of external identification others, i.e.

my environment says what is my mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:18). External identification can cause discrimination as it did (or does) in Hungary related to hearing impaired, as the linguistic and cultural rights of deaf people got under regulation only in 2009.

The third criterion is competence that refers to the language one can speak best (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:14-15; 18). It is possible that “the language one knows best” (ibid) is not the language he learnt first. This can happen to hearing impaired children when for example the child lost his hearing at the age of four when he had already learnt to speak verbal Hungarian, but in the rest of his life he uses mainly sign language. In this case he may consider sign language to be his mother tongue as he uses it more naturally.

The fourth criterion according to Skutnabb-Kangas is called function (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:15; 18). She defines this function as “the language one uses most” (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:18). It can differ from the language known best, from the language with which one identifies himself or the language one learnt first. On this basis it is possible that one considers to have more than one mother tongue.

Skutnabb-Kangas highlights that “[a]ll except the criterion of origin allow for the possibility that the mother tongue may change, even several times during a lifetime” (ibid) if someone changes his or her workplace, moves to another country, gets married to a foreigner etc., so if his or her life circumstances have changed somehow.

The last source I will mention is an article written by Csilla Bartha and Helga Hattyár from which I learnt about the changing attitudes towards the deaf community and their rights in theory and practice. I used this article as a preface to the law on Hungarian sign language introduced in 2009, as it summarizes the legal actions and their (non-)realization in the last circa eight years. This article and the law itself are essential when the FL learning of hearing impaired students is discussed, as their linguistic rights and opportunity are determined by legal measures.

I. Clinical and Cultural Perspective of Deafness

The concept of deafness is complex therefore there are usually two interpretations. First, there is a medical, biological, or so to say clinical perspective, and on the other hand there is a cultural or anthropological one (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:78-79). In the followings, I will describe the two perspectives, and then, I will examine the cultural perspective in detail.

Clinical Perspective

This perspective explains hearing impairment from the biological side. “In medical sense deafness means the lack of hearing” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:79). Michael Rodda, Carl Grove and Peter V. Paul explain the degree of hearing impairment on the basis of two variables: hearing loss “measured in decibels (dB)” (Paul 2009:11) and “frequencies for the reception of speech” in hertz (Hz) (Rodda and Grove 1987:7). The most significant speech frequencies are 500, 1000 and 2000 Hz (*ibid*; Paul 2009:12). An example of calculating one’s hearing impairment is provided by Peter V. Paul:

Right ear

<i>Frequency (Hz)</i>	500	1000	2000
<i>Decibels</i>	70	80	90

Left ear

<i>Frequency (Hz)</i>	500	1000	2000
<i>Decibels</i>	40	50	60

(Paul 2009:12)

The average of hearing impairment is the average of 70+80+90 for the right ear, and the average of 40+50+60 for the left ear (*ibid*). On this basis “the average across the speech frequencies ... is 80 dB for the right ear” and “50 dB for the left ear” (*ibid*). “In this case, the left ear is the better ear” (*ibid*).

By knowing the average value of hearing loss, we can make categories “that correspond to degrees of hearing impairment” (*ibid*). Peter V. Paul has come up with his own classification (slight, mild, marked/moderate, extreme/profound) (*ibid*), but I have found Rodda and Grove’s categorization more precise:

Normal	-10 to 25 dB
Mild	26 to 40 dB
Moderate	41 to 55 dB
Moderately Severe	56 to 70 dB
Severe	71 to 90 dB
Profound	> 91 dB

(Rodda and Grove 1987:8)

In spite of this categorization, Paul attracts our attention to the importance of individual differences. He says that “two individuals with the same degree of hearing impairment (and similar age at onset ...) can turn out to be very different linguistically and psychologically” (Paul 2009:13).

Hearing acuity is significant of course, but the place of hearing loss is also essential. The human ear is divided into three parts: external, middle and inner ear (Figure 1).

The procedure of normal hearing is summarized by Timothy C. Hain, Professor of Neurology, Otolaryngology and Physical Therapy:

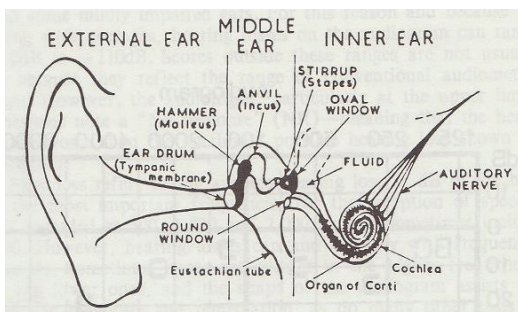


Figure 1.: The structure of the human ear
(Rodda and Grove 1987: 5)

[s]ound waves are first collected in our outer ear ... pass through our ear canal and cause our eardrum to vibrate. These vibrations are in turn transmitted to our inner ear by the bones of our middle ear.

Our inner ear plays a vital role in the transformation of these mechanical vibrations into electrical impulses, or signals, which can be recognized and decoded by our brain. When the vibrations reach the cochlea through movement of the bones in the middle ear, the fluid within it begins to move, resulting in back and forth motion of tiny hairs (sensory receptors) lining the cochlea. This motion results in the hair cells sending a signal along the auditory nerve to the brain. Our brain receives these impulses in its hearing centers and interprets them as a type of sound (Hain 2010)

In order to gain more insight into the lives of hearing impaired children I interviewed the teacher whose lessons I visited in Klúg Péter Kindergarten, Primary and Vocational School. She briefly summarized the biological background of hearing impairment, so I will quote some parts of the interview here.

[h]earing impairment can occur in two places. One of them is the middle ear which means that the inner ear is unharmed. In this case hearing impairment can be repaired by a hearing aid, and the impaired child is very likely to become a hearing person and learn to speak. This is called conductive hearing impairment and it can be caused by aviator ear.

Another type of hearing impairment is called nerve deafness that occurs in the inner ear. It can be hereditary or caused by meningitis. Hearing is an electric stimulus, but in this case some of the nerves do not function

well or at all, therefore they do not convey the stimulus to the brain. In this case one's hearing is tried to be repaired in a surgical way by placing a cochlear implant. The earlier the implant is given, the bigger chances the deaf child has to be able to hear and learn to speak properly (Appendix 2)

In order to clarify the difference between a hearing aid and a cochlear implant I will briefly describe them. A traditional hearing aid "consists basically of a microphone, an amplifier and an output into a tube connecting with an ear mold that must be properly placed in the ear" and it can only amplify the sound but not restore one's hearing (Rodda and Grove 1987:10). It differs from a cochlear implant which is the following:

a small, complex electronic device that can help to provide a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly deaf or severely hard-of-hearing. The implant consists of an external portion that sits behind the ear and a second portion that is surgically placed under the skin (Cochlear Implants 2010)

Peter V. Paul mentions age at onset as an influential factor in relation to hearing impairment (Paul 2009:13). Age at onset means the "age when the impairment occurs" (ibid) on the basis of which two groups can be distinguished: prelingual and postlingual deaf people (Kárpáti 2004:162). The difference is that in the case of postlingual deafness "hearing loss occurs after language acquisition, so around or after the age of three which implies that the deaf person is able to communicate in his or her mother tongue even though his or her pronunciation gets distorted a little" (ibid). On the other hand, "if a person is born deaf or loses his or her hearing before the age of three, he or she will be able to learn spoken Hungarian by great difficulties and within many years" (ibid).

Age is a relevant factor in the acquisition of one's mother tongue, and it is said to be important in the case of learning a FL. "Many linguists and researchers have been working on the question of critical age period after which the native-like acquisition of a language is really difficult or nearly impossible" (Drávucz and Pintér 2009:1). Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that "there is an age-related point beyond which it becomes difficult or impossible to learn a second language to the same degree as native speakers of that language" (Gass and Selinker 2001:335). For Hungarian non-hearing children it is nearly impossible to become native-like speakers of a FL, especially because they often have difficulties in learning Hungarian fluently and properly.

In what follows, I will describe the cultural or anthropological perspective of hearing impairment, where I will analyse my experiences and the results of the questionnaires filled in by non-hearing learners of English.

Cultural Perspective

According to the cultural perspective the members of the deaf community belong to a separate cultural group who “sense the world in a mainly visual way, share a common culture ... common behavioural habits and common language” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:79). “In a sociolinguistic sense the group of hearing impaired people is considered to be a linguistic minority” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:80). “10% of the Earth’s population is hearing impaired” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:78), and “in Hungary the deaf community is the third largest linguistic minority” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:73; Kárpáti 2004:161).

The texts I referred to above were written in 2002 (Bartha and Hattyár) and 2004 (Kárpáti), when the deaf community was said to be a linguistic community. In spite of this consideration, there has been substantial discriminative prejudice towards them. In 2002 Bartha Csilla and Hattyár Helga wrote that “it is not the uniqueness of developing countries that deaf people are regarded as deviant or a group with reduced abilities as they do not follow the norms, value system and language of the leading community (in this case the hearing society)” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:84). Still in 2002, “according to the laws to operate the deaf community was not considered as a minority but as a challenged group” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:87).

It was only in December 2009 when a law was introduced about the Hungarian sign language and its use. This law declares that hearing impaired and deaf people are equal members of the society, and acknowledges the “cultural and community-forming power of sign language” (2009. évi CXXV. törv.). The law acknowledges the linguistic status of Hungarian sign language (ibid) which is very important from two points of view. First, it is necessary to understand that sign language is “an individual system that has its own vocabulary, structure and grammar” (Kárpáti 2004:161). “Sign language is not international: every country, every linguistic community has its own sign language” (Kárpáti 2004:162), consequently a hearing impaired Hungarian and a hearing impaired English will not be able to understand each other unless one of them is able to use the other’s sign language.

The second significant perspective is that before the introduction of the law on Hungarian sign language it was a widespread belief that “only sounding or verbal languages can be considered as “normal”, human languages” (Bartha and Hattyár 2002:75). Therefore, “within the society and

in education it was a fact that a deaf person's mother tongue is Hungarian" (Kárpáti 2004:166).

One of the aims of my research is to find out which language deaf children consider their mother tongue as "it is worth teaching a foreign language via one's native language" (ibid). The question arises what if a hearing impaired child considers both spoken Hungarian and sign language his or her mother tongue. In this case I have to introduce the concept of bilingualism.

According to François Grosjean bilingualism means the "knowledge and regular use of two or more languages" (Grosjean 2002:127).

only the sign language-verbal language bilingualism can satisfy a deaf child's needs to communicate with his or her parents as early as possible, to develop his or her cognitive abilities ... to communicate with his or her environment and to adjust to the world of deaf and hearing communities (ibid)

When we consider a Hungarian deaf child bilingual we say that his or her languages are spoken Hungarian and Hungarian sign language. "The significance of the two languages can differ as one child may consider sign language his or her dominant language, others may say their dominant language is spoken Hungarian, and there are some who make balance in the use of the two languages" (ibid).

François Grosjean makes difference between simultaneous and successive acquisition of two languages (Grosjean 1982:169). In the case of simultaneous acquisition the two languages are learnt at the same time (Grosjean 1982:180-181), while in the case of successive acquisition the learning of the second language only starts when the first language acquisition is finished (Grosjean 1982:191). I will introduce it in the analysis of the questionnaires that we can find examples for both types of language acquisition among hearing impaired children, and that it can influence their FL learning.

II. Research Methodology

I decided to examine foreign language learning of Hungarian hearing impaired children from three different perspectives. First, I intended to observe the students in order to gain a general idea about their language skills and find out the circumstances of their FL learning. Second, I was interested in the students' own views and opinions, thus I asked them to fill in a questionnaire

about their language use. Finally, I wanted to learn about the reasons of these students' learning conditions, therefore I conducted an interview with their English teacher to get an insight into the institution itself, its regulations, teachers, habits and the way the teacher sees her students.

I aimed to find answers to three major questions. First, I examined which language Hungarian hearing impaired children consider their mother tongue: verbal Hungarian or Hungarian sign language. That is why I asked the students to fill in a questionnaire where besides answering questions referring to their language use, they had to name their mother tongue as well. Second, I was interested why it is difficult to teach a hearing impaired child through his or her mother tongue. And third, I intended to find out whether it is worth teaching them verbal English or English sign language.

I tried to find out the students' level of proficiency both in Hungarian and English. That is why I observed three English classes where I could hear them speak both Hungarian and English. Moreover I could observe their communication habits among each other as not only could I gather data in their English classes but I could observe them communicating during breaks.

2.1 Classroom Observations

First, I will introduce the English classes I visited, and the students I observed in the institution of hearing impaired children in Szeged called Klúg Péter Kindergarten, Primary and Vocational School. I had the opportunity to attend three classes in three different groups.

My aim was to get to know their language use among each other during the lessons, and the way they communicate with their teacher. I also expected to discover the language they use in a rather informal situation, namely during the breaks where they are not controlled and supervised by their teacher. My other intention was to find out their language abilities even in Hungarian and in English as well.

2.1.1 Group A

The first group was a seventh grade class where I had the opportunity to observe ten students. In this class the students are between the age of 13 and 15, and they all have been studying English for two years. All students use a hearing aid and two of them have a cochlear implant. They are taught English through the oral-auditory method via spoken Hungarian. "The oral method considers speech, lip-reading, and the development of hearing as the primary means of communication and education within the deaf community" (Bartha

2004:320). In practice it is carried out by slower speech and better articulation from the teacher.

Another possible way of teaching hearing impaired children is the manual method. This method “is based on sign language” (Kárpáti 2004:163). According to the teacher, the problem with this method in Klúg Péter Kindergarten, Primary and Vocation School is that teachers usually can use very basic sign language, so they are not able to use it effectively in education.

In Group A all students can use sign language and as I was observing them in the breaks between classes they were communicating with each other via sign language. All students of this group are capable of speech production however some students are difficult to understand especially when they speak English.

In the beginning of the lesson, all of them were asked to tell four sentences about themselves. The sentences were the following:

- 1) I'm / My name is ...
- 2) I'm ... years old.
- 3) I'm a girl / boy.
- 4) I'm Hungarian. / I'm from Hungary.

These four sentences are considered to be basic and quite easy sentences of English: however, some of them had difficulties in producing them. The words “girl” and “Hungarian” caused great difficulties for them, and hardly could they recall the names of numbers. When they could not pronounce and/or recall a word, they spoke rather “Hunglish” as they started the sentence in English but finished it in Hungarian.

If they were not sure about something, they turned to each other and expected help from their classmates rather than from the teacher. During the break they used sign language among each other, but during the lesson they rather used verbal Hungarian as they tried to adjust to their teacher.

In the second half of the lesson they wrote a short test that focused on mostly vocabulary. Their proficiency level is rather low, but there are some prominent students within the group who could finish the test fast and flawless.

2.1.2 Group B

The second group I visited was an eighth grade class where seven students formed the group. In this class students are between the age of 15 and 17, and they have been studying English for three years. They are more seriously impaired than Group A, as they usually do not use hearing in their

communication. Their speech is less understandable, and they rely mostly on lip-reading and sign language. They use sign language among themselves either during breaks or the lesson. One of the students said that he did not use a hearing aid although this is because of his non-hearing identity and not because he would not need it.

The method was the same as in the case of Group A, they study through the oral method however it seemed more difficult for Group B. They had difficulties in lip-reading longer words such as “Hungarian”. When the teacher saw that they did not understand it, she wrote the pronunciation “hángériön” on the blackboard. Students are familiar with phonetic symbols; they usually learn the pronunciation of new vocabulary with the help of them.

In the first part of the lesson they introduced themselves in the same way as Group A did. They are also capable of speech production but it is less understandable than that of Group A. If a student cannot pronounce a word, the teacher helps him by using the finger alphabet (Figure 2). So if she has to support the pronunciation she shows the following elements of the finger alphabet: H - Á - N - G - É - R - I - Ö - N.



Figure 2.: Finger

During this lesson the teacher used the technique of differentiation as two out of seven students are able to use their hearing. Those students who do not use their hearing got a short comic strip in English. They were also given two sheets of paper: the first one contained the Hungarian translation of the comic strip sentence by sentence, and the other included the phonetic transcription of the sentences. The students were asked to match the Hungarian translation and the phonetic transcription with the English sentences of the comic strip.

Those two students who were taught differently had to listen to the story as a start. The teacher read it out loud meanwhile she was showing the pictures of the comic strip. She spoke slowly and articulated more than usual, so the students could understand her. After that, they also had to do the same exercise as the other five learners.

2.1.3 Group C

The third group under analysis was a mixed group where hearing impaired and hearing, but mentally challenged students studied together. In this class I observed only the four hearing impaired learners.

The hearing impaired students are between the age of 17 and 18, and they have been studying English for different periods of time. Three of them have been studying it for four years and one of them is a beginner student: he has been studying English only for a year.

The difference among the time intervals does not mean any difference between their proficiency levels. Two students have cochlear implants therefore their speech is quite clear and understandable. The other two students should use their hearing aids but they often refuse to use them. According to the teacher, this is related to their strong hearing impaired identity, and the fact that they consider it shameful. Therefore, these two students' speech is difficult to understand even in Hungarian.

In the beginning of the class, they were asked to introduce themselves; then some parts of the class were also differentiated as two different types of students attended it. They all practiced the names of months: the hearing students had to repeat the words after the teacher, while the hearing impaired ones had to match the written names of months with their phonetic transcriptions.

In the next task, all of the learners were involved. The teacher wrote everything on the blackboard, sometimes even the instructions. Their task was to answer the questions on the blackboard by names of months.

The first question was the following: "When were you born?" The teacher wrote the phonetic transcription under the question and the Hungarian translation next to it.

When were you born? = Mikor születnél?
 [wen wər ju bɔ:n]

The teacher also wrote the answer to this question on the blackboard. The system is very similar, except that the Hungarian translation is not given.

I was born in _____
 ai wɔz bɔ:n in _____

As you can see “born” was given two different phonetic transcriptions [bɔ:n] and [bo:n]. It can be confusing for students learning English as a FL, but in this paper I do not focus on this issue of language teaching.

In addition to the phonetic transcription, there is another aid for students to support pronunciation:

áj voz bɔn

This transcription helps students to support the pronunciation of phonetic symbols.

Other questions that they were working with are the following: When is Christmas?, When is Easter?, and When was your mum born?. In the last part of the lesson they collected good wishes such as Happy birthday to you, Happy New Year, Merry Christmas and Happy name-day.

Writing on the blackboard and visual supplements were essential parts of all the three classes as hearing impaired children often rely on visual aids (Kárpáti 2004:168). During my classroom observations I was interested in how hearing impaired students understand the verbal Hungarian or English instructions, and how they can produce English utterances. I observed that instructions in verbal Hungarian were not always obvious for them, and they hardly understood if the instruction was English. When they could not pronounce a word correctly, they rather reacted in Hungarian. Moreover, in most cases, they had difficulties in pronouncing English words and making (grammatically) correct English sentences.

My aim was to find out if it is worth teaching them a FL through verbal Hungarian, or it would be more beneficial if the teacher used sign language. What is more, it is also questionable whether teachers should teach verbal English or English sign language. I found that most students had great difficulties in pronouncing English words because they did not get an appropriate pattern they could have been able to imitate. Lip-reading was not always enough, thus because of the lack of success they lost their motivation and gave it up very soon. According to my observation, it would be more

beneficial if they were taught via a language they can use at a sufficient level, but verbal Hungarian does not seem to be the best choice.

2.2 Interview

I conducted an interview with the teacher of the students whose classes I could observe. My intention was to learn about the learning environment of students and I was also interested what their teacher thinks about their language use. I found this research method important because I could see the students from another aspect, i.e. from the perspective of their teacher. The full version of the interview can be found in Appendix 2.

The interview was conducted before the classroom observations, thus in the first part of the interview I asked about hearing impairment in general, but I will not imply this section in my paper as I have already discussed both the clinical and the cultural perspective of deafness.

In the second part of the interview I was asking about the teachers of this institution and the methods used during language teaching. I realised that there is only one teacher who can use sign language at a sufficient level for teaching, but she does not use sign language during her lessons. She only holds extracurricular lessons for those who are interested in sign language.

The law on Hungarian sign language introduced in 2009 ensures the right for a hearing impaired student to study different subjects through sign language but only if his or her parents ask for it (2009. évi CXXV. törv.). Otherwise the institution is not required to provide teachers who are able to use sign language at a sufficient level for education. This results in the fact that students are taught through the oral method that uses verbal Hungarian as a language of instruction.

I was asking about the realisation of this method, for example, how pronunciation is taught through verbal Hungarian if the students do not have an advanced language command of the language of instruction. The teacher mentioned how important it is to provide visual aids for them in form of handouts or writing on the blackboard. The teacher also mentioned the finger alphabet that can help supporting the pronunciation for those seriously impaired students who cannot fully rely on lip-reading. The teacher explained me its usage through an example, and I had the chance to observe it in practice during the lesson of Group B.

The teacher is able to use the finger alphabet, but she can use sign language only at a basic level. That is why she cannot use sign language as a means of teaching. Thus, the students communicate with her through spoken Hungarian, but she observed that among each other they mainly use sign language.

I also intended to learn about the linguistic and cognitive abilities of students, and the way they communicate with each other. I found out that there can be major differences between the students when they start their studies at the age of six. They may differ both linguistically and psychologically, and the level of hearing impairment is different as well. I got to know that prelingual and postlingual deaf students study together, thus their general knowledge about the world can differ as well. The lack of knowledge about the world results in “mental retardation” and “reduced speech production” (Appendix 2) as well. Therefore, it is really difficult to satisfy every student’s needs equally.

These students study the material designed for the first school year for three years, thus they finish primary school later, at the age of 16. Regarding the issue of FL teaching, it is not compulsory to study a FL during the primary school; it becomes obligatory only at 9th grade. However, starting to teach a FL through verbal Hungarian for 16 or 17-year old students who do not have an advanced language command of the language of instruction is seemingly impossible. It would seem more beneficial teaching them through a language they can use at a more proficient level, i.e. Hungarian sign language. If they can use Hungarian sign language at a higher level than verbal Hungarian, it forecasts that they would use English sign language at a more proficient level than verbal English.

2.3 Questionnaire

I intended to examine two factors of language use with the questionnaire. First, I was interested in which language hearing impaired children consider to be their mother tongue: sign language, verbal Hungarian or both. Second, I intended to learn about the students’ language use at home and among their friends. I expected to discover which language they use the most often and at the best level of proficiency. I was also interested in which language they approve of using in different environments.

The students were asked to answer nine questions related to their hearing impairment and language use. In questions 1 to 8, they were asked to choose from two, three or four possible alternatives, and to underline the one they are able to identify with. However, in case of question 7 and 8 where they had to name the language they use the most frequently at home and among their friends 10 of them marked both answers despite the fact that they were asked to underline only one of the alternatives. Question 9 was an open ended question as students were asked how long they have been studying English. In the following part I will introduce the analysis of the questionnaire and the consequences I have drawn from it.

First and foremost, I was interested how long they have been hearing impaired (Figure 3). It turned out that there are both prelingual and postlingual deaf students, so in spite of the fact that the students differ linguistically these two groups study together.

Those who became hearing impaired between age 1 and 3 are on the edge of prelingual and postlingual deafness. They may have been born deaf, but their environment started being suspicious when they did not start talking in time. Therefore, this age between 1 and 3 may mean the discovery of hearing loss and not the actual losing of hearing.

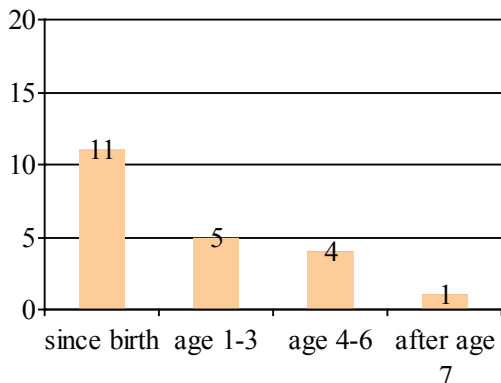


Figure 3: The age of becoming hearing impaired

The student who lost her hearing after the age of 7 met verbal Hungarian before the hearing loss. This means that her speech is completely understandable, although it is slightly distorted. Her English pronunciation is fully understandable as well.

Hearing loss can be hereditary, so one of my goals was to find out if their parents are hearing impaired as well (Figure 4). I found that those two learners who claimed that both their parents were hearing impaired lost their hearing between age 1 and 3. In these cases hearing loss may have been hereditary, but it was recognized later. That is why this age may mean only the discovery of hearing loss. On the other hand, it is possible that two non-hearing parents have a hearing baby, so in this case it is also an option that these two children under analysis lost their hearing between age 1 and 3.

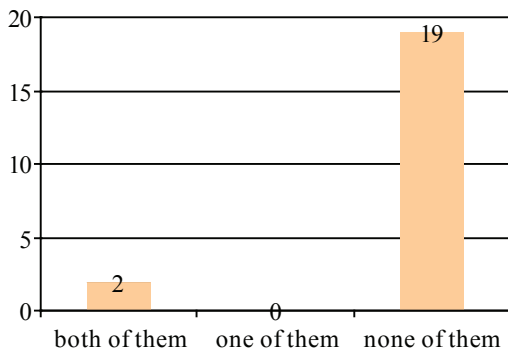


Figure 4: Hearing impairment of parents

In the third question students were asked to give the level of their hearing acuity in decibels for their right and left ear as well. Though I realised it is

irrelevant as the level of hearing acuity can and usually does differ from frequency to frequency. Therefore, I left this question out of my analysis and concentrated on more relevant issues.

The fourth question was whether they use a hearing aid or not. With the exception of an 8th grade student, all of them answered yes. This 8th grade student does not have a cochlear implant, but the reason for not using his hearing aid was only guessed by his teacher, which I have mentioned before (non-hearing identity).

The fifth question was whether they are able to use sign language, and they all answered yes. I observed that they use sign language among each other, sometimes even during lessons as well. The only group that uses sign language constantly in classes as well is Group B, so the 8th grade class.

Question 6, 7 and 8 are the most significant from the point of view of my research. In question 6 I inquired which language they consider their mother tongue (Figure 5). This idea is very important for me as a future teacher of English and for those teachers who are working with non-hearing or hearing impaired children as “it is worth teaching a foreign language via one’s native language” (Kárpáti 2004:166). If we consider our mother tongue a language, it implies that it is the language we use the most often and the most easily. That is why this seems to be the best means of teaching any foreign language to students with hearing impairment.

Question 7 and 8 focuses on language use in different environments. I intended to find out which language Hungarian hearing impaired children use in their two most important environments: at home and among their friends. Figure 6 presents the learners’ language use at home, while Figure 7 presents their language use among their friends, mainly within the school.

7 out of those 8 children who mainly use sign language at home marked sign language as their mother tongue in question 6. 10 out of those 12 students who speak mostly

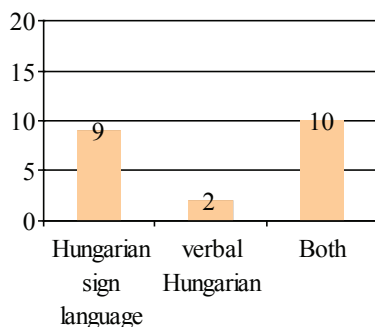


Figure 5: Mother tongue of deaf children

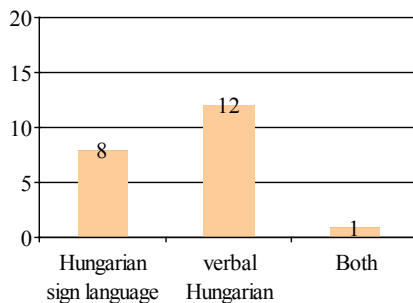


Figure 6: Language use at home

verbal Hungarian at home consider themselves bilinguals according to their answers, and 11 of them have hearing parents. As mentioned before, there were two students, who have hearing impaired parents, but their answers were different to question 6 and 7. One of them considers himself as bilingual and said that he used verbal Hungarian at home. The other student considers sign language his mother tongue and he marked sign language as the most frequently used language at home.

There was only one child who marked both sign language and verbal Hungarian as the most often used language at home. He considers sign language as his mother tongue, but his parents are hearing, therefore marking both answers is completely understandable.

The 8th question refers to language use among their friends (Figure 7). 4 out of those 7 students who marked Hungarian sign language in question 8 also consider sign language as their mother tongue. 2 learners consider themselves bilinguals, and there was one child who said that his mother tongue was verbal Hungarian. This student has hearing parents and he lost his hearing between age 4 and 6. Thus he learnt verbal Hungarian before hearing loss, and in spite of the fact he uses sign language at home and among his friends he still considers verbal Hungarian his native language.

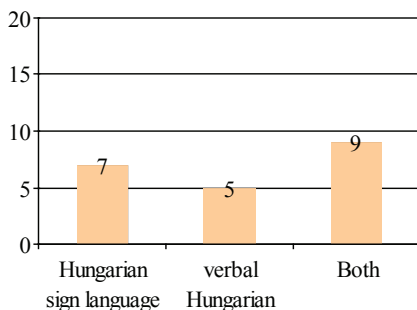


Figure 7: Language use among friends

4 out of those 5 children who chose verbal Hungarian in question 8 consider themselves bilinguals. One of these students has a cochlear implant that facilitates communication in verbal Hungarian. It is not peculiar if a student says that he uses verbal Hungarian among his friends as hearing impaired children have hearing, but sometimes mentally challenged schoolmates as well.

4 out of those 9 students who marked both languages in question 8 said that their native language was Hungarian sign language. One of these children has a cochlear implant as well, and all of their parents are hearing. Other 4 out of these 9 students consider themselves bilinguals, and only one of them said that her mother tongue was verbal Hungarian.

It can be seen from the data above that children come from very different environments, have different linguistic backgrounds, thus they have different educational needs. This is why it is so difficult to teach every student according to his or her needs or through his or her native language.

III. Data analysis

From Tove Skutnabb-Kangas's criterion system and the analysis of the questionnaires it can be seen that defining hearing impaired students' mother tongue is really difficult, as on the basis of the four criteria we identify more languages.

For example, one of the students is hearing impaired since birth and his parents are hearing. The language learnt first is not obvious, as the parents must have spoken verbal Hungarian but the child could not hear it. When the hearing impairment turned out the parents might have started learning and using sign language but I do not have data related to this question. So, in this case I would say the child is native bilingual as he might have learnt the two languages simultaneously.

Identification is a very personal issue, especially internal identification. I can only rely on his answer to question 6 according to which he considers himself bilingual. On the other hand, external identification is another question. By living in the Hungarian society and reading relevant literature, I concluded that hearing people can be divided into two groups. The first group thinks that Hungarian non-hearing people are part of the Hungarian nation therefore their native language is definitely verbal Hungarian. They may relate sign language to disability and not think of it as a minority language. The other group of hearing people would say that a deaf person's mother tongue is necessarily sign language as they communicate in this language.

From the point of view of language competence I think that this student can use sign language more effectively than verbal Hungarian as he is hearing impaired since birth. This child is seriously hearing impaired, who relies mostly on lip-reading and sign language, and does not really use his hearing. He used sign language during breaks and he communicated via sign language with his mates during the lesson as well.

Function refers to the language used the most often and it can be seen that it depends on the environment. With his hearing parents this student uses verbal Hungarian, but among his friends he prefers sign language as I have already mentioned above.

On the basis of my observations and the analysis of questionnaires I have found four different categories related to hearing impaired children and their possible L1:

- a) *Hearing parents with non-hearing child since birth:* in this case the hearing impaired child is very likely to meet verbal Hungarian first, and if his parents are not considerate and open-minded

enough, he may not get familiar with sign language until he starts primary school. In this way the hearing impaired child will be at a cognitive disadvantage: he will miss learning about his environment and the world in general, as he will not understand the verbal language. He has to learn verbal Hungarian and sign language simultaneously at school around age 6 or 7. Learning sound production is really difficult - if it is possible at all - in this case, therefore learning another language through verbal Hungarian seems impossible.

- b) *Hearing parents with non-hearing child who lost his hearing after meeting verbal Hungarian:* in this case the child has not necessarily learnt to speak Hungarian, but has already got some verbal input from his parents. If he has already learnt to speak then his speech will remain understandable and he will learn a foreign language without much difficulty in verbal Hungarian, as he will not have to rely only on sign language. If the child has not learnt to speak before the hearing loss the situation may be similar to the one in a).
- c) *Non-hearing parents with non-hearing child:* in this case the first language is also the language of the parents which is sign language. Sign language will become the child's first language, i.e. his mother tongue. Verbal Hungarian will be learnt as a second language and most probably will be started to be taught only in primary school. On this basis it should seem obvious that the child will learn a foreign language the most effectively through sign language.
- d) *Non-hearing parents with hearing child:* it could be obvious that if the parents' first language is sign language, then the child's first language will be sign language as well. Although we cannot forget about the child's environment - siblings, grandparents, teachers, media etc. - from where he will most likely to get verbal Hungarian input. In this case the child can learn sign language in order to be able to communicate with his parents, but will learn proper verbal Hungarian and foreign languages as well.

By studying Skutnabb-Kangas's complex definition for mother tongue and the replies of students under analysis, I found the following answers to my research questions.

- 1) Why is it so difficult to determine a hearing impaired child's mother tongue? – It can be difficult to define a hearing person's mother tongue as we can observe this concept according to four criteria. Moreover, the languages rendered to these criteria can alter if one's living circumstances change somehow. Defining one's mother tongue is a personal issue, but teachers have to take into account the needs of each child and establish a learning environment as suitable for all children as possible, even if it requires forming smaller groups and applying new methods.
- 2) Why is it difficult to teach each hearing impaired student on his or her native language? – First of all, because defining one's mother tongue can be difficult as well. The main reason is the difference in the students' needs, and the lack of teachers who are able to use sign language for educational purposes. The law introduced in 2009 ensures the right for all hearing impaired children to receive bilingual education but only if their parents demand it (2009 évi CXXV. törv.). Parents should take into consideration and represent the needs of their children, and they all have to cooperate with the teachers who should also prefer the requirements of their students.
- 3) Is it worth teaching verbal English or shall we teach English sign language? – From the classroom observations it turned out that students mainly rely on visual aids and some of them do not use their hearing at all. Moreover, it is not obligatory to teach them the oral skills, as they are only required to take the written part of the language exam. It depends on the language teacher if he or she finds the development of oral skills important or not. Thus, I would recommend focusing only on written English as hearing impaired students have a lack of verbal language command of Hungarian as well. It seems more efficient to teach them English sign language.

Conclusion

In my paper I examined the FL learning of hearing impaired children. First, I introduced the two aspects of deafness: the clinical and the cultural

perspective. Then, I put emphasis on the cultural approach and focused on the issue of one's native language if he is hearing impaired.

After discussing the theoretical background, I introduced my research based on classroom observations, an interview and a questionnaire. My first research question was why it is so difficult to define one's mother tongue in case of hearing impairment. I found that there are different criteria on the basis of which one can name more than one language as his or her mother tongue. In the case of non-hearing learners I realised that the question of mother tongue mainly depends on two factors. From the criterion system of Skutnabb-Kangas I found competence (language known at the best proficiency level) and function (language used the most often) (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984:14; 18) as the two major criteria of defining a hearing impaired student's mother tongue.

I have examined why it is so difficult to teach a hearing impaired child via his or her mother tongue. There are substantial differences between the students which make it hard to satisfy their needs equally. In addition, a law in itself does not guarantee that every child will be able to or want to practice his or her rights. Teachers and parents have to work together to ensure the least problematic learning conditions of students.

My third question was whether it is worth teaching them verbal English or English sign language. Written skills seem to be used with more confidence, thus teaching them verbal English where pronunciation is completely different from that of Hungarian is really difficult or even impossible. These students are very unlikely to become able to use verbal English at a sufficient level for communication, as they lack the oral skills in Hungarian as well.

In addition, not all Hungarian hearing impaired children consider verbal Hungarian as their native language. There are some who do so, but those students can use sign language as well. I realised that about 48% of the students consider themselves bilinguals and another 43% say that their mother tongue is sign language. This ratio seems to be significant enough to be taken into account and teach learners via sign language if they find it more convenient than verbal Hungarian. I am aware of the fact that this is an option if the parents ask for it, but I intend to emphasize its importance from the point of view of hearing impaired FL learners.

In order to teach a FL effectively the best would be to form groups according to the learners' needs. I do not intend to state that the oral method is better than the manual one or vice versa, but it is unquestionable that a teacher might use one method more effectively with certain students than with the others. It is not enough to introduce a law; teachers, parents and students should all work together and decide in favour of the learners', demands, even if it requires reorganization or methodological renewal.

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Figure 1:

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Figure 2:

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