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CHAPTER EIGHT

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO A STUDENT WITH HEARING LOSS COMBINED WITH SLIGHT AUTISTIC DISORDERS

ABSTRACT

The population of people with hearing loss is a very diverse one due to differences in biological factors such as the level and type of hearing impairment and also social and educational factors, among them the family environment, type and intensity of rehabilitation undertaken and school experiences. The functioning of a hearing impaired student at language classes depends not only on the above factors, but also on teaching strategies and the student's learning strategies. The process of learning and teaching a foreign language usually can be very effective, particularly when effective methodological strategies are used. Significant difficulties arise, however, in such situations, when hearing impairment is accompanied by other serious cognitive and language difficulties, eg. autistic disorders. They make it difficult to communicate with the student, limit the repertoire of forms and techniques of teaching, often de-motivate the student to learn a new language. In cases like these, teachers raise doubts about the legitimacy of such kind of didactic work.

The aim of this presentation is to discuss the methods and forms of work with a deaf student with an autistic disorder used during the 54-hour individual foreign language course. This is a case study drawn from the author's teaching practice. The case study took a form of participatory research/action research. The conclusions of these analyses can confirm the fact that even when working with a student with such serious difficulties, it was possible for the student to acquire the basics of speaking a foreign language. The classes have to be highly individualized. The outcome may be the acquisition of a specific vocabulary and a strengthening of the intellectual and social potential of the student.

Keywords: hearing loss, deaf, autism, teaching a foreign language

INTRODUCTION

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students experience serious difficulties in communication in social and educational contexts. First, their parents (of whom more than 95% are hearing) have to take decisions as to the best rehabilitation method and try to make language skills accessible for their child. Usually proper technological devices such as hearing aids and cochlear implants support this process. Sometimes a sign language is the choice of language. This means that parents have to learn this new language and get accustomed to using it as a main means of family communication. Later the accessibility of this language has to be guaranteed at schools and other institutions. Services of professional educators, technological devices such as hearing loops or FM systems and supportive social atmosphere should all support the learning process. Quite often stereotypes and misunderstandings about hearing disability have to be discussed and fought.

The process of communication development is even more difficult if we take into consideration teaching a foreign language to the deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Even if they master reading, writing and – quite often – speaking in a foreign language – it is a really difficult task for them to acquire yet another language – with all its cultural, social and individual variables. Learning a new language means not only knowing one more name for a given activity or thing – but understanding the way of thinking and perceiving the world that is characteristic for people of another nationality and way of life.

Supporting a deaf and hard-of-hearing student in acquiring language skills is difficult if there are some additional disabilities, and might be especially difficult in work with a person with hearing loss combined with autistic disorders. Lack of communication skills is one of the three most characteristic features of autism.

The aim of this paper is to present possibilities and challenges of teaching English as a foreign language to a profoundly prelingually deaf student with an autistic disorder. Although this task might seem unworkable it is not like that. The paper is based on author's experience gained through a 54-hour English as a foreign language course for such a student. Teaching strategies and techniques used during this process might be useful for other teachers working with students with similar characteristics.

1. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN AUTISTIC STUDENTS

There are several dozen types of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) so it is not possible to enumerate or characterize all forms of communication challenges met by this group of students. ASD is recognized as a set of developmental disabilities that result in severe social, communication and behavioral problems. The cause of

these challenges is mainly biological: information is processed differently by the brains of ASD persons.

Autism seriously affects the person's communication skills- only about a quarter of persons with ASD have language skills in the normal range (Kjelgaard, Tager-Flusberg 2001). Its symptoms differ as to their level and severity, but generally autistic persons have problems in interacting with others and communicating successfully. Although some patients can have a rich vocabulary and are able to talk about particular subjects in a great detail, the majority of them do not speak at all, some use only a narrow repertoire of words and expression, others use only gestures, sign language or other means of alternative visual communication. Persons with ASD experience deficits in spontaneous language, difficulty in conversational skills, delayed grammar usage, echolalia and difficulty in the social use of communication skills (Ganz, Flores 2009). Autistic persons usually have problems with non-verbal communication: eye contact, hand gestures, facial expressions, body language and nuances of voice tone. Their language is repetitive and rigid, and usually concentrated on some narrow interests or abilities.

One of the main aims of autistic persons' therapy is to develop their language and communication skills. The type of intervention depends on age and scope of interests, but the patients generally respond highly positively to well structured and specialized programs. Basic communication trainings often emphasize the functional role of language, which means to learn how to hold a conversation and to take turns in asking and answering the questions.

One effective therapeutic approach to persons with ASD is, among others, the Direct Instruction method (DI). It is characterized by several features (Ganz, Flores 2009): 1. Tasks are broken into components and taught individually; 2. Teachers' responses include a set of procedures, like the provision of instruction and immediate corrective feedback; 3. Students are engaged mainly in repeated practice and 4. Learning environment and teacher behavior set the stage for a student's effective learning. The Direct Instruction method is reported as the one that helps the ASD children to master reading as decoding, reading as full comprehension (Flores, Ganz 2007) and developing higher language skills. Thanks to it, ASD persons get a greater access to a learning environment (Ganz, Flores 2009).

Another efficient teaching strategy is the Instructive Feedback (IF). In this method extra information is presented to a student during teaching trials for other target skills (Kurt 2009). This strategy postulates 1:1 teaching instruction for autistic students as only then is a teacher able to monitor the autistic student work progress and intervene when necessary with a small cue or suggestion. Research shows that this way of teaching, with the use of regular instructive feedback may bring really promising effects for some ASD students, but was not effectively used by every AD students in the study.

One more commonly used method is the Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT). In this method skills to be taught are separated into simple steps and each step is taught by means of repetitive trials. The study session consists of five steps: 1. Stimulus; 2. Prompt; 3. Response; 4. Consequence; 5. Inter-trial interval. The teacher is firstly presenting a new stimulus to the student and encouraging the student to take part in the teaching process by different prompts. These prompts are consequently fading, providing a space for the student to do the task. After each success the student feels gratified and is praised. Research show that the DTT method is highly effective and can serve as a teaching method of many language and communicative skills for ASD students. Additionally, it is possible to use the DTT method not only with verbal instruction but also in programs using augmentative and alternative communication, also with the use of sign language (Webber, Scheurerrmann 2008).

2. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND CHALLENGES OF DEAF STUDENTS

Hearing impairment is almost inevitably connected with language and communication challenges – as it was stated by R.O. Cornett: *Not speech, but language – this is a main problem of the hearing impaired persons*. Although today the time of diagnosis is really early and a child is usually equipped with technological devices such as hearing aids or cochlear implants and supported by early intervention programs, language development of a hearing impaired child is quite often delayed. It takes a huge effort from the family members and the teachers to support the deaf or hard-of-hearing person to learn new vocabulary and grammar rules that enable this person to build correct and understandable sentences and longer texts.

Only 5% of deaf persons are born to deaf parents. Sign language is the natural and first way of communication for these families. It greatly helps to establish emotional and social bonds between the family members and social environment. Education, however, requires a good command of a national language and sign language users require a strong support to learn their national language and use it efficiently in education.

Despite these difficulties, deaf and hard-of-hearing students can become experts both in using their national language and foreign languages (Domagała-Zyśk 201a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012 a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, Domagała, Rosowicz 2013). More and more of them graduate from high schools and start their careers independently. On the other hand, there is still a large group of deaf and hard-of-hearing persons excluded from good quality education and job opportunities.

3. TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO A DEAF STUDENT WITH AUTISTIC DISORDERS – A CASE STUDY

Foreign languages are taught to deaf and hard-of-hearing students at each level of education, in primary low secondary and secondary schools. It usually enables a student to pass the Matura exam and encourage the smartest of them to apply to the university. However, there is a considerably large group of D/HH persons who experience severe learning difficulties, usually connected with hearing loss AND some other disabilities. They usually have their education organized in special schools and after finishing it seek for a job in supported work environments.

In this paper, teaching strategies and the participant's response to them will be analyzed for one such student, 18-year old Adam, who experiences prelingual severe hearing loss and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD).

The preparation for teaching a student with hearing loss and autistic disorders should firstly include all training of methods of communication that the student is used to. The most popular ones include sign language and writing. Some of these students are able to communicate by speech. Interviews with parents or carers might help to learn more about it. Before starting my work, I learnt that Adam communicates with his parents in different ways: he lip reads their speech, which is usually supported by sign language and other family gestures. Adam does not use speech. He knows some sign language that he uses in communication with family members and other people at work.

Adam is regarded by his parents as an independent man – he commutes to school and workshops by himself, is able to manage different job tasks, participates in housework and other duties, such as using the ATM, doing simple shopping or paying the bills at the bank. Adam likes sport – he goes regularly to the gym and swims. I also got to know that he likes writing – at home he tries to copy some words or sentences in Polish almost every day. He is encouraged to do by his parents and thanks to that, he revises his skills in using his native language.

Adam, as a typical autistic person, was very nervous during our first meeting, as this situation was new for him. He had to meet with a new person in a new place (a language school). He came with his mother, motivated to learn English, but was – I suppose – afraid that this might be too difficult for him. We greeted each other with “good afternoon” in sign language and shook our hands. During the first half of the class, Adam looked through the window several times and probably wanted to go out. However, he tried to participate in the class and continued doing his tasks. I tried to lead the class very slowly, checking his rhythm and pace of work. To communicate, I used some sign language and some simple writing. I patiently waited for him to finish the tasks and commented every single one with a smiled emoticon – a sign of success.

Our meetings were scheduled once a week and lasted 90 minutes each. After 45 minutes there was a break. During the next classes, Adam was more relaxed: he was entering the classroom courageously and he was usually very focused on the class tasks and interested in new exercises. Since the very first class I established a clear class structure: after the initial greetings, there were several tasks which had a common topic – some of them were pen-and-paper (first half of the class) and some of them were to be done online (they were scheduled for the second half of the class). In the last ten minutes of the class, we played dominoes in English – and this was a sign for saying goodbye. This routine helped Adam to feel secure and to control the time of the class.

The teaching program consisted of three stages: 1. Arousing interest in learning languages; 2. Using words; 3. Using simple expressions and sentences.

3.1. STAGE ONE: AROUSING INTEREST IN LEARNING LANGUAGES.

Students with autistic disorders do not manifest a need for extensive communication with other people. If they have some language problems connected with hearing loss, communication possibilities may be very limited. Adam communicated regularly with a narrow mixture of Polish and PJM signs. He did not have any possibility to meet foreigners. The key question for me was how to make him interested in learning English? The level of his cognitive and language skills was quite low, but at the same time he was an adult man, working in a small factory. It was not an easy task to set the aim of this class. After some consideration, I decided to profit from Adam's hobby - sports and his interest in good cuisine.

Task 1. Sportsmen from different countries

Aim:

- to arouse interest in learning English
- to learn names of countries in English

I prepared a PP presentation of well-known sportsmen. At each slide there was a picture and a name of a sportsman (Robert Lewandowski, David Beckham, Leo Messi, Michael Schumacher), a flag symbolizing his country and a greeting *Good morning* in his language. This presentation was accompanied by a simple explanation in sign language: *They are from different countries. They do not know Polish and Polish Sign Language. They speak different languages.* In the second stage of the task next to each greeting there appeared a greeting in English. The teacher explains: *They use different languages but all of them know English.* As a natural conclusion there appeared a statement: *People use different languages, but in order to communicate they use English. It is good to know English, as it is possible to communicate with people from different countries.* Afterwards there was a series of several exercises aiming at identifying the flags of the countries (the student knew

them as he likes watching different sports events on TV) and their names. The tasks were both traditional (based on visuals on paper) and technological. On different internet sites there are interesting exercises addressing this issue. As homework the student was supposed to match the flags and names of several countries. Astonishingly, he did not only do the required 20 – but wrote down 5 pages of the names of the countries, nationalities connected with them and their flags.

Task 2. Greetings in English, Polish and PJM

Aim:

- to learn greetings in English
- to use appropriate greetings depending on the time of night and day

The next exercise aimed at learning the greetings. Firstly the teacher showed a student greetings in Polish written on pieces of card (*dzień dobry* – good morning, *dobry wieczór* – good evening, *dobranoc* – good night, *cześć* – hello, *do widzenia* – goodbye, *jak się masz* – how are you, *mam sie dobrze* – I'm OK). The teacher asked the student to show these greetings in PJM – in this exercise a student was an expert and the teacher learnt and revised her skills. The situation allowed the student to feel like an expert. This was considered as a very important motivational factor. After matching the greetings with their signs, the teacher provided an English equivalent for each sign. As the expressions in Polish and in English were written down both as a list (Polish and English expression next to each other) and on two collections of separate pieces of paper each it was possible to repeat this exercise several times: 1. The teacher shows an English greeting and the student provided an equivalent in English; 2. The teacher shows a greeting in sign language and the student provides an English expression. 3. The pieces of paper lie face down on the table and the student tries to find the same expressions (Polish one and English one); 4. The student shows an English expression and the teacher shows a Polish one, but sometimes makes mistakes and then the student has to spot the mistake and correct it; 5. The teacher shows an expression in sign language and the student shows a form in English.

As a summary one more idea was included: figures of sportsmen were printed with bubbles overhead. They “spoke” different greetings. Next to them the teacher wrote down the student’s name and the bubble. In each bubble the student was supposed to answer the sportsmen greetings.

It is worthwhile to notice that the limited language presented and acquired during this class was successfully used in real-life communication. Three languages were used in the conversations. The aim of these classes was successfully met: the student started to be motivated to learn English, perceiving it as a means of communication with people whom he regarded significant. The student recognized several flags of the countries and was able to copy a name next to each flag. He got to know several greetings and was able to use them in communication.

3.2. STAGE TWO: USING WORDS

Several of the following classes were devoted to learning, revising and extending Adam's English vocabulary. We started from learning words. This way of communication was natural for Adam. Neither in Polish nor in sign language was he able to communicate with sentences. When asked he usually answered with a word or simple statements like "Yes" and "No". Words used at this stage were chosen according to the student's individual preferences and were mainly those that were known by Adam in Polish or in PJM. They were close to Adam's everyday experience. However, Adam rarely used in his native language some of the words that I planned to use. Hence the English class served actually as a language therapy class (cf. Domagała-Zyśk 2006) as the students had the chance to revise, fix, understand better and widen the full meaning of some of the words.

Below the structure for presenting a new class of vocabulary will be shown.

Task 3. Vocabulary: Food & Drink.

Aim:

- to acquire, fix and revise new food and drink vocabulary in English

At the beginning, it is usually worth to start from everyday experience, so the lesson can begin with eating or drinking a small snack or drink with an English name written on it. I used a small cartoon of apple juice that had an English name on it. That was a good starting point to ask in sign language: *What is it inside?*, point to the English name and comment: *It is not in Polish, it is in English. Let's learn some English names of food and drink.*

After this short warm-up the first exercise was to see a PP presentation consisting of several slides with pictures of fruit and a name of each fruit. Some names are known even to small children as they see or hear them in films, while doing shopping etc, so it is usually possible to use 12-20 pictures for this presentation. Pictures have to be realistic, show one fruit (to avoid misunderstanding singular and plural forms). At this level of communication articles do not have to be used. It is necessary to check if the student knows a Polish name for each of these items so it is advisable to prepare a vocabulary Polish-English list of all names. While watching the slides the teacher and the student might comment on them with a simple expression, eg. orange – *I like it. And you?* If some fruit is not known by the student, it is possible to show some more simple information about it, e.g. avocado – *Not sweet. From Mexico. You can buy it in a shop. I do not like it.* The presentation can be watched once or twice – depending on the student's preferences.

After seeing the presentation the student is advised to prepare a vocabulary sheet. The worksheet given to the student has Polish names of the items written down, with plenty of space around. The student's task it to glue a picture of the

fruit and – using the presentation – write or copy its name. Such vocabulary sheets can be kept in one file and used as a reference list for different tasks. They form an open collection and the student can add new cards if only he feels like it.

Having this reference list, it is possible to do a series of exercises concerning these new vocabulary items:

- *Matching* – a worksheet consists of some pictures of the fruit on the left (the pictures can be schematic this time so as to help in the classification of some items into a class) and the names of the fruit on the right. The student's task is to match names and pictures. One more option is to match Polish names and English names of the fruits.
- *Missing letters* – this worksheet contains pictures of fruits on the left and names of them on the right, written with large fonts. In the names some letter are missing. The student's task is to complete the names – with or without using the reference list.
- *Circling* – this worksheet contains 4 pictures of the fruit. Around each picture there are 4-6 names but only one of them is correct and describes the picture. The student's task is to circle the name of the fruit on the picture.
- *Memory* – if we cut a set of the fruit pictures and a set of their names, it is easy to organize a memory game. The number of items depends on the student's potential. To make this task more interesting and diverse, it is possible to find memory games online and use them. Online games should not replace the traditional cardboard games – they improve visual and kinesthetic coordination and engage the student's mind in a very effective way. Using memory games, we can also introduce and practice plural forms – on some of the pictures the student can see one fruit and a singular name, on others – some fruits and a plural name.
- *Fruit juice* – student is given a picture of some juice cartoons. His task is to decide which fruit can be used to produce a juice. If possible, a picture of a fruit is glued to the cartoon and the name is written down e.g. orange juice, plum juice.

Task 4. Rare and interesting sports

Aim:

- to learn new sports vocabulary

As I knew from my short interview with Adam, he was keen both on watching and doing sports. We started this task by watching short films (accessible from YouTube) that presented fragments of different sports plays and activities. After watching each fragment, I presented Adam a photo of it and a name in English – thus our reference list was created. It consisted of some well-known items, but also some new ones, like rugby, squash, cricket or grass hockey. Next we played *matching*, *missing letters*, *circling* and *memory* exercises. It was a very interesting

lesson for Adam as the different gadgets used for the sports and the intensive and emotional ways of playing these games amazed him.

The methodology described above can be used effectively with different sets of vocabulary items, thus widening the vocabulary and thanks to that – the communication skills of our students.

3.3. STAGE THREE: USING SIMPLE EXPRESSIONS AND SENTENCES

Taking into consideration the language and communication disorders connected with autism, it is not always possible to teach an autistic person communication more advanced than word communication. However, if the person communicates in her/his native language with the use of longer expressions and sentences, it might also be possible to use these strategies in a foreign language.

Task 5. Do you like avocado?

Aim:

- to acquire, fix and revise simple conversational expressions in English

The first stage of this task includes a presentation of the expressions *I like* and *I don't like*. If we know that the student is not using pronoun "I" and is naming himself/herself by a first name, the expressions *likes* and *doesn't like* should be introduced and used with the student's first name, e.g. *Adam doesn't like....* The meaning of this expression can be explained verbally, with the use of sign language (sign for *like* and *not like*) or emoticons – smiling or unhappy faces. The next stage is to provide visuals (pictures or photos of food and drink labeled in English) and to assist the student in deciding about his/her attitude towards it, which can be expressed with a sign or emoticon. Later, next to each picture, the student should be encouraged to write a sentence: *I like avocado/Adam likes avocado* After that we ask the student: *Do you like?* And motivate him to answer. The next stage involves a dialogue between a students and a teacher. \

Such exercises are very *user-friendly* – they consist of simple language activities, but at the same time give an opportunity to create short dialogues and exchange thoughts and share personal experiences. They can be repeated with other vocabulary groups, like animals, sports, weather or free time activity.

Task 6. Adam can.../Adam's Mum can't

Aim:

- to understand and use modal verb can in positive and negative sentences
- to revise and use names of selected activities

Another useful and easy to understand expression is the modal can/can't, especially when used in a personalized way. First the meaning of it was explained, both in sign combined with mimics and writing. Next labeled pictures of some activities were presented. Adam's task was to divide them into two columns, named

as: *Adam can* and *Adam can't*. Each activity that was placed in the column "can" was appreciated and applauded. Then the chart was given different names: Eva (the teacher) can/can't, Tomek (Adam's brother) can /can't or Mum can /can't. As the exercises were personalized, Adam was very happy to share the information about him and his family with me and he was interested in my skills. Students usually like knowing some facts about their teacher, so I suppose it was interesting for Adam to know that I can't play football or swim well and to feel appreciated as he was able to do these activities perfectly. At the second stage of the task, Adam was instructed to read the questions and give a correct answer. After introducing some new verbs and a reference list of them, the questions were formulated so as to describe the activities, but also to provoke a smile, e.g. *Can Adam cook? Can Eva fly? Can Adam's Mum run one kilometer?* Answering the questions (using full names, not pronouns), Adam did not even try to hide his smile. At the end Adam was also able to copy the expression describing his skills.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the chapter was to present the educational opportunities, strategies and methods that have been used during a 54-hour *English as a foreign language course* for the deaf and hard-of-hearing participant with slight autistic disorder. The chapter presents both the student's challenges and the teacher's strategies. The material can be used as a reference on the possibility of teaching a foreign language and communicating in it, despite the low level of social and educational skills showed by autistic persons with accompanying disorders.

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