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Communicating between the hearing and the deaf. In search for innovative solutions

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Abstract:

Democratization of social life in Poland after political transformation of 1989 meant that people with disabilities, including the deaf began to participate in social life actively and demand the ability to use full rights of citizenship. Active presence in the public space requires a constant, uninterrupted communication. In order to improve communication it is necessary to teach the hearing ways to communicate they use to encourage the deaf and the hearing to acquire these skills.

First of all, the so-called linguistic-sign system (SJM), which uses visual-spatial channel to communicate, is used for communication. Polish Sign Language (PJM) became an innovation in search for better communication between the hearing and the deaf since the first years of the 21st century. Dissemination of the Polish Sign Language (PJM) and teaching this language to the hearing gives more opportunities to communicate the deaf with the hearing. Skills of using Polish sign language are essential in everyday public life interactions in institutions of public administration and health services or places of culture.

1. Introduction

The democratization of social life in Poland after the political transformation of 1989 meant that people with disabilities, including the deaf began to actively participate in social life and demand the possibility to use full rights of citizenship. Active presence in the public space requires effective communication, with constant, uninterrupted flow of information, so the need to communicate. Deaf people want to interact with greater intensity than before the political transformation. This requires communication simultaneously on the other side – hearing people. Hence the expectations that the hearing acquire skills to communicate in the language of the deaf – the sign language. In public institutions, offices of various levels, post offices, railway stations, bus stops, in hospitals, places of culture, exhibitions etc., so wherever interaction and communication relationship is necessary, deaf (as cultural-communication community meaning) expect and need communication support, creating conditions allowing agreement and receiving necessary information. It should be added that government agencies and medical entities are legally obliged to allow contact with the deaf person in sign language¹. Hence the need to meet social expectations through a creative approach to the problem of the deaf – acquiring their communication skills, those that are close to them, within the limits of the possibilities of the deaf; in a word “entering their role.” This requires a creative approach to communication, understanding the language capabilities of the deaf, and so high culture of communication in general and understanding of the needs of the deaf, being characterised with empathy, acceptance of differences. The way to effective communication with deaf people is to acquire the ability to use their language – the sign language.

¹ Under the Act of 19 August 2011 about sign language and other means of communication.



2. Language-sign system and Polish Sign Language

In this case, there arises the need to teach sign language to the hearing and encouraging them to gaining the skill. The learning process comprises nowadays of the language-sign system (SJM) or Polish Sign Language (PJM). Language-sign system uses visual-spatial channel of communication. It is more common.

Language-sign system is a method of communication which one of the most basic aims is teaching the deaf Polish language in order to make their life among the hearing easier. The method in its assumptions was to give phonic Polish language a visual dimension to the deaf, who are deprived of the opportunity to communicate on the basis of voice-hearing channel, they had access to the structures of the Polish language, which in turn would contribute to better understanding. Lexemes of the Polish language were used and embedded in grammar of the Polish language. Additionally, new signs had to be created, for example for non-existent in PJM reflexive pronoun. This is how SJM was created, a bimodal method which uses both voice-hearing and visual channels of communication that helps to communicate between the deaf and the hearing. Immediately, the method gained great interest, especially on the part of teachers at special schools and educational centres for hard of hearing and deaf children because it was an alternative to the oral method, which consisted of verbal contact with a deaf student. In the rapidly developed in Poland system of courses SJM. The system of SJM courses developed in Poland at a rapid pace. Course participants hope that it will lead to abolition of barriers of communication. Organizers of sign language courses, in most cases, offer a learning system of language-sign language. Hearing people who, for various reasons, need to learn sign language, are not aware that under the name of "sign language" there are two completely different systems of communication that are connected with engagement of hands to communicate². There are SJM course offerings, after which the graduate receives a certificate of the course completion as well as a certificate of sign language interpreter. According to Cambridge English, institution granting certificates of proficiency in English, which uses the standards of the European Framework of Reference for Languages, in order to achieve a level of proficiency in a language one should devote from 1000 to 1200 hours³. The scope should be extended by additional time to study aimed to explore the translation techniques, theories related to the ethics of the profession of interpreter and other issues, without which this profession would be to at least qualitatively questionable or impossible. Therefore, a similar range of time should be devoted to a sign language course, which issues certificates of a sign language interpreter. Learning sign language as a L2 in Poland it is divided into learning of SJM and PJM. SJM as artificial system of communication is implemented in a three-step learning process. For each degree 60 hours of studying focused primarily on acquisition of new sign vocabulary are dedicated. Learning grammar is not necessary, because statements are constructed based on the Polish language syntax and the target group is hearing Poles, who, after all, are native speakers of Polish. Classes are conducted based on the method, which relies on getting accustomed to the sign and its consolidation by signing it – communicating two sentences in which the sign is included. As part of the repetition participants translate sentences from Polish to SJM. The attention of students is headed towards the manual aspect, i.e. the arrangement of hands, which always represents a letter of the finger alphabet or numeral, palm orientation, location in space or the body. Non-manual dimension refers only to facial expressions and their expressive features, which can be summarized by words "smile when you refer to something cheerful, grieve when it's sad." In the process of SJM teaching phonic speech is always used. Elementary level of SJM begins with a theoretical part, which discusses in its scope: the characteristics of the disability: hearing-impaired people, deaf and mute; the scale of the phenomenon; the consequences of hearing loss; education of children and youth with hearing impairment; employment of the deaf; section of deaf in society; barriers in communication and technical aids; the specificity of communication with people with hearing impairment; communicating with hearing impaired people; communication with deaf people; communicating with deaf and mute people; basics of the sign language⁴ and practical guidelines to communicating in the sign language i.e. how to learn dactylography, that is finger alphabet and ideographic characters, or sign lexemes (Szczeplankowski, 2000, pp. 3-24).

² Most of the participants of the courses carried out by Migaj Naturalnie had no awareness of the SJM and PJM. They believed that there is only one sign language in Poland. In many cases, they were convinced that this is a universal communication system common to all deaf people in the world.

³ Cambridge English: <https://support.cambridgeenglish.org/hc/en-gb/articles/202838506-Guided-learning-hours>

⁴ Sign language is other name for SJM.



The three levels of SJM courses, i.e. elementary, intermediate and advanced, are carried out within 180 hours, during which the participant masters about 1,000 characters. Comparing again the sets of hours presented by Cambridge English for different levels of proficiency, 180 hours of learning a foreign language equals the range of hours for basic level A2 in the six level scale of the European Framework of Reference for Languages CEFR (ESOKJ, 2003) (source of information that facilitates the creation of curricula of sign languages). In addition, SJM focuses exclusively on producing of a communicate. It does not practice receptive actions because the messages in SJM are supported by phonic speech. The hearing participants are able to read the meaning of expression with closed eyes. Oposing in itself is the fact that under the term of sign language a code is taught that after blocking the main channel of communication, which is the visual channel for natural sign languages, it does its job. SJM like PJM does not have its notation, which is why actions aimed at developing reading and writing skills are not in place here. Throughout the course, there is no indication for the deaf as a language and culture minority with a separate language and culture, which has created members around it. No such indication is equivalent to the lack of socio-cultural competence in SJM curriculum. This is a consequence of the perception of the deaf only from the perspective of disability.

Polish Sign Language (PJM) has become an innovation in the search for better communication between the deaf and the hearing.⁵ Popularisation of Polish Sign Language (PJM) and teaching the language to the hearing gives a better opportunity to communicating between the deaf and the hearing. It began to spread from the first years of the 21st century. Then the first PJM courses appeared. Availability of PJM courses is low and only applies to some of the largest Polish cities. Organisers are often authors of curricula and teaching materials of PJM, most of whom are deaf people. PJM learning programs are usually created on the basis of ESOKJ directives for A1 up to B2 levels. It is observed that most of the courses carried out in Poland, are still based on 60 hours range. One can have reasonable doubt to output language competence of the course graduates on B2 level, who ended their education after 240 hours⁶. The reason for doubt is incomplete separation from SJM methodology in teaching sign language, which in turn can lead to learning hybrid forms between PJM and SJM, or teaching PJM on a lower level than offered. Unfortunately, in Poland there is no certifying authority, confirming the level of mastery of Polish sign language as a foreign language, which would safeguard the quality PJM education. However, in order for such an institution to be established, organizers of PJM courses have to answer a question: what standards teaching Polish sign language to the hearing as L2 should be based on? Is European Framework of Reference for Languages the right tool?

Let's look at CEFR in teaching the hearing PJM as L2. The process of creating the European Union would not have been possible without language skills of its people. A big step in the field of language teaching has been made by the publication 'Threshold Level 1975' by the Council of Europe, which gave rise to communicative approach. After many years of efforts of teams of specialists from different countries working on standardization of foreign languages teaching and learning in Europe, threshold were improved in 2001, which did not break with traditions of communicative approach, but even emphasized its importance in a new dimension called the task approach or the task perspective (Janowska, 2011, p. 45). European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment – offers common to the whole of Europe basis for developing learning plans, recommendations, curriculum, examinations, textbooks, etc. It broadly describes knowledge, skills and skills needed to achieve proficiency in the language, as well as cultural context in which every language is embedded. An important part of it is to determine levels of proficiency which allow you to assess progress in mastering the language – at every stage and throughout their lives (ESKJ, 2003, p. 13). Does CEF refer in its content also to sign languages? In the document '*the European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*' in section on 'paralinguistic means of communication' we can read:

[...] paralinguistic communication differs greatly from sign languages, which are not included in the System of description, although experts of this field can also find many interesting pieces of information in it. (Janowska, 2011, p. 85).

⁵ Research on PJM started in the 90s on the 20th century, mainly in the University of Warsaw. In 2008 postgraduate studies "Polish Sign Language" were opened on the university.

⁶ Time devoted to learning of a language to B2 level stretches between 500 and 600 hours. Cambridge English Language Assessment: <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/>



Thanks to grants from the European Funds, a few international projects concentrating on sign languages have been conducted in the recent years, among others: EFESTO Project, Spread the Sign, DSigns, SignALL, Medisigns, DeafVoc2. In years 2011 – 2014 within 'Lifelong learning' program a research program 'SignLef: Sign Language European Frame' was granted and conducted, the aim of which was to support the linguistic diversity of sign languages in Europe and improve the quality of teaching these subjects. An important point was preparing common basis for studying sign languages in accordance with the CEF guidelines and creating a description of language proficiency for the Austrian, Italian and Catalan Sign Language (Janaszek, 2013, p. 11).

However, the most important event in the current schedule of research projects funded by the Council of Europe, from the perspective of teachers of sign languages in Europe, has been conducted since 2012 'PRO-SIGNS' project, objectives of which are: adaptation of the CEFR in terms of creation of proficiency levels definition for sign language languages; detailed study of levels of proficiency with specifications for national curricula, regional sign language for the hearing; creating a tool to assess competence in sign language for proficiency levels from A1 to C2⁷.

The group "Pro-Signs" finished its work in 2015. Owing to its achievements teachers of visual-spatial languages can make use of results of the project which are: the overall scale of proficiency levels for sign languages, indicators for various activities of language, ie. production, reception, interaction and mediation according to a given level (A1-C2) and sample assessing tests along with analysis of their creation for sign languages.

Results of the project are available in both English and International Sign⁸, because most teachers of national sign languages are their native users. CEF adaptation to specific visual-spatial language teaching argues that the European Framework of Reference is a tool by which it is worthwhile to learn regional sign languages, also PJM, to the hearing. It is worth noting here that CEFR is not an official document, which should follow recommendations of EU Member States educational institutions. It is a universal tool, developed in a team, which has been proposed as the basis, the basis for improved readability in teaching foreign languages (Janowska, 2011, p. 70).

Let's have a look at communication needs of the hearing PJM learners and specifics of teaching a visual-spatial language. CEFR was established, because cooperation between the European Union countries was getting closer and concerned many areas as well as migration became more common. The need for communication had to be met. Assuming that the deaf are not a minority but majority in society, it is they, as citizens of the European Union who migrate between countries to look for work, for tourism or education, would have to acquire communicative competence in national sign languages, depending on destination country.

Thanks to this assumption, the cause of creating common language policy within the EU would also apply to the deaf community and their languages. The deaf, however, are a minority and there are rare situations in which they migrate massively in order to improve the situation. Even so, they generally find employment in places run by the hearing, thus learning a sign foreign language gives a minimum guarantee to break communication barrier and it occurs only when the hearing also know the sign language of the country. Such use of the CEFR in teaching sign language as a foreign language to the deaf seems unlikely. In contrast, teaching the hearing sign language as a foreign language according to standards of that language policy should be based on analysis of learners needs.

Thanks to data provided by Migaj Naruralnie (Lodz), the greatest need for PJM learning among the hearing is observed among hearing parents of deaf children, teachers working with deaf and hard of hearing children, SJM interpreters, employees of public administration, medical staff and services required to contact participants or witnesses of emergency situations, social workers, psychologists and lawyers. Analysis of areas where the need for communication in PJM is the most urgent, should focus curriculum among both the CEFR descriptors as well as the content of teaching and communication tasks meeting the need. In addition, visual-spatial language learning forces modifying the definition of language activities, which for phonic languages are implemented in oral and written form. Talking about sign languages, there are activities concentrates on: production of signs live as an equivalent of actions directed to speaking; production of videos in sign language

⁷ Website of „Pro-Signs” project: <http://www.ecml.at/F5/tabid/867/Default.aspx>

⁸ Sign language pidgin type is used mainly during international meetings (conferences, the Olympic Games of the deaf etc.).



as an equivalent of measures aimed at writing; reception of signs live as an equivalent of listening; reception of signs in videos as an equivalent of reading; sign interaction; sign mediation.

In foreign language teaching, an extremely important aspect is the development of socio-cultural competence. This competence is related to knowledge and skills that allow to keep social dimension of culture (Janowska, 2011, p. 60). CEFR enumerates here: determinants of social relations, politeness conventions, folk wisdom carriers, speech register, dialects and regional variants. (ESOKJ, p. 106). Additional advantage in teaching PJM to the hearing is antidiscriminating dimension (Tomaszewski, 2000, p. 36). The hearing participants of the interaction realize through association with the culture of the deaf and methods of communication by the community that there is no better or worse culture. Knowing PJM and KG, makes the stereotypical approach to the deaf as disabled is replaced by perception the deaf community, which characterises largely a distinct language and culture (Tomaszewski, 2000, p. 36).

3. Conclusions

The deaf community should be treated as a language minority, although legal status of Polish deaf community as a linguistic minority is not regulated. Hence the need for education of the hearing who work in public institutions, places of culture and science in the field of language, understandable communication to the deaf community.

Bilingual education in Poland does not exist. Currently, it is based on oral method or total communication method, which is expressed in using each method leading to a better understanding between teachers and pupils. Unfortunately, if a method used for this purpose is based on visual-spatial channel, it is usually a linguistic-sign language⁹.

Most of sign language courses in Poland are courses of linguistic-sign system. PJM offer is currently developing, but we can see habits used in teaching SJM methodologies, ie. 60 hours course on every level.

European Framework of Reference of Languages directs work on curriculum development and teaching materials for sign languages, but should also take into account the nature of the visual-spatial language, ie. a different communication channel on which sign texts are built, the analysis of the target group, in particular areas, which often result in contact between the deaf and the hearing and the development of socio-cultural competence, which allows course participants to explore the deaf culture and thus no longer be seen solely from the perspective of disability.

Dissemination of Polish Sign Language (PJM) and teaching the hearing this language gives a better chance to improve communication with the deaf with the hearing, and thus to closer the two communities.

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Legal Acts

Act on sign language and other means of communication from 19 August 2011.

⁹ Ibidem PJM in Poland does not have regulated legal status. The most often they are CODA – ‘children of the deaf adults’ or teachers of institutions for the deaf. Currently, there are translating companies focusing on online services.

