

LANGUAGE COGNIZANCE AND SIGN LANGUAGE AWARENESS ON THE PART OF DEAF INDIVIDUALS AT 2nd LEVEL PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR HEARING IMPAIRED INDIVIDUALS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Pavel Kučera, Eva Suralová
Institute of Special Education Studies
Pedagogical Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic

Abstract

A deaf individual's language cognizance is one of the main factors leading to his/her inclusion in the community of the deaf. Sign language has a major influence on the development and creation of deaf individuals' identity. The conscious use of sign language as a communication tool is closely related to the different perception of the world and, thus, culture dissimilarities. At present, the subject 'Sign Language', contributing to the overall development of language cognizance of deaf individuals — sign language users —, is being introduced at primary schools for hearing impaired individuals within the framework education programme. The following text presents the conclusions of the research focused on ascertaining the perception of sign language, the level of knowledge relating to the theory of sign language, and the position of sign language in the society (culture of the deaf) on the part of sign language users themselves — pupils at 2nd level primary schools for hearing impaired individuals — through the qualitative approach method.

***Key words:** deaf individuals, sign language, identity, language identification, community of the deaf*

Introduction to the Issue

There are no exact statistics in the Czech Republic, which would describe the current number of hearing impaired individuals. Hrubý (2008) states that there are approximately 1,000,000 hearing impaired individuals in the Czech Republic, the decisive part of whom are old people (predominantly over 65 years of age) whose hearing has deteriorated due to senility. Of this total number of hearing impaired individuals in the Czech Republic, there are approximately 7,600 whose hearing impairment has lasted since birth or set in before the development of spoken language. These individuals usually use the Czech sign language.

The term 'hearing impaired individual' is an identification in the broader sense of the word, including hard of hearing individuals, deaf individuals, deafened individuals, individuals

with the cochlear implant, individuals suffering from ringing in the ears, or individuals with presbycusis. This contribution is focused, in particular, on hearing impaired individuals whose hearing loss does not allow them to naturally and spontaneously acquire the spoken form of a language. **Deaf** individuals cannot perceive sound, even at the highest volume, but only possible vibrations. Pre-lingual deaf individuals are individuals who were born deaf or lost their hearing before the development of speech. In **hard of hearing** individuals, the hearing impairment may range from minimal hearing loss up to severe hearing impairment affecting quality communication. Hearing impairment can be substituted, to a significant extent, by hearing aids (Horáková, 2012).

Sign language is officially recognized as a natural and full-fledged language code of the deaf. The specificity of the family and school environments where deaf children are predominantly surrounded by adult non-deaf individuals makes them to get to know, in certain form, the spoken language — language of the non-deaf — at early age. Thus, these children become the children of two worlds, two languages. Sign language is a natural communication means for the deaf, which allows them to get to know the world around them, acquire its concepts and elaborate these concepts further. Spoken language (in its written form) then allows deaf individuals to function in the world of the non-deaf on full-fledged basis.

Czech sign language is a communication system of visual motor nature. *“Czech sign language is a natural and full-fledged communication system formed by specific visual, movement-based means, that is, by the shapes of the hands, the positions and the movements of the hands, mimics, the positions of the head and the upper part of the body. Czech sign language has the basic attributes of a language, that is, sign-based communication, double structure, productivity, distinctiveness, and historical dimension, and is stable from both lexical and grammatical perspectives”* (Act No. 384/2008 Coll., as amended by Act No. 423/2008 Coll., on Communication Systems of Deaf and Deaf-blind Individuals (Zákon 384/2008 Sb)).

One of the conditions of inclusion of hearing impaired individuals in the major hearing society is to learn the Czech language. It is necessary to understand the contents and grammar of the Czech language and the meaning of the sentences that are read since the Czech sign language has a particular sentence structure and does not decline nouns or conjugate verbs. A deaf child gets familiar with the Czech language through writing. Many deaf individuals find it difficult to understand the read or written text (Petráňová, 2005). Additionally, many people think that the deaf can communicate without problems by reading and writing and that they can read all necessary information in the literature or on the Internet.

The method of handling both languages becomes a substantial part of an individual's personality. The language cognizance of the deaf has considerable influence on the development and creation of his/her identity. The achievement of the final form of a deaf individual as a conscious, full-fledged part of the society, who knows his/her place in the world and lives a full and satisfied life, is an indispensable prerequisite for a mature and complete personality perceiving his/her own identity, language and culture. Deaf individuals, being a language and cultural minority, share with one another not only the sign language but also culture, education, rich history, beliefs, values and habits (Kosinová, 2008).

“Pre-lingual deaf children do not realize their ‘handicap’ because they do not know what hearing is. Only when they are required to look and behave as hearing children do they start to realize the deficiency (Wilbur, cited in Wilcox, 1989, p. 103).”

The **communication systems used in the education process** of pupils at schools for hearing impaired individuals differ from institution to institution. It is possible to simplify that two basic communication streams were developed during the education of hearing impaired individuals: audio-oral and visual-motor (Horáková, 2012).

The communication systems stemming from these two streams are then used by specific schools, depending on the preferred approach to hearing impaired pupils. They concern the oral approach, total communication approach, and the bilingual approach. Thus, children get to know the sign language through a deaf teacher and deaf classmates — deaf parents' children.

Language Acquisition

Every child has the innate ability to perceive and acquire language. The well-known linguist Noam Chomsky declared that people are bearers of an innate module of language development (Sternberg, 2009). This means that we are biologically prepared to acquire language. Developmental psychology professionals presume the existence of the so-called critical periods, that is, decisive lifetime periods, in which the given function must be acquired for its development to be normal (Atkinson et al, 2003). If the given function is not acquired in the critical period, its full potential need not develop anytime later. Children with insufficient language stimulation until the age of six up to seven years do not feel the need to learn to speak to the fullest extent (Goldin-Meadow, 2003).

In relation to the acquisition of sign languages, Hronová (2010) states that according to the research in the sphere of neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics of sign languages, it was proved that the acquisition of a language is not related to the acoustic-oral channel since every language is an amodal functional system. She also states that the ontogenesis of a language takes place as a series of development phases that are nearly identical in all children in the whole world and the richness in the language expression does not differ depending on the nature of the language in which a child communicates.

The development of thinking and the development of language take place independent of each other, but are strongly interrelated. Language is often characterized as a thinking tool: *“If we do not know the words for colours, we will be able to differentiate them by sight, but will not be able to ‘mentally’ work with the concept of colour. If we do not know the words for numbers, we will not be able to carry out mathematical operations with them. If we do not acquire the abstract concepts expressing sadness, anger, regret or shame, our own perception will be reduced to the most fundamental physical feelings. If we do not have an expression describing the past and the future, it is difficult to think within these categories* (Jungwirthová, 2014, p. 10)”.

If a child cannot communicate with understanding, he/she is frustrated all the time due to his/her emotional deprivation and does not obtain sufficient experience in the sphere of social and communication competencies. Thus, the resulting incorrect development of an individual may be exhibited through inadequate reaction to a particular situation, by compromised self-control, lack of empathy, or disorientation in social relationships and situations (Krejčířová & Říčan, 2006).

Language and Cultural Context of Hearing Impairment

The specificity of hearing impairment lies in language and cultural dissimilarity. The deaf then become a minority, the members of which differentiate themselves from the hearing majority by their different language and cultural cognizance. At present, deaf individuals are a proud and self-confident community everywhere in the world, which knows, fights for, and asserts, its rights.

The term **culture of the deaf** was introduced in the 70s of the 20th century; however, this culture existed much earlier. The culture of the deaf is maintained inside the community of the deaf. Its contribution is specific due to the fact that this transmission from generation to generation directly in a deaf family is possible only in 5–10% of these individuals since 90–95% of deaf children are born to deaf parents. The transmission and the sharing of common

culture then take place at schools for the deaf, at boarding schools or in the organizations of the deaf (Kosinová, 2008).

We can understand a deaf individual's identity as the creation of consistent self-perception, 'the finding of oneself', the realization of 'where I belong' as the social aspect of identity and of 'who I am' as the personality aspect of the identity. The aforesaid shows that it concerns a development process and that an individual's identity develops gradually and depends on many factors, such as the approach of the people around to a hearing impaired child, the communication at home and, later, at school, the relationships with classmates and peers and whether there is any adult deaf individual's identification model during the individual's development. Padden (2005) considers an individual's primary language as the basic identification factor. The language determines a deaf individual's identity and his/her affiliation with particular culture. Thus, the individual's identity expresses his/her attitude to his/her own hearing impairment.

Subject: Sign Language

The Framework Education Programme (FEP) is a curricular document defining binding frameworks for educating pupils from 3 to 9 years of age. The objective of the education is to equip pupils with a set of key competencies. "*The key competencies constitute a summary of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and values important for personal development and application of each member in the society* (Belz & Siegrist, 2001, p. 167)". The school level then represents school education programmes according to which the teaching takes place at individual schools. To achieve this objective, the FEP enables the consideration of pupils' education needs and possibilities and the application of a more variable organization and individualization of the teaching based on pupils' needs. The FEP regulates education of pupils with special education needs. For these pupils, special subjects, including **Sign Language**, are incorporated into the school education programmes (stemming from the FEP).

At present, the contents of the subject 'Sign Language' are not firmly defined and rather depend on the individual approach of the given school. Most schools stem from the experience from abroad where this subject has been a mandatory part of bilingual education programmes for several years. The subject is usually taught one hour a week in sign language and the teacher is a sign language user. The teacher is often deaf and so plays the identification role of an adult deaf individual. He/she serves as the communication, identification, social and cultural role for the child, in particular, for the deaf parents' deaf children for who the school may be the first place where they encounter the culture of the deaf and the sign language.

Principal Research Objective

The principal objective was to ascertain the level of perception of sign language by the users themselves — pupils from schools for hearing impaired individuals. The objective of the research was neither to ascertain the level of pupils' communication competencies in this language nor to evaluate the level of sign language on the part of the parents, the teachers or the users themselves. The research aimed at ascertaining the subjective perception of sign language in family and school environments and the language cognizance of primary school pupils.

The following partial objectives were implemented within the research:

- to ascertain the level of language cognizance of pupils from primary schools for hearing impaired individuals;
- to ascertain the hearing impaired pupils' attitude to sign language (whether they feel to be sign language users), depending on the communication status in the family and school environments;

– to ascertain the popularity of the subject of Sign Language among pupils from schools for hearing impaired individuals.

Research Theses

Thesis 1: The hearing impaired pupil, being a sign language user, realizes the communication value of sign language and asserts his/her right to use it.

Thesis 2: The hearing impaired pupil has basic cognizance of sign language and of the history and the culture of the deaf.

Thesis 3: The hearing impaired pupil prefers the communication code dominating in his/her family communication environment.

Thesis 4: The hearing impaired pupil prefers the communication code dominating in his/her school communication environment.

Thesis 5: The subject of Sign Language belongs among subjects popular with children who are sign language users.

Methodology and Research Sample

The research was conducted as qualitative research. Of the research techniques, the structured interview with open questions, group discussion analysis, and group interview were used.

We addressed the primary schools for hearing impaired individuals in the Czech Republic, which use the bilingual approach or the philosophy of total communication within their education processes and the teachers of which know and use at least the fundamentals of sign language (schools using the oral approach were not addressed). There are 13 primary schools for hearing impaired individuals in the Czech Republic and only 5 of them teach the Sign Language. The research was carried out from October to December 2013 and from March to May 2014.

The respondents were pupils at a 2nd level primary school for hearing impaired individuals. The research was attended by 45 pupils in total, of whom 29 were boys and 16 were girls, between 13 and 16 years of age (see Table 1). Of these pupils, there were 9 respondents whose parents were deaf and whose sign language was their mother tongue. The other respondents (36) were children of hearing parents.

Table 1. Research Collection Data

	2nd Level (13–16 years of age)
Boys	29
Girls	16
Total	45

Twenty-one respondents stated that their hearing parents knew the fundamentals of sign language. Of the total number of 45 pupils, 31 pupils preferred sign language as the primary communication code and 2 pupils with the cochlear implant stated they used both language communication codes without preference.

Interpretation of Research Results

Thesis 1: The hearing impaired pupil who is a sign language user realizes its communication value and asserts the right to use it.

Table 2. Thesis 1- related Questions

I prefer communicating in (Czech/sign language/sign Czech)
I use sign language in communication with (parents/teachers/friends)
I would like to know (sign language/Czech language/English language)
I would like to use sign language at school (yes/no)
I have the right to use sign language at school (yes/no)

Of the total number of 45 pupils, 14 prefer communicating in the Czech spoken language and 31 pupils communicate in sign language. Of these **31 sign language users**, 17 pupils stated that they used both the sign and Czech languages (did not state any preference for either of them) and 14 pupils stated that they preferred sign language and used it in both school and family environments (with their parents, teachers and friends), which shows that they consider sign language as their primary communication code.

All 45 pupils were aware of their right to use sign language at school, of whom 34 would like to make use of this right and use sign language at school (with their teachers and friends). Thirty-four pupils also stated that they wanted to know sign language. Thus, the pupils realized the communication value of sign language and their right to use it and most of them would like to communicate in sign language and have full command of it. Concurrently, they realized the need for having command of the Czech language and most of them would like to learn it.

Thesis 2: The hearing impaired pupil has basic cognizance of the sign language and the history and the culture of the deaf.

Table 3. Thesis 2- related Questions

Sign language has its grammar and order of signs in a sentence, similar to the Czech language having its grammar and order of words in a sentence (yes/no).
Pantomime and sign language is the same thing (yes/no).
The deaf could not use sign language at school in the past (yes/no).
Sign language is a natural and full-fledged language, similar to, for example, the Czech or English language (yes/no).
Sign language is international (yes/no).
I understand what the concept ‘culture of the Deaf’ means (yes/no).
I feel to be (Deaf/deaf — capitalized or non-capitalized N; I know the difference/don’t know the difference)

The statement describing sign language as a natural and full-fledged communication code that equals the Czech language was correctly confirmed by 37 pupils out of the total number of 45. That sign language has its own grammar was correctly confirmed by 18 pupils. Despite this, 12 pupils claimed that sign language was identical with pantomime and that sign language was international. That sign language was forbidden at school in the past was correctly acknowledged by 22 pupils.

Thirty-four pupils of the total number of 45 pupils encountered the concept ‘culture of the Deaf’.

The clear answer to the statement relating to pupils' identification within the group of the deaf and the Deaf was surprising. Thirty-three pupils did not know the difference between these terms. Three pupils identified themselves with the group of the deaf and nine pupils with the group of the Deaf. Pupils at this age do not distinguish between these two concepts and, thus, it is not possible to determine which approach to their hearing impairment is dominant for them (either medicinal or language-cultural). For this reason, we cannot speak about the conscious approach to their hearing impairment and about the perception of sign language as part of the culture of the Deaf.

Thesis 3: The hearing impaired pupil prefers using the communication code dominating in his/her family communication environment.

Table 4. Theses 3 and 4 — related Questions

I communicate with teachers in (sign language/Czech language/sign Czech).
I learn sign language at (school/home/boarding school).
My parents can use sign language (yes/no).
My friends are (non-deaf/deaf).

Of the total number of 45 pupils, 38 were sign language users, out of which 9 used both the sign and Czech languages without preference for either, and 29 preferred solely the sign language. Nine pupils' parents were deaf. All these pupils preferred sign language as the primary communication code. Of 36 hearing parents, 17 parents had command of the fundamentals of sign language. These parents' children also stated their preference for sign language as the primary means of communication. All pupils communicating through sign language in their family stated sign language as the preferred means of communication. Three pupils preferred sign language to other communication codes even though they did not encounter sign language in their family.

Thesis 4: A hearing impaired pupil prefers communicating through the communication code dominating in their school communication environment.

In the school environment, the use of sign language in communication with a teacher was confirmed by 38 pupils and in communication with friends (classmates) by 43 pupils. Thus, most pupils use sign language in the school environment when communicating with their classmates.

It was interesting to find out how the pupils perceived the learning of sign language. Forty-three pupils confirmed that they learnt sign language at school. Only 17 pupils confirmed that they learnt sign language at home and 9 pupils at boarding school. This may probably be explained by the fact that at school, children learn sign language purposefully. They perceive sign language as a functional means of obtaining information and their sign vocabulary develops purposefully. They are awarded marks for their knowledge of the subject Sign Language. Communication with their parents in their family environment or with friends at boarding school does not constitute purposeful learning since sign language is communicated naturally and most pupils do not realize they are learning it.

Thesis 5: The subject of Sign Language belongs among the subjects popular with children who are sign language users.

Table 5. Theses 5 — related Questions

Sign language belongs among my favourite subjects (yes/no).
I communicate with teachers in (sign language/Czech language/sign Czech)
I use sign language in communication with (parents/teachers/friends)
I prefer communicating in (sign language/Czech language/sign Czech)

As stated above, of the total number of 45 pupils, 38 were sign language users. Only 3 pupils stated that the subject of Sign Language did not belong to their favourite subjects and 42 pupils confirmed that the subject of Sign Language belonged to their favourite subjects. The subject of Sign Language is popular with all pupils who consider themselves as sign language users, and belongs among the favourite subjects of pupils that prefer communicating through other communication code.

Research Conclusions

All pupils are aware of their right to use the sign language at school. This data shows relatively high level of realization of the communication value of the sign language. The level of theoretical knowledge relating to the facts of the sign language and the culture of the deaf is in disproportion to these findings. What was surprising was ignorance to the difference between the terms ‘the deaf’ and ‘the Deaf’. Thus, these findings refer to the fact that pupils perceive sign language as a communication tool naturally used as their primary language. However, their language cognizance in the sense of understanding language as part of the culture of the deaf and their own identity is not supported by sufficient theoretical information about the language itself.

The research shows that even when the sign language does not dominate as the means of communication in the family environment, the pupil may prefer it as a natural and full-fledged communication means encountered and learnt in his/her school environment.

The conducted research shows disproportion between the perception of sign language as a means of communication and the understanding of its function as the cultural and language identification of its users. Language cognizance is an essential part of an individual’s identity and his/her self-perception and is related to the development of his/her personality. The concept of an individual’s language cognizance is shaped in both the family and the school environments. An important role in relation to the family environment is played by timely intervention and care for the hearing impaired child’s family. Within this research, I will focus on putting together some recommendations for the school environment, that is, for the special education practice.

This contribution is part of a grant and provides partial results of the specific research project IGA PdF of Palacký University titled ‘*Research in the Sphere of Evaluation of Communication Specifics in Selected Groups of Individuals with Impaired or Deficient Communication Ability*’ — PdF UP, 2014/2015, IGA_PdF_2014_016; researcher: Kateřina Vitásková.

References

1. Atkinson, R., L. et al. (2003). *Psychologie*. 2. Vydání. Praha: Portál.
2. Belz, H. & Siegrist, M. (2001). *Klíčové kompetence a jejich rozvíjení: východiska, metody, cvičení a hry*. Praha: Portál.
3. Goldin-Meadow, S. (2003). *The resilience of language: what gesture creation in Deaf children can tell us about how all children learn language*. New York: Psychology Press.

4. Horáková, R. (2012). *Sluchové postižení. Úvod do surdopedie*. Praha: Portál.
5. Hronová, A. (2010). Úloha znakového jazyka v rozvoji neslyšícího dítěte. *Speciální pedagogika*, 2010, č. 4, s. 265-274.
6. Hrubý, J. (2008). Tak kolik těch sluchově postižených u nás vlastně je? *Speciální pedagogika*, 19, 4, 269-290.
7. Jungwirthová, I. (2014). *Komunikace s malým dítětem s těžkou sluchovou vadou*. Retrieved from: <http://www.tamtam-praha.cz/userfiles/files/komunikace-s-malym-ditetem.pdf>.
8. Kosinová, B. (2008). *Neslyšící jako jazyková a kulturní menšina — kultura neslyšících*. 2. opravené vydání. Praha: Česká komora tlumočnicků znakového jazyka.
9. Krejčířová, D. & Říčan, P. (2006). *Dětská klinická psychologie*. 4. vydání. Praha: Grada..
10. Padden, C. (2005). *InsideDeafCulture*. 1st edition. Harvard University Press.
11. Petráňová, R. (2005). Čtení a psaní. In *Ve světě sluchového postižení*. 1. vyd. (pp. 45-48). Praha: FRPSP-Tamtam.
12. Sternberg, R., J. (2009). *Kognitivní psychologie*. 2. vydání. Praha: Portál.
13. Vágnerová, M. (2005). *Vývojová psychologie I. Dětství a dospívání*. 1. vydání. Praha: Karolinum.
14. Wilcox, S. (1989). *AmericanDeafCulture*.Burtonsville: LinstokPress.
15. Národní ústav pro vzdělávání. Retrived from: <http://www.nuv.cz/file/133>.
16. Úplné znění zákona č. 155/1998 Sb., o znakové řeči a o změně dalších zákonů, jak vyplývá ze změn provedených zákonem č. 384/2008 Sb. — Zákon 423/2008 Sb., o komunikačních systémech neslyšících a hluchoslepých osob. Sbíрка zákonů — Česká republika. Ročník (2008). retrived from: www.mvcr.cz/soubor/sb138-08-pdf.aspx.
17. Zákon 384/2008 Sb. Retrived from: <http://www.sagit.cz/pages/sbirkatxt.asp?zdroj=sb08384&cd=76&typ=r>.

LANGUAGE COGNIZANCE AND SIGN LANGUAGE AWARENESS ON THE PART OF DEAF INDIVIDUALS AT 2ND LEVEL PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR HEARING IMPAIRED INDIVIDUALS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Summary

Pavel Kučera, Eva Souralová
Institute of Special Education Studies
Pedagogical Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic

The language cognizance of pupils from schools for hearing impaired individuals is an important part of their personality and identity. At junior and senior school age, their identity and self-perception is still incomplete (Vágnerová, 2005). In this developmental process, an important role is played by the profiles of the family and school environments. The environment where deaf children are nurtured does not always provide ideal conditions for trouble-free development of their personality. Ninety-five percent of the children are born to hearing parents for whom the acceptance of communication in sign language is a very difficult decision to make. Sign language is used as a means of communication in the school environment within the bilingual approach, but is presented by hearing teachers who are not its native speakers. The specificity of the system of educating hearing impaired children, pupils and students lies in the continuous search for new, more suitable and efficient methods and techniques that would prepare the deaf for full and equal life in the society of hearing individuals and that would preserve their own uniqueness and identity. It is the support of language cognizance of pupils at schools for hearing impaired individuals that leads to this objective.

A school institution is a place where a hearing impaired child encounters the culture and the language of the deaf. In particular, for the hearing parents' children the school is a place where they meet an adult hearing impaired individual as the identification model. The output of the education process should be an individual that is capable of being involved in the society of hearing individuals on full-

fledged basis, while preserving his/her own identity, language and culture, and that is aware of his/her rights and possibilities. A school institution creates an environment that prepares a hearing impaired individual for his/her life.

In the development of language cognizance on the part of hearing impaired pupils, an important role is played by the personality of the teachers — both the hearing and the hearing impaired teachers. A deaf teacher with pre-lingual deafness, who is a Czech sign language user and considers himself/herself as part of the community of the Deaf, is the adult identification model for the child. He/she is the bearer of the culture and the language of the deaf. A hearing teacher reveals to the pupils the world of hearing individuals and the language of the major society and teaches them mutual respect for both communities.

I consider the contextual definition of the subject of Sign Language as a current task of special education practise that should be flexible at reacting to the newly introduced curricular documents and the changing tendencies of how hearing impaired individuals are perceived by the society. Within this subject, pupils should get acquainted with the concept of language and cultural cognizance of the community of the deaf. Hearing impaired individuals should get acquainted with both the world of hearing individuals and the world of the deaf to be able to decide with which group they will identify themselves based on their own experience, attitudes and values.

On the basis of the research results, we recommend focusing, within the subject, on both the development of sign vocabulary and the acquisition of the sign language grammar and the pupils' acquaintance with the world of the deaf — their history, culture and current situation. It is necessary to create such suitable teaching materials for, and the contextual concept of, this subject that respect the development of an individual's personality and identity. The subject should be taught by a deaf teacher in sign language or, as team work, by both the hearing and the hearing impaired teachers.