The foreign-language learning situation of Deaf* adults: An overview

EDIT H. KONTRA1,2**

1Department of Modern Philology, Selye János University, Komarno, Slovakia
2Department of English Applied Linguistics, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

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Background and aims: Little is known about how Deaf and severely hard-of-hearing persons learn foreign languages and what language-learning opportunities are available for them at school or in adulthood. There are Deaf youngsters at schools who hope to be able to use English in adulthood, and there are also Deaf adults motivated to learn languages, but their possibilities are far from ideal. This study aims to call attention to the disadvantaged situation of this special group of people by providing insight into their learning needs, their motivation, and their difficulties.

Methods: The author explores the foreign-language learning opportunities and experiences of Deaf adults based on data derived from questionnaires and individual interviews conducted in different projects between 2006 and 2016 in Hungary. Results and conclusion: Research results show that the lack of teaching methodology and the shortage of learning materials specifically developed for language learners with special needs put these individuals in a highly disadvantaged situation. Both Hungarian and international data support the view that the introduction of bilingual education at schools and the provision of language teachers who know sign language could improve the situation of Deaf foreign-language learners to a great extent. There is also a need for language schools that are both willing to cater for the needs of adult learners with hearing loss and are capable of providing appropriate circumstances for them.

Keywords: Deaf people, Deaf education, foreign-language learning

INTRODUCTION

Some degree of familiarity with a foreign language (FL), mostly English, has become a sine qua non of 21st-century life. Exploring recent trends in the use of English worldwide, Graddol (2006) envisaged an unprecedented growth in the number of learners with an estimated peak of about two billion by the end of the 2010s. He also predicted that English in non-English-speaking countries would rapidly become one of the baseline skills, which would have an impact on both school curricula and adult education. How do all these changes affect special needs (SN) learners, such as Deaf and severely hard-of-hearing persons?

Having SN clearly does not mean being unaffected by the changes that take place in society at large. SN persons basically compete for jobs in the same job market, organize their lives in the same socioeconomic context, and collect information about the world from the same global media sources. There is no “them and us” in this respect: the need for English as the dominating language for international communication concerns all people. The question is, how equipped we are in present-day Hungary to cater for these needs in the case of Deaf and severely hard-of-hearing persons? This study attempts to explore the situation from the perspective of Deaf adults and provide an answer to this question using data derived from questionnaires and individual interviews conducted in different projects between 2006 and 2016. Research shows that there are Deaf youngsters at schools who believe they will use English in adulthood, and there are also Deaf adults motivated to learn languages, but their possibilities are far from ideal. To understand the reasons and consider solutions, first it is necessary to take a look at who the Deaf are and how their education is taking place.

DEAFNESS AND LANGUAGES

There are two fundamentally different approaches to deafness. The medical approach is concerned with deafness as a problem that needs to be eliminated or at least mitigated by the use of audiological devices. Several hearing-impaired persons also share this view and strive to be as much like a hearing person as possible to fit into and be accepted by the hearing community (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). Those with a strong Deaf identity, however, consider deafness a state and Deaf people the members of the Deaf community: a minority group connected by the use of a common

*We follow the tradition of spelling Deaf with a capital “D” to denote people who share a sign language as well as distinct cultural values and who consider themselves a linguistic and cultural minority.

** Correspondence: Edit H. Kontra, Department of English Applied Linguistics, Eötvös Loránd University, Rákóczi út 5, 1088 Budapest, Hungary; Phone: +36 1 460 4421; Fax: +36 1 460 4413; e-mail: ekontra@gmail.com

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language, the national sign language, and by Deaf culture. This difference in attitude is frequently represented in the spelling of the word, as well, in which case deaf with a small case “d” refers to the audiological condition, while Deaf spelled with a capital “D” refers to being a member of a linguistic and cultural minority. The present text follows this tradition as well: accepting and respecting the preference of Deaf communities (cf. https://wfdeaf.org); Deaf is spelled with a capital “D” unless the word is used strictly in the audiological sense.

The average hearing person seldom gives a thought to what living without the ability to hear might be like. Deafness is low-visibility impairment, much less conspicuous than mobility impairment or blindness: a hearing aid – and profoundly deaf persons often do not even wear one – does not catch the eye like a wheelchair, a white cane, or a guide dog does. Auditory handicaps are not only hidden from view, their implications are not easy to identify either. The implications are varied and depend not only on the degree of hearing loss, but also on the age of onset and whether the child is born to hearing or Deaf parents.

Jacobs (1989) defines deafness as “[A] condition in which the residual hearing, if any, is not usable; perceivable sounds have no meaning to the individual” (p. 1). Goldin-Meadow and Mayberry (2001) explain the importance of the degree of hearing loss for the development of language skills as follows:

A child with a severe (70–89 decibel) hearing loss is unable to hear even shouted conversation and thus cannot learn speech as a normally hearing child would. A child with a profound (≥90 decibel) loss hears only occasional loud sounds and these sounds may be perceived as vibrations rather than sound patterns. (p. 222)

For the above reasons, this paper and the Hungarian research data cited in it do not draw a sharp line between people who are officially categorized in Hungary as severely hard-of-hearing (66–90 dB) and those who are considered d/Deaf (≥90 dB) (EMMI, 2012, p. 3437), but treats them as one group under the umbrella term: Deaf.

According to estimates, about 90%–95% of Deaf children grow up in hearing families. This is important to know because for age-appropriate development, young children must be regularly and frequently exposed to accessible language (Humphries et al., 2013). The sense of hearing is a channel of input for all kinds of information vitally important for the development of a child. A Deaf child’s sense of hearing, however, will give him/her no or only distorted input of information as a consequence of which he will have to acquire skills through other, mainly visual channels of communication. Children born to Deaf parents are usually surrounded by native sign language users in the family, communication in sign language starts at an early age and research shows that these children’s rate of cognitive, social, and emotional development is on a par with that of their hearing peers (Hattyár, 2008; Kozma, 2013).

The age of onset of deafness can make a huge difference. Postlingually deaf children, those who lose their hearing at a later age, learn to speak effortlessly, and start their cognitive development via spoken language. For them it is this spoken first language (L1) on which the development of literacy skills and the acquisition of further languages – spoken or sign – can be built.

Prelingual deafness, on the other hand, means either being born deaf or losing the ability to hear – for instance due to an illness or as a side effect of some medication – before the development of speech. If a prelingually deaf child is surrounded by hearing family members and does not encounter sign language at an early age, their deprivation of fully comprehensible language can lead to a severely delayed cognitive development (Dotter, 2013; Goldin-Meadow & Mayberry, 2001; Hattyár, 2010; Muzsnai, 1999; Vasák, 2005).

The situation is complex as the kinds and amount of language input that reaches the child varies greatly. Some children receive no special intervention at an early age. Others receive incomplete spoken language input because, as Mayberry points out, “hearing aids and cochlear implants do not restore hearing to normal levels” (2002, p. 75). Access to education in the home as well as at school requires language. Therefore, the deprivation of a deaf child of accessible language is considered by many the violation of their human rights (Grosjean, 2001; Jokinen, 2000; Skuttnab-Kangas, 2000). Linguistic deprivation leads to cognitive deficit, psychological damage, social isolation, delayed development of literacy skills, and long-term disadvantage.

ISSUES IN DEAF EDUCATION

As a result of a resolution taken at The Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan in 1880, the education of Deaf children worldwide was dominated for a period of 80–100 years by various forms of the so-called oralist method proclaiming the superiority of speech over signs “in restoring deaf-mutes to social life” (Gallaudet University Archives, 1963). As its name suggests, the oral method concentrates on speech, speech-reading, and the use of residual hearing, and does not permit the use of any sign language or manual alphabet (cf. Moores, 2010).

In the past roughly three decades, there have been significant initiatives to reintroduce the use of sign languages in the education of Deaf persons internationally. In 1994, UNESCO issued the so-called Salamanca Statement on SN education declaring that sign language as the medium of communication among the Deaf should be recognized and provisions should be made to ensure that “all deaf persons have access to education in their national sign language” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 18). This was followed by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007), which in Section 2 of Article 24 on Education confirms that “States Parties” will not only ensure that “the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual,” but will also “take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education” (p. 17).

Hungary was among the first to sign the convention, and in 2009, the Hungarian Parliament passed Act 125 on Hungarian Sign Language and Sign Language Use allowing
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schools until 2017 to create the necessary conditions for introducing Hungarian Sign Language (HSL) across the curriculum both as a subject and medium of education. This is a fundamental change, since Hungarian education is deeply rooted in the oralist tradition. In a comprehensive study, Cshai, Henger, Mongsy, and Perlusz (2009) found that the special schools for hearing-impaired children apply the auditory–verbal approach, a form of oralism that deemphasizes speech-reading and concentrates on the development and use of residual hearing (Moore, 2010). Out of the 90 teachers surveyed, Cshai et al. (2009) identified 92% hearing, four hard-of-hearing and only three Deaf colleagues. More than half of the respondents (62%) reported to have some knowledge of sign language; however, most of them rated their proficiency level only intermediate. The authors also mention that in most cases this is likely to entail sign-supported Hungarian – signs expressed using the grammatical order of spoken Hungarian – rather than natural HSL.

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON TEACHING FLs TO DEAF PERSONS

Deaf persons are bilingual even if due to the above circumstances, many of them do not reach full competence in either the national spoken language or the local sign language (Falkowska, 2016). Consequently, any FL they learn is their third language, and the more solid their L1 base is, the more smooth their process of third language acquisition can become. Laypersons often remark that for a Deaf person learning to use international sign – a contact variety of sign language used particularly at international meetings – should suffice, but that is not the case. A Deaf person will want to communicate with hearing foreigners as well, will want to watch foreign movies with foreign subtitles, read foreign papers or websites, and access information written in a FL, usually English, on the Internet or in the printed media.

Although the literature on FL acquisition and language teaching methodology abounds, little has been written about Deaf FL learning. The edited volume by Kellett Bidoli and Ochse (2008) provides insights into various approaches of teaching and learning English in different parts of Europe. For instance, at the University of Wolverhampton, UK, Fleming and her colleagues designed a program to teach primarily written English to Deaf international students using the medium of both British Sign Language and sign-supported English (Fleming, 2008). The international SignOn! English for Deaf Sign Language Users on the Internet project, coordinated by the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, developed a bilingual model of self-study English via the Internet (Hilzensauer & Skant, 2008). It presents written English complemented with explanations and translations in the national sign language of each of the seven participating countries (Austria, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the UK), and international sign.

We know of various initiatives from the Czech Republic and Poland as well. Janáková (2008), for instance, gives an account of using a sign language interpreter and a notetaker when teaching English to her Deaf students at Charles University in Prague. She warns, however, that this approach can only work if the interpreter has sufficient knowledge of English and she recommends that younger generations of teachers of Deaf persons should definitely learn to sign. She also notes that her university is in need of more Deaf teachers, since “that is the dream of all deaf students: to be taught by a member of their own deaf community” (p. 60).

In Poland, Gulati (2016) at Siedlce University found that the use of an interpreter distanced her from her Deaf students and decided to learn Polish Sign Language (PJM) herself. Falkowska (2016) in Poznań conducted research on placing her adult students in monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual study groups based on their proficiency level in English and their preferred mode of communication in speech or PJM. Her experience showed that the inaccuracies in students’ self-rating in oral/aural skills and PJM often resulted in mismatched groups and intragroup conflicts.

DEAF FL LEARNING IN HUNGARY

In Hungary, the FL education of Deaf persons has been explored in a series of studies conducted by a research team including the author at the Department of English Applied Linguistics of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) between 2006 and 2016 (Csizér, Kontra, & Piniel, 2015; Csizér, Piniel, & Kontráné Hegybíró, 2015; Kontra, Csizér, & Piniel, 2014, 2015; Kontráné Hegybíró, 2010; Piniel, Csizér, & Kontra, 2014). Fieldwork in the seven residential schools for Deaf children revealed that the teaching of English and German is mainly taking place in the oralist tradition and builds on the assumption that the L1 of a Deaf child is spoken Hungarian. The researchers only met a couple of proficient HSL user teachers who did not only involve the use of signs when all other means had failed but truly believed in the usefulness of a bilingual approach in FL teaching and employed HSL to ensure barrier-free information flow in the classroom (for details, see Csizér, Piniel, & Kontráné Hegybíró, 2015). This finding supported earlier retrospective accounts of adult learners (Kontráné Hegybíró, 2010), who also emphasized the benefits of HSL in education and praised the few teachers they had encountered who had learned to sign for their students’ sake. In 2015, volunteer ELTE students were involved in collecting data from Deaf university students about their positive and negative FL learning experiences before and during tertiary education (Kontra, Piniel, & Csizér, 2017). The accounts of the participants in the above projects representing various ages and backgrounds reveal Deaf persons’ moderate interest in FL learning, a mixture of successes and failures in the process, some future goals involving FL use, attempts at continuing language learning, and a great deal of disappointment and frustration caused by the lack of appropriate possibilities. In the following sections, the aims and dreams of Deaf learners are compared with their possibilities in adulthood.

Students’ future images of themselves as adult language users

In a 3-year project (project supported by The Hungarian Scientific Research Fund under Grant OTKA-K-105095) between 2012 and 2015, the research team at ELTE visited
all seven residential schools for the hearing-impaired and the single secondary school with a faculty for hearing-impaired students to investigate the FL learning situation from the perspective of the students and their teachers themselves (Kontráné Hegybíró, Csizér, & Piniel, 2015). Questionnaire data from ninety-six 14- to 19-year-old students, as well as interview transcripts from 31 student participants, 10 language teachers, and 7 school principals and vice-principals were analyzed (for details, see Kontráné Hegybíró et al., 2015). From the point of view of the present article, the findings in two areas are of particular interest: (a) the self-efficacy beliefs of the participating students and (b) their FL learning motivation.

**Self-efficacy**

In the research project cited above, self-efficacy beliefs were defined as the language learners’ beliefs about their own abilities to learn a FL, such as, for example, *I think I can learn to read and write well in English* (Piniel et al., 2014, p. 278). For this student sample, descriptive statistics showed a medium level of self-efficacy with a mean value of 3.22 on a 5-point scale. It has to be noted, moreover, that the correlation between self-efficacy and motivated learning behavior was strong: 0.572 (p < .01). This has implications for the future of the participants as language learners: for teenagers to want to continue dealing with FLs after school as adults it is of utmost importance for them to believe in themselves; they must be convinced that they have the necessary abilities to accomplish the learning tasks and to deal with the challenges they encounter along the way. If a Deaf teenager has low self-efficacy beliefs, we cannot expect him or her to want to continue learning a FL as an adult and to be ready to make an effort.

The data from the 31 individual student interviews provided a deeper insight into the questionnaire results and revealed a broad spectrum of beliefs. There were a few participants who thought indeed that not all Deaf persons had the ability to learn languages, and those who had difficulties should give up trying. One interviewee put the blame on her own lack of abilities, suggesting that she did not “have the brains” (original data are cited in the author’s translation) for language learning (Kontráné Hegybíró, 2015, p. 47). Some other students claimed their low levels of FL abilities were due to their hearing impairment: “I’m deaf, I cannot hear it. […] I can write, but not speak” (Kontráné Hegybíró, 2015, p. 48). Others thought it was not the ability to hear that mattered, only effort and hard work. In one of the schools, the research team came across a few girls representing the other end of the scale with very high levels of self-efficacy. They were confident language learners who felt they were able to cope with English at school easily.

**Motivation**

For tapping into the FL learning motivation of the school sample, Dörnyei’s (2005) model of language learners’ motivational self system comprising the person’s ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and language-learning experience was used in both the questionnaire and the interviews. The components were defined as follows:

- **Ideal L2 self**: how the learners think of and envisage their future self from a language-learning perspective (e.g., *I will be able to communicate well in English in a couple of years*);
- **Ought-to L2 self**: what language learners perceive as others’ expectations of them (e.g., *Nowadays, English is important for everyone*);
- **Language-learning experience**: the experiences language learners have had while learning a FL (e.g., *I like the English classes*) (Piniel et al., 2014, pp. 277–278).

The results of the descriptive data analysis indicated that the Deaf participants’ motivated self was of a medium level on a 5-point scale regarding each component: ideal L2 self: 3.55 (0.82); ought-to L2 self: 3.36 (0.80); language-learning experience: 3.72 (0.94) (length limitations unfortunately do not allow us to go into a detailed discussion of the results; for details, see Csizér, Piniel, & Kontra, 2015; Csizér, Piniel, & Kontráné Hegybíró, 2015). Although each figure is relatively low, from the point of view of a long-term engagement with FLs, it is the low level of the participants’ ideal L2 self that should give us concern. Research into motivation has confirmed the central importance of this motivational component (Dörnyei & Kabanyiova, 2014), and if Deaf students at school do not have a vision of themselves as learners and users of a FL in the future that can have a long-term impact on their future decisions and actions.

The data from the 31 individual qualitative interviews with students allowed insight into what is behind the figures cited above. Each of the interviewed students was specifically asked about how they imagined themselves and their future as regards learning and using the English or German language. Out of the 31 student interviewees, only a few rejected the idea of continuing language learning in the near future. They did so either because they did not think they would need FL skills or because they felt discouraged by the difficulties they had experienced. Some of them were also aware that if they stopped studying, without formal training, they would forget everything they had learnt.

Those sixth- to eighth-grade students who saw their future selves as learners or users of English or German mainly considered doing it as part of their studies in secondary education (grades 9–12) provided they get admitted to the targeted school. A few of the 31 interviewees imagined trying to improve their language skills via self-study using books or free programs on the Internet. There were several students who admitted they would not know where and how to continue learning languages once they finish school. Costly options such as taking one-on-one classes from a private tutor or in a language school were not considered. A strong element in several students’ language-related future plans was traveling or taking a job abroad. Also on the positive side were the students’ comments emphasizing that FL skills would be needed for communicating with people and expressions of awareness that their life would be easier in the future if they had FL skills.

**Adults struggling with FL learning**

Between 2006 and 2010, a series of interviews were conducted (project sponsored by the National Institute of Research and Technology NKTH B2 2006-0010) with a purposive sample of 18 Deaf and 5 severely hard-of-hearing
adults who had some FL learning experience (Kontráné Hegybíró, 2010). The retrospective reports of these adults painted a varied picture of their language-learning experiences at school, with lots of hardships, frustration, and disappointment, but interestingly enough, the participants in our sample managed to retain a positive attitude toward languages and many of them were on the lookout for further learning opportunities as adults. How far they had come already depended on their circumstances and possibilities. Although each story was unique, there were some similar experiences. Four language-learning routes emerged from the accounts: (a) tertiary education, (b) self-study, (c) organized language courses, and (d) working abroad.

FL learning in tertiary education

According to the accounts of those participants who were admitted to a college, university, or other form of post-secondary education around the turn of the century, tertiary institutions in Hungary were not prepared to accommodate Deaf language learners. They were placed in hearing groups, and the language teachers were unprepared to deal with them so the students were left to their own devices. One of them said that he just got up and left the class. Another interviewee looked for outside help. She found an English major student who wanted to learn HSL, so in exchange for HSL classes, she received help with her English. Another participant attempted to take English at college together with a hard-of-hearing student in a hearing group and was offered an HSL interpreter. This did not work out well for the simple reason that the interpreter did not know much English. He only managed to translate into HSL what was said in Hungarian, but was lost when the instructor switched into the FL. Finally, the Deaf student quit the class and decided to teach himself.

Self-study attempts

Self-study seemed to be a popular solution among the adult interview participants. One of them used a grammar book and a dictionary to manage his e-mail correspondence with foreign Deaf sports clubs. The name of a free translator program on the Internet was also frequently mentioned. A young mother said she tried to always get up half an hour earlier than her family and used this time for studying English. She read the texts, did the exercises, and checked her answers in the key. Self-efficacy did not seem to be an issue for these adults. The problem that was mentioned most frequently, however, was finding suitable self-study materials. Most study kits they knew relied heavily on listening materials, which is frustrating for Deaf learners. Internet programs that involve listening are not suitable either. Self-study FL programs on the Internet for Deaf persons, such as SignOn! or SignOnOne (Hilzensauer & Dotter, 2011; Hilzensauer & Skant, 2008), were not available at the time and still do not have HSL versions.

Instructed learning opportunities

Although self-study can work out quite well when a person is mainly interested in learning to read and write in a FL, people usually prefer getting some guidance and explanations from a teacher either in person or online. This applied to the participants of this research as well. Most of the adult interviewees had experimented with taking a FL course in a group. The Deaf Association in Budapest made several attempts at organizing language courses for interested members, but it was difficult to find suitable teachers. This is not surprising because there are no training programs for language teachers of Deaf persons. The interviewees had stories about teachers who could not cope and quit, native speaker volunteers who were unsuitable, a male teacher with a thick beard and a mustache making speech-reading literally impossible, just to mention a few. Organization and creating groups of equally motivated learners also seemed to be a problem.

Several of the participants knew about one exceptional teacher who actually learnt sign language to be able to communicate with her students (cf. Bajkó & Kontra, 2008). This teacher ran a grant-supported course for hearing-impaired adults at one of the language schools in Budapest and managed to help several of the interviewees to take the basic-level language exam at the end of the year. Unfortunately, when the grant ran out, the program could not be sustained any longer.

The research team at ELTE also used some of their project money to offer beginner and pre-intermediate classes in English and French to Deaf adults with teachers who had HSL skills. The classes were popular, but could not continue for long after the grant had been used up because the participants were unable to pay a fee and could not find a sponsor either. This also explains why private tutoring is not a real option for most Deaf adults: it is unaffordable.

FL learning on the job

Although nowadays it is common practice for young people to seek employment abroad, one seldom considers that among them there are likely to be hearing-impaired persons as well. Yet, being Deaf does not mean being less adventurous or less curious. A few of the Deaf adult interview participants did relate such work experience abroad as being a pizza delivery boy in Britain or a truck driver in France. These people did not only pick up some of the local spoken language on the job, but also made contact with the local Deaf community and learned the local sign language as well. One of the interviewees did not have to go abroad for the same immersion experience: she took a babysitting job with an American family in Budapest and picked up the American Sign Language from the children. She said that this helped improve her English vocabulary and comprehension as well.

PRESENT OPTIONS FOR DEAF FL LEARNERS

Tertiary education

As a final stage of the research conducted by the ELTE research team, data were collected with the help of ELTE students from hearing-impaired students in different institutions of tertiary education. Although statistically there are
currently more hearing-impaired students in higher education than before the passing of the Sign Language Act in 2009, tracking down hearing-impaired students was not an easy job. This sample only consisted of six interviewees (for details, see Kontra et al., 2017). Each of them had a chance to study one or more languages in primary and/or secondary school, but only three continued taking language classes in higher education.

One of the participants was actually a language major preparing to eventually become a teacher of German and Italian for Deaf learners. She considered herself lucky because at each department, she received individual help. Instead of having to go to the regular language classes of her group, she received weekly one-to-one tutoring, which she thought was much more effective because she had the teacher all to herself for 90 min. Another participant of this sample was doing a postgraduate course in Pedagogy. He had some knowledge of German and after spending some time in Germany, he felt his knowledge was sufficient for taking an intermediate level exam. He passed the oral part “as a miracle” but failed the written paper twice. Due to his studies, he felt the need to learn English but beside a brief, 1-month course, there was not another chance. A third participant was taking Theology at the university with a specialization in social–spiritual care. As part of his coursework, he will be able to take classical Greek but modern languages are not offered. For a while, he managed to take English classes as part of an experimental project at ELTE where the language was taught via HSL. He found it extremely useful but the classes stopped after the money had run out.

An informal survey of language schools

Every now and again inquiries are made at the ELTE Department of English Applied Linguistics by Deaf persons about possibilities for learning English, namely whether we can recommend any courses or private tutors. To help such persons, the author carried out an informal survey of Budapest language schools on the phone in the summer of 2016. For sampling, first the official list of NYESZE, the Hungarian association of quality control for language schools was consulted. Out of the 38 qualified schools (entitled to use the “Q” logo), 15 are located in Budapest. Their websites were consulted for information. One school does not offer English, four schools were found to offer only company courses, which left 10 schools remaining. To increase the sample to at least a dozen, two randomly selected non-“Q” schools were added to the list. A final sample of 12 language schools was contacted by phone. Two schools did not respond to the call during their advertised office hours. The 10 schools that responded were asked the following questions: Were they ready to receive Deaf students?, Did they have any courses that would mainly focus on the written language?, Did they have any experience with hearing-impaired learners? Schools that responded positively were also asked about such details as their fees, group sizes, possibilities for fee remission, the number of hours, and the experience of the prospective teacher with hearing-impaired learners.

The results were not very promising but not hopeless either. Five schools either plainly rejected the idea or rejected with regret. Reasons for the rejections were one or more of the following:

1. The school used the communicative approach and could not help if the prospective student was not able to participate in oral activities via lip reading or using a hearing aid;
2. They had no experience with hearing-impaired learners; this is not what the school was geared at;
3. They would not be able to provide the learners with a suitable course book;
4. Concern about the other members of the group: it was important for the school to place students with similar needs into one group, and a Deaf learner’s needs would obviously be different;
5. The school had mainly native speaker teachers who, we should understand, would not be able to cope.

There were five schools that reacted very positively. They asked for details about the degree of hearing loss of the prospective student, following which the only solution each school could come up with was one-to-one tutoring, which, however, is rather costly. Their prices ranged from HUF 3,500 to 5,500 for a 45-min class. This is about 4–5 times as expensive as a regular group course with 3–9 learners.

Still, there can be no doubt about the helpfulness of these schools. One of them returned the call to let us know that they had found a teacher who had taught a hearing-impaired learner before and would be willing to try again. At another school, they mentioned that they currently actually had a hard-of-hearing student taking individual classes and were ready to negotiate the conditions with the teacher for a new student. Since one-to-one teaching is rather expensive, they even suggested that if three hearing-impaired students of about the same level could team up, they would try to find a suitable teacher and offer a group fee. Another of the schools was prepared to lower their fee if a full course was paid for in advance.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the above overview. First of all, we can conclude that Deaf people, young and adult, consider themselves capable of learning a FL overall, especially the written form and if adequate instruction is provided. Lack of abilities is seldom named as a cause for lack of success. This is very good news because circumstances can be changed more easily than a person’s inner qualities or self-efficacy beliefs. It can also be stated with confidence that there is awareness among Deaf persons about the importance of FL skills, especially English, and there are some highly motivated Deaf individuals. The examples of adults show that the future plans of the school-aged learners are realistic: they do need and can make use of FL skills when using the Internet, when traveling, or when they want to keep up international relationships. Working abroad is not an unrealistic plan either and is also a good opportunity for acquiring the FL naturally.
A third important fact is that if a Deaf person wants to learn a FL for free, his or her best option is to learn as much as possible at school. Today, all special schools for the Deaf have English or German on the curriculum, and most of these schools have teachers who know how to deal with Deaf learners. With improved methods and materials, students should be able to achieve higher levels here.

Those who attend mainstream schools either at the primary or the secondary level have a hard time in trying to keep up with their hearing peers. The teachers are not trained to cater for their SN either. As a result, Deaf students usually end up getting a waiver. Postsecondary and adult education is also geared to hearing people. There is really no organized possibility for Deaf adults to learn English or another FL. Tertiary education on the whole is not prepared to accommodate Deaf language learners. Language schools find it impossible to enroll them in regular classes, and although a few schools are prepared to provide one-to-one tutoring for them, the fees are not affordable formost Deaf adults.

The best support the language-teaching profession could provide is to develop and disseminate methods and materials. Language teachers at the SN schools have to be given more support with materials developed for Deaf learners and with in-service training in the application of bilingual teaching methods. They should also be given access to free HSL courses, so that they can enhance their communication with their learners in class. Another area which could give a helping hand is the development of self-study materials for all ages on the Internet with explanations and translations in HSL. Finally, grant providers could consider supporting language schools in accommodating SN learners, so that they can take classes at a reduced fee. The more schools there are which offer such courses, the more teachers there will be who become involved in developing methods and materials that they can share.

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