

## Teaching Foreign Languages to the Deaf in Poland

Inclusive teaching is strongly emphasised nowadays in European regulations and documents. Educators, teachers, scholars and policy makers are struggling to make education accessible to the widest possible group of learners. One of such groups are the d/Deaf – teaching them foreign languages is still an area that has not been fully explored. Although it is undoubtful that the d/Deaf require adjustments in teaching techniques and content, some researchers claim that there is no special method that could be applied to teaching this group of learners. The article presents the characteristics of teaching foreign languages to the d/Deaf. This theory is combined with the results of a study conducted on a group of foreign language teachers (of English and Polish) working with d/Deaf learners, showing how they manage to teach this peculiar group of students. The data gathered in a form of online interviews and reported in the paper shed light on how teachers approach this particular group of FL learners. The article presents conclusions regarding the conditions and formal regulations of the Polish system. They concern possible changes in the educational programme and the teacher training system. Additionally, the paper presents a wide range of practical suggestions regarding teaching foreign languages to the d/Deaf.

**Keywords:** d/Deaf education, teaching foreign languages to the d/Deaf, Polish educational system

### Fremdsprachenunterricht für Gehörlose in Polen

Inklusiver Unterricht wird heutzutage in europäischen Vorschriften und Dokumenten stark betont. Pädagogen, Lehrer, Wissenschaftler und politische Entscheidungsträger bemühen sich, Bildung einer möglichst breiten Gruppe von Lernenden zugänglich zu machen. Eine dieser Gruppen sind die Gehörlosen – der Fremdsprachenunterricht für diese Gruppe ist immer noch ein Bereich, der noch nicht vollständig erforscht wurde. Obwohl es zweifellos ist, dass Gehörlose Anpassungen in den Unterrichtstechniken und -inhalten benötigen, behaupten einige Forscher, dass es keine spezielle Methode gibt, die angewendet werden könnte, um diese Gruppe von Lernenden zu unterrichten. Der Artikel beschreibt die Merkmale des Fremdsprachenunterrichts für Gehörlose. Diese Theorie wird mit den Ergebnissen einer Studie kombiniert, die an einer Gruppe von Fremdsprachenlehrern (Englisch und Polnisch) durchgeführt wurde, die mit gehörlosen Lernenden zusammenarbeiten, und zeigt, wie sie es schaffen, diese besondere Gruppe von Schülern zu unterrichten. Die Daten, die in Form von Online-Interviews gesammelt und in dem Papier berichtet wurden, geben Aufschluss darüber, wie Lehrer mit dieser bestimmten Gruppe von Fremdsprachenlernenden umgehen. Der Artikel enthält Schlussfolgerungen zu den Bedingungen und formalen Vorschriften des polnischen Bildungssystems. Sie betreffen mögliche Änderungen im Bildungsprogramm und im Lehrerausbildungssystem. Darüber hinaus enthält das Papier eine Vielzahl praktischer Vorschläge zum Unterrichten von Gehörlosen in Fremdsprachen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Gehörlosenbildung, Fremdsprachenunterricht für Gehörlose, polnisches Bildungssystem

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## 1. Introduction

Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners are subject of compulsory education in Poland. They are required to study the same subjects as hearing learners. The d/Deaf<sup>1</sup> have the possibility to learn in classes together with hearing learners (Janicka 2016) or receive education in special facilities with classes for learners with similar educational needs (Szczepankowski 1999). In both cases, abilities and needs of the d/Deaf learners are taken into consideration by teachers. Educators are required not only to prepare classes tailored to d/Deaf learners, but also to implement the content of the General Core Curriculum (Szczepkowska 2019). Since d/Deaf communicate primarily using sign language (Szczepankowski 1999), the issue of adapting language classes seems especially appealing. The literature of the subject presents a plethora of solutions and techniques that can be used by teachers to make the learning process more effective. Because in the case of d/Deaf learners, the effectiveness of learning is based not only on linguistic aptitude of a learner but mainly on the methods used by the teacher (Dłużniewska 2011) and the ways learners are involved in class activities (Dotter 2013), teaching techniques shall be given special consideration in this paper.

Considerations on the aforementioned topic begin with the presentation of characteristics of the d/Deaf's as foreign language learners. This part gathers theoretical information and tips from the literature on teaching foreign language to the d/Deaf. The latest knowledge of both Polish and foreign scholars working in the field of d/Deaf education have been included in this article. Gathered information is the basis for further elaboration on the use of the theory in practice by teachers of Polish and English working with d/Deaf in the Polish educational system. Information on this subject was obtained by the researcher through interviews carried out in 2020. Data collected from teachers pose a description of practical methods used by them during classes with the d/Deaf. At the end, all gathered information is compared and reflections as well as tips on working with the said group of learners are formulated.

## 2. The d/Deaf as foreign language learners

One of the most important aspects that every foreign language teacher has to bear in mind while working with the d/Deaf is the fact that the natural way of communication of the d/Deaf is sign language (Szczepankowski 1999). This may be seen as a challenge due to the need to adapt teaching methods to the perceptive abilities of learners with hearing impairments (Gulati 2013). Because hearing of d/Deaf learners is impaired to the extent that they are not able to communicate freely using phonic language

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<sup>1</sup> "Deaf with an upper case 'D' denotes membership in the Deaf culture or Deaf community; deaf with a lower case 'd' is an audiological description" (Brice/Strauss 2016: 67). It is also worth noting that not every deaf person will belong to the Deaf community, because many of them were raised in hearing families and do not have contact with the community, thus the article uses the spelling "d/Deaf" to include both mentioned groups of learners.

(Brice/Strauss 2016), it is not possible to develop all receptive and productive skills. Among the skills which are not typically taught to the d/Deaf are listening and speaking (Doležalova 2013). According to Pritchard (2013), teachers of foreign languages to d/Deaf shall focus on the learners “experiencing language with all the senses and actively using the language to achieve a purpose” (Pritchard 2013: 122). In the case of the d/Deaf, the most important is to provide them with an opportunity to develop the ability to understand and produce texts (Dłużniewska 2011). Moreover, those teaching the d/Deaf have to bear in mind that all curricula, textbooks, additional materials, and even the core curriculum for general education are prepared primarily with the hearing students in mind (Fleming 2008). Therefore, taking into account that the effectiveness and ability to learn a foreign language by the d/Deaf depends primarily on the methods used by teachers (Gulati 2013, Dłużniewska 2011), teaching d/Deaf learners involves the need to adapt the available materials and develop own unique methods and tasks.

Even though there are no obstacles to teach reading skills to the d/Deaf learners, some peculiar types of techniques are suggested to be used in a FL class to make the learning process as fruitful as possible. Doležalova (2013) focuses on technical aspects concerning reading tasks, proposing, among others, dividing texts into sections, using pictures to support the content of the reading, and preparing visually attractive materials, i.e. avoiding black print on white paper, to encourage learners who agree that English should be taught through visualisation (Csizér/Kontra 2020) – pictures, images, charts etc. One of the most frequently raised issues is the appropriate selection of the topic of readings to make learners curious about the text (Pritchard 2013, Doležalova 2013, Domagała-Zyśk 2018). Learners should be also taught to implement various strategies of reading, among others: “using their background knowledge and creating expectations as to what the text will be about, using information from pictures and titles, scanning the text for familiar words, understanding the meaning of words from the context, using dictionaries to check understanding, looking for similarities between English words and the mother tongue etc.” (Pritchard 2013: 122). According to Domagała-Zyśk (2018), it may also be helpful to translate words and phrases unknown in sign language, such as fixed phrases or idioms, and to use sign language to determine the meanings of words and expressions.

As regards writing, “for the d/Deaf and hard of hearing [it] constitutes the main means of acquiring the language (through reading) and using it in communication” (Domagała-Zyśk 2013: 167). Therefore, teachers are recommended to develop this skill to the fullest using various techniques and types of tasks. Writing may take many forms, i.e. keeping a diary (learners write about themselves and their lives), writing short descriptions of learners’ previous day, or discussing learners’ problems using chatrooms and emails for conversation (Doležalova 2013). Since sign languages are purely visual/gestural systems, they have no written representation (Moore/Levitan 2003). As a result, d/Deaf English learners may face the problem of reproducing

language in writing while their mother tongue cannot be written. Thus, they may need help defining the register or organising the written text (Domagała-Zyśk 2018). An important aspect influencing learners' motivation and involvement in writing are feedback and selective marking offered by the teacher (Pritchard 2013). It is important that teachers not only reward effective delivery of content of the written message but also treat mistakes as a natural element of the learning process (Domagała-Zyśk 2018).

Study conducted by Bajkó and Kontra (2008) shows that d/Deaf learners have their preferable types of activities and ways of memorising teaching content. They opt for "colourful, practical, creative and intellectually challenging tasks and games" (184). What helps d/Deaf learners understand foreign language better is detailed explanation of the function as well as the form of language structures (Fleming 2008). They like receiving feedback in a written form (Csizér/Kontra 2020). Bearing in mind what d/Deaf learners claim, teachers shall focus not only on the selection of appropriate content and teaching specific language skills, but they also must pay special attention to the way the knowledge is transferred.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Aim

There is no one fixed solution for teaching all d/Deaf, therefore, it seemed important to conduct a survey among teachers of the d/Deaf, who would share their practical experience of working with this group of learners. The main aim of the research conducted in 2020 (April–June) was to examine what foreign language education of the d/Deaf in the Polish educational system looks like. It focused on selected areas of teaching foreign languages to d/Deaf learners, among others, techniques of teaching, language exams, adapting school conditions and teaching materials, conducting teacher training and communication between hearing teachers and d/Deaf learners.

This article presents findings concerning techniques and forms of work used by foreign language teachers while working with d/Deaf students. The purpose of this part of the study was to verify if teachers use the methods and techniques described in the literature of the subject, check which modifications they introduce while working with the d/Deaf and in what way they implement the core curriculum. The researcher aimed to juxtapose information on teaching Polish and English to the d/Deaf collected from teachers and compare them with the theoretical knowledge.

#### 3.2 Participants

Due to the fact that the native language for d/Deaf people in Poland is the Polish Sign Language (PJM), the researcher decided to conduct interviews not only with teachers of foreign languages in a standard understanding (e.g. English, German etc.), but also with teachers of Polish which is taught to the d/Deaf in the form that most hearing people know from mainstream schools. This subject, however, should be treated as

a foreign language for the d/Deaf – due to the differences in the structure of phonic Polish and PJM, as well as to the d/Deaf's ability to understand and interpret texts and to use phonic language. The research group consisted of 6 teachers – 3 teachers of English and 3 teachers of Polish. In both groups, 1 teacher worked with the d/Deaf in primary school and 2 teachers were employed in a secondary or vocational school. All mentioned schools were located in cities over 250,000 residents in Poland – among others, in Lublin, Łódź and Warsaw.

All of the interlocutors had worked as teachers for more than 10 years by the time of the interview. As regards teaching hearing-impaired learners, 3 teachers (50%) had more than 12 years of experience in this field and the other half worked with the d/Deaf for less than 6 years. The research participants had graduated from Polish or English philology and finished courses that prepared them for work with learners with disabilities – among others, special-needs education, d/Deaf education, revalidation pedagogy. Teachers worked with learners in various types of classes – d/Deaf-only classes (2 teachers), classes for learners with mixed disabilities (3 teachers) and integrated classes (1 teacher).

### 3.3 Instrument

The data were gathered using semi-structured online interviews via Google Meet. Factual questions, i.e. the number of years of work as a teacher, the number of years of work with d/Deaf learners, the type of school and the educational level, were used at the beginning of the interview to describe the participants. The interview tool contained open-ended questions that allowed the researcher to elicit a broader scope of answers and research selected areas to the fullest, they were as follows:

- What techniques do you most often use during language classes with d/Deaf learners?
- What skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) do you most often practice during language classes with d/Deaf learners?
- In which tasks do d/Deaf learners participate most willingly?
- In which tasks do d/Deaf learners participate least willingly?

The aim of the interviews was to exchange experiences and information about d/Deaf learners, which is why the researcher also shared with the teachers what he was able to find out in this field. Therefore, during the video conference, the researcher presented and discussed some ideas on methods and techniques that can be used during classes with the d/Deaf and asked the teachers to elaborate on them telling if and in what way they use mentioned ideas. The list of ideas included i.a. lip reading comprehension, introducing elements of foreign sign languages (e.g. BSL), enabling the use of dictionaries, practicing spelling of new words, gap filling exercises, learning pronunciation, exercises in oral production of texts.

The researcher asked teachers additional questions when it was necessary to clarify the most interesting aspects of their answers and gain a better overview of their

experience. The questions were original ideas of the researcher based on theoretical information from the literature of the subject. The interviews were not transcribed, however, information concerning teaching methods presented by the interlocutors was written down and grouped by the researcher and analysed.

### 3.4 Results

#### 3.4.1 Teaching techniques used by teachers of English as a FL

The interviewed teachers of English claimed that they did not have any special methods or types of exercises dedicated to teaching the d/Deaf. It appeared that they tended to omit listening comprehension and speaking. It became an issue in classes for learners with mixed disabilities and integrated classes during which listening and speaking had to be included. In such cases sometimes “d/Deaf learners were irritated even by the very sound of recordings”. Therefore teachers replaced listening and speaking tasks with reading and writing respectively. This required prior preparation of recording scripts or writing exercises that would correspond to the speaking tasks.

Reading was regarded by the interviewed teachers of English to the d/Deaf as the most important activity. “Reading is the only way for the d/Deaf that they could check if they can understand the real language without the help of a teacher”, claimed one of the interviewed teachers. They tended to make detailed analyses and translations of the texts with their students. Even though it took a lot of time, the teachers claimed that this technique allowed learners to understand the texts to the fullest and to acquire many new vocabulary items. Additionally, they supported text comprehension by combining speech with gestures, facial expressions and body language. To attract the attention of d/Deaf learners, the teachers tried to make readings visually interesting, supplementing them with colourful photos, pictures or drawings. Some teachers claimed they also used visualisation techniques that help d/Deaf learners easily remember vocabulary items – they made their own flashcards or asked learners to make ones.

An issue that was raised by the interlocutors was also combining various senses and techniques that would activate learners. In this area, the teachers enumerated such games as hangman and charades, as well as interactive internet games, such as Kahoot. Some of the interviewed educators employed films with English subtitles. This way they provided authentic materials in the education process (d/Deaf learners were allowed to watch parts of films, TV shows, interviews and were able to get to know cultural elements of foreign countries). To make writing tasks more approachable, the teachers reported to be using instant messaging apps and social media groups. According to them, this technique made it possible for the d/Deaf to hold a conversation in the foreign language, and was an interesting alternative for typical writing assignments.

### 3.4.2 Teaching techniques used by teachers of Polish

The teachers of Polish stressed the need to teach the d/Deaf reading for different purposes – general understanding of the text, focus on subsequent text analysis, focus on parts of the speech, focus on interpretation. Even though such skills and knowledge are required by the General Core Curriculum in Poland and are tested after each educational stage, the educators claimed that “they were not necessary, and that their acquisition was a problem for d/Deaf learners”. Since the written form of the phonic Polish language is difficult for d/Deaf learners, the interlocutors tried to make the texts easier to understand in various ways. The most common approach was transferring texts into a visual form, which included combining gestures, facial expressions and illustrations to facilitate understanding of the texts. The teachers who had classes for learners with mixed disabilities and integrated classes faced the challenge of conveying the content of the text, taking into account various modalities at the same time – phonic for blind learners and learners without disability and picture/sign for the d/Deaf.

As regards visualisation aids, the teachers used photos, pictures, as well as films with subtitles or sign language translations. One of the interlocutors pointed that one of the most usable device in a d/Deaf class is the overhead projector – “I use it almost during every meeting to present visual aids and as a replacement for standard reading text to highlight the part of the text that is being analysed”. The educators also tried visualisation of words and concepts from the theory of literature and language to build better understanding of the phonic Polish language structure.

The interlocutors also paid attention to the use of sign language during classes. Unfortunately, only one of the teachers of Polish language to the d/Deaf used the Polish sign language (PJM) fluently, one knew PJM at the basic level, and one used the help of the signed Polish (SJM)<sup>2</sup>. The teachers, who used the Polish sign language, simply translated written texts into this language, however, it was not an easy task. The educators also used drama technique. They played scenes from literature and poems with students, thus encouraging active participation in classes. In their opinion, this method was very positively accepted by d/Deaf students.

## 4. Discussion of results

The interviews conducted confirm that the theoretical information on teaching foreign languages to d/Deaf learners is effectively used in practice. The interviewed teachers are aware of the limitations and abilities of d/Deaf learners and adapt the teaching techniques to classes with the d/Deaf focusing on skills, as well as on exercises that

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<sup>2</sup> Polish Sign Language (PJM) is a natural language of communication of the Deaf community in Poland; signed Polish (SJM) is a language-sign system created by hearing people to facilitate better communication between the hearing community and the Deaf community in Poland (Szczepankowski 1999).

suit this group of learners. Some of presented techniques are borrowed from classes with non-deaf learners, however the research presents how the teachers adjust them to the needs of the d/Deaf and how varied such techniques are.

The both group of teachers agree that reading and writing are skills with the use of which the d/Deaf are able to gain knowledge. Most often mentioned, and thus the most effective, technique was including visual aids into tasks. This seems to be obvious taking into the consideration visual modality of the d/Deaf's communication. Each of the interlocutors tried to implement techniques that would activate learners, putting them in the role of a powerful knowledge seeker rather than the passive recipient of information. Therefore, among these techniques we find engaging games, drama techniques, visualisations, using mobile applications. Some of the educators tried using the sign language during classes which appeared useful and beneficial for learners, however, teachers who can sign are still the minority in the Polish educational system.

Teachers of English	Teachers of Polish
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• detailed analysis and translation of texts</li> <li>• text comprehension supported by combining speech with gestures, facial expressions and illustrations</li> <li>• involving games – charades, hangman</li> <li>• interactive internet games – Kahoot</li> <li>• films with English subtitles</li> <li>• instant messaging apps and social media groups to practice writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading for different purposes</li> <li>• combining gestures, facial expressions and illustrations to facilitate the understanding of the texts</li> <li>• photos, pictures, films with subtitles and sign language translations</li> <li>• use of the overhead projector</li> <li>• translating texts into the sign language</li> <li>• drama techniques</li> <li>• visualising keywords that may be incomprehensible to d/Deaf learners</li> </ul>

Tab. 1. Comparison of techniques used by the interviewed teachers

## 5. Conclusions

The article ponders upon the up-to-date topic of inclusive teaching. The collected information on teaching foreign languages to d/Deaf learners can contribute to development of this still thriving field of foreign language didactics. The conducted research sheds light on the competence of Polish teachers to teach English and Polish to the d/Deaf. It turns out that the ideas presented by the teachers follow the latest knowledge on the subject gathered by Polish and international scholars. Information presented by teachers is a significant source of knowledge about the teaching techniques that can be used with d/Deaf learners. They are not only proper and empirically grounded but also checked in practice.

Following the content of the article conclusions can be drawn concerning conditions and formal regulations of the Polish educational system. It would be reasonable to make changes to several areas regarding the teaching of d/Deaf. First of

all, it should be considered to introduce the Polish sign language into the university programmes as a compulsory subject for future teachers and d/Deaf pedagogues. This would facilitate contact between learners and teachers. Moreover, classes of the d/Deaf's natural language, Polish sign language, are strongly advised for this group of learners, since nowadays, the schooling system does not allow them to learn any sign language. Practically speaking, they learn two (or more) foreign languages, not improving the language that is natural for their perceptual possibilities.

Particularly noteworthy is the issue of teaching Polish to d/Deaf students. The surveyed teachers indicate that the curriculum is not adapted to d/Deaf learners for whom the Polish language in the phonic version is a foreign language. Therefore, teachers try to adapt the techniques of work to the d/Deaf. However, they believe that, above all, it is the teaching content that should be adapted to the abilities of the d/Deaf. Polish language classes should resemble foreign language lessons, without focusing on the theoretical knowledge about the language and interpretation of literary texts.

There is still a lot that needs to be done when teaching the d/Deaf is concerned. Objective studies that would verify if any of mentioned techniques are more effective, enjoyable, less stressing than other shall be conducted to explore the topic presented in the article to the fullest. The students' perceptions of these techniques shall also be reported. Yet another area to be researched is variability of d/Deaf learners – their learning styles, different levels of motivation, influence on the learning process of language experience as well as access to phonic languages because of the family they come from.

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