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Student with impaired hearing in the academic environment

Key words: student with impaired hearing, bilingualism

Abstract

The aim of this article is to share experiences and reflections on how to improve access to education of students with impaired hearing. Its authors focus on a selected group of issues related to the education of students with disabilities, which include, among others: a low level of knowledge of the Polish language, insufficient knowledge of a foreign language and – in many cases – even a lack of knowledge of any languages. Therefore, the article presents examples of good practices developed by the Disability Support Service at the Pedagogical University of Cracow. These solutions have been designed not only to support the education of students with disabilities, but also to fully integrate them into the academic, social and professional life.

With regard to disabled people it is often stated that the factor which integrates this group is education and professional activity. In Poland, there is a range of educational offers which are adapted to the individual needs and abilities of learners with special needs at all levels of education. One of the stages is academic education, which is regarded as an important step towards equalization of life opportunities of disabled people.

The young disabled persons take the trouble to study as they believe in the importance of studying, and they are willing to learn for themselves and for their future. Thanks to the regulations introduced in the reform of higher education in 2011, Polish higher education institutions gained new possibilities to help disabled students. According to the revised act “Law on Higher Education” a new provision was added to the basic law : “tasks regarding the provisions of appropriate conditions for the full participation in the process of learning by students and doctoral students who are disabled persons”. Supplementation of this Law are Article 94, section 1, clause 1 and Article 94, section 4, according to which: “A non-public higher education institution shall be given a grant for the provisions of appropriate conditions for the full participation in the process of learning by students and doctoral students who are

disabled persons(...)". Such a legal status offers new prospects for teaching disabled people in higher education.

The support for students with disabilities depends on the kind and level of disability while maintaining educational standards. It is an extremely complicated task as every disabled student needs a different kind of support and assistance of third parties. We should approach the problems of students with hearing impairment in a different way than disability related to mental disorders or the problems of people on wheelchairs, for whom it is necessary to build architectural facilities.

The purpose of the current study is to present good practices of Biuro ds. Osób Niepełnosprawnych Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego – BON (Disability Support Service in the Pedagogical University of Cracow), a unit sharing experiences with other institutions which are or will be concerned with these issues, and to draw attention to the sources of the discussed problems, as all aspects of the matter should be considered when talking about providing access to education to hearing-impaired students.

For the needs of the publication, students (registered at BON) can be qualified in three categories:

- a. **students with mild/moderate hearing impairment** – hearing loss at the level of perception of human speech (hearing loss range 20–40 dB HL), using low-power hearing aids, lack of typical nasality in speech,
- b. **students with severe hearing impairment** – human speech beyond hearing range of a student (hearing loss range 50–100 dB HL), in most cases it is necessary to use high-power hearing aids, sometimes cochlear implants; nasality in speech, supplementary use of sign language¹ or their own system of signs invented while playing with the siblings or peers,
- c. **students with profound hearing impairment** – no hearing aids, sign language as their first or second language.

The above juxtaposition is very general as each student requires individual approach and giving them support depends on their previous language and educational experience, and also on their own attitude to further education. Basing on the practical experience of the authors, hearing-impaired students (registered at BON) can be divided in the following way:

- a. deaf, signing, weak-speaking or non-speaking,
- b. deaf, using PJM (Polish Sign Language)/= signing?, combination of PJM/SJM or? their own system of signs, speaking,

1 In the current study the term "sign language" is to be understood as Polish Sign Language (Polski Język Migowy, PJM), the language of the Deaf community, as opposed to SJM,...

- c. hard of hearing, using PJM,
- d. deaf, non-signing, non-speaking.

There are also many other combinations, which have been shaped by life, family situation, and support of third parties. The scope of deafness is extremely wide and it is difficult to approach the problem in a schematic way.

In the current study we would like to focus on a set of problems and situations which must be faced by student, the university, or the Disability Support Service to help students to obtain higher education regardless of their hearing loss. The problems presented are not the only ones that deaf people have to cope with. There are many more; nevertheless, we have concentrated on a few, in our opinion, most important ones, which we can encounter in the academic environment.

Problem No 1

Inability to understand Polish. Low level of understanding written texts, problems with written exams and understanding instructions, problems with writing diploma theses, and in contacts with lecturers and other university staff.

All hearing-impaired people have a similar language problem – each of them has gained a command of their national language to a different extent. It is one of the most important issues concerning education of students with hearing loss and it must be approached in more detail. The described problem affects every aspect of education of the deaf and their functioning in the society.

Irrespective of their hearing loss, hearing impaired people cannot learn Polish phonics in the way of natural acquisition. It stems from the fact that Polish is a phonic language, which means that it is acquired in the first months of life through hearing and then through speaking (hearing control over one's own utterance). A child obtains verbal and non-verbal information from the environment, starts to understand grammar rules, extends its vocabulary – acquires its first language. The situation is different in the case of hearing-impaired children. Innate and early hearing impairment (during language acquisition) causes that Polish cannot be the first language for people who do not have free access to it. Recipients obtain only fragmentary information, which causes gaps in general knowledge, lack of understanding of grammar rules (or creating their own grammar) and a limited range of vocabulary. Polish is never a native language for deaf people and it can never become one, even after many years of studying. A child who uses that fragmentary code, full

of mistakes, starts its education at school as a native user of Polish. However, curriculum does not take into consideration teaching Polish as a foreign/second/national language. At the next stages of education the child still has deficiencies in their knowledge about the language. It causes a limited access to any texts, problems at learning, low self-esteem, and a conviction that they are worse than their peers.

In comparison, the sign language is favoured by this group of recipients thanks to its accessibility. The sense of sight develops much earlier than organs of articulation and hearing, therefore it is adopted earlier. Even a person with slight hearing loss, who has never had contact with sign language, will be able to learn it with ease. It derives from the visual and spacious modality of the sign language.

The way to solve the language problems of the deaf people is implementation of bilingual education, on the assumption that the sign language will be the first and the national language will be the second one. That solution will allow children to obtain a communication channel (the sign language) thanks to which they will be able to communicate freely, learn about the world and their national language, and make use of it in everyday situations, at school, at work, etc. (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1

Natural language (PJM) + national language (Polish) = bilingualism

Practices of BON

Arranging Polish language courses for deaf students is a novelty and arouses certain controversies. Recent findings have shown that mistakes made by deaf people are similar to the ones made by foreigners learning a new language. Thus an idea emerged to teach Polish to the deaf as a foreign language. That is why it is essential to organize both as for both languages -sign language and Polish language. On account of the complexity of Polish grammar it is impossible to master that language within a few terms of the course. Therefore, besides the traditional language course in small groups, it would be a good solution to arrange individual consultations with the lecturer, e.g. concerning writing a diploma thesis. Currently we have observed greater awareness of the reasons to learn their national language among hearing-impaired students. The number of people who want to learn correct Polish is growing, providing they know they can do it through their natural language.

Problem No. 2

Inability to use any language. Students cannot use the support of an interpreter because they do not know the sign language; they do not understand written texts, as they do not know Polish; they have a difficult contact with the lecturers, which often leads to frustration. They are not able to independently write assignments or examinations in a correct way.

In reference to the problem of inability to understand Polish, we can observe inability to use any language. At that moment we need to look back at the time of language acquisition. A child who is deprived of a communication channel is not able to learn. Due to hearing impairment the child does not acquire information via the aural channel or does it only in a fragmentary way. It does not have another channel because parents are presented with a theory that the sign language hinders or even prevents the deaf child from developing speech. Different experts working in the rehabilitation of hearing-impaired people give parents an example of the existence of the deaf community as a result of non-rehabilitation of the hearing impaired or as a side effect of inadequate rehabilitation methods.

Table 1. Comparison of educational paths of hearing-impaired people, considering the use of different languages

	With the use of PJM	Without the use of PJM
Sign language	naturally acquired in the closest environment or taught by a specialist	avoiding gestures while communicating with the child and isolating the child from the environment of deaf children who use the sign language
Polish	through the first natural language (sign language)	by trial-and-error method, often too late to obtain expected results and full language competence
Communication channel	sign language	“personal” Polish, proto-gestures, language understood solely by the closest environment
Contact with peers	the environment of deaf, hard of hearing, hearing people in the closest environment, possibility to send and receive messages in sign language	limited – lack of a communication channel, lack of a way to express their own thoughts, poor understanding by recipients
Psychological aspect	greater awareness of language and culture	low self-esteem, feeling of being worse, “stupid”

Further education	with the assistance of a sign language interpreter, full access to delivered messages	one-to-one education, limiting educational materials to minimum, learning by heart
Choice of the future profession	according to preferences and abilities, excluding professions which require normal hearing	in most cases only physical jobs
Number of acquired languages (communication channels)	1-2	0

Example of a student

Andrzej C. – severe hearing impairment, serious speech impediment, inability to use the sign language (“He doesn’t need it, he gets by and speaks well” – the opinion of his parents), inability to understand Polish, which has been a result of hearing impairment; he has low self-esteem, limited contact with peers, he failed to be admitted to the studies in the humanities, numerous depressive episodes.

Depriving a child of a possibility to communicate in the sign language causes that it loses the only language which it is able to master and use as a communication channel with other people.

Thanks to many years’ experience and our constant presence in the Deaf community, we can boldly state that inability to use any language is a more serious “impairment” than the necessity to learn Polish Sign Language as the first language (recently a sign language has often been compared to a wheelchair).

Practices of BON

Actions taken by BON involve widening language awareness among lecturers and university employees, organizing trainings and workshops. The greater awareness of problems which students have to face will allow avoiding unpleasant situations for both sides. Apart from actions taken within the teaching staff, we try to make our students better informed, we offer support of a professional psychologist and a career advisor.

We try to work out a method of cooperation with students who wish to gain higher education but do not have any channel of information flow. If students opt for learning a sign language, we support them in that decision, introduce them to the environment and try implementing assistance of a sign language interpreter or a lip speaker.

Problem No. 3**Inadequate education and social stereotypes.**

Gaps in the basic knowledge; misunderstandings with lecturers and university staff due to limited vocabulary range or its incorrect use; stereotypes about the deaf as intellectually and professionally limited people; low score of the school-leaving examinations reduces the number of faculties a student can apply for.

Polish special needs education has to face two main problems: demographic decline and methodology of teaching deaf learners.

It was the Act on Sign Language² that first allowed to acknowledge Polish Sign Language as an official language in our country. Up to that point, solely the oral method had been used, with possible support of SJM³, which did not bring any effects; it was an additional and artificial subcode whose purpose was to make communication easier, but, in practice, it made it even more difficult. Children with a severe hearing impairment were not able to understand what teachers presented, artificial SJM was incomprehensible, and texts written on the blackboard in Polish did not facilitate teaching (another reference to the problem of the current study). As a result of such a chaotic method, secondary school learners often did not take the school-leaving exam (due to insufficient knowledge, insecurity, or low self-esteem), opting for vocational schools and professions which had been popular among this group for years (mechanic, carpenter, locksmith, etc.). The first Deaf students appeared at higher education facilities in Cracow in 2003. In the case of Pedagogical University, the first Deaf assisted by a sign language interpreter applied for a place in 2009. Since then, we can observe that the number of non-hearing, signing graduates has been steadily growing as there is better access to education in the sign language.

Another problem which Polish education system has to cope with has been the demographic decline. As a result of it, many schools were forced to shut down their integrating classes or even entire units. Consequently, the number of special education schools decreased. In many cases schools were forced to merge classes in order to avoid closing. Thus, schools for hearing-impaired children were transformed into schools for children with multiple disabilities.

2 "Act on Sign Language and other means of communication" dated 19 August 2011, signed by Bronisław Komorowski, the President of Poland, came into force on 1st April, 2012.

3 SJM is not a natural language but only an artificial subcode, based on the Polish grammar. It is not popular among the Deaf community as it is inconvenient in use and disturbs communication.

Education of children with hearing impairment, autism, depression, and mental retardation has eventually been merged. Classes grouping children with many different kinds of disabilities can cause educational deficiencies and low self-esteem to a greater extent than it has been so far. Deaf children need only an operational communication channel. As long as they do not have multiple diseases (e.g. 03-L, 02-P), their sole problem is to acquire language competence sufficient to absorb knowledge. Joining such a child with an autistic child in one class will certainly affect the results of their education. The whole attention of the teacher will be focused on the ill, and the deaf children will bottle up the feeling that they are worse and their deafness is comparable with psychological disorders. The fruit of these actions will be observed within a few forthcoming years.

Practices of BON

The Pedagogical University of Cracow organizes courses for students of pedagogical faculties who want to deal with hearing-impaired children in their future professional life. Not only the sign language, but also the issues of Deaf culture, education, and *savoir-vivre* are raised during our classes. Our university can boast many conference speeches concerning the situation of the Deaf, and cooperation with institutions and foundations working for hearing-impaired and deaf people. We raise the awareness of the community, analyse problems and seek alternative solutions.

Problem No. 4

Insufficient knowledge of a foreign language, inability to meet the requirements of the university concerning passing a foreign language test at the B2 level.

The underlying causes of this problem again refer to the inability to understand any language in general – the lack of a communication channel, which prevents learning other languages. Much too often are learners with hearing impairment taught by the same method as others. Currently teaching foreign languages is performed through *speaking*, which is highly ineffective for learners with hearing loss. This group are talked to excessively distinctly (still in e.g. English) or are assigned substitute tasks without detailed explanation of grammar rules. If we have to deal with a class in an integrating school, the teacher does not want to use sign language and prefers to write texts on

the board (in Polish), which is pointless, considering the first of the described problems, referring to the general inability to understand Polish.

Practices of BON

Traditional foreign language courses are not adapted to people with hearing impairment. Tackling the problem, thanks to the cooperation with Foreign Languages Centre we created specialist courses aimed only at hearing-impaired people. Classes are held in small groups in a room equipped with an interactive whiteboard and a computer. They are run by an English lecturer trained in the sign language (focusing mainly on structure and grammar and general language awareness) in the assistance of a sign language interpreter who uses three languages in translation (Polish, English and sign language). Students have 40 hours to attend in a term and additional 10 hours in order to clear their backlogs. During the central examination students are exempt from the *speaking* and *listening* parts. Instead, students have more writing tasks and, in case of any questions or doubts, they can be assisted by a sign language interpreter on duty. The whole exam is checked by an exam coordinator and does not diverge from the central exam. The courses of this type have been organized since the 2011/2012 academic year and have a high pass rate.

Problem No 5

Inadequately chosen faculties. The choice of a faculty which is inadequate to the interests of a student.

Among candidates for studies the so-called “domino effect” can be observed. It manifests itself in such a way that after one hearing-impaired student has become a graduate of a faculty, it is certain that he/she will be followed by others.

Table 2. Faculties chosen by hearing impaired students assisted by a sign language interpreter since 2009

Faculty	Number of admitted Candidates	Number of graduates (up to 1 April 2015)
History	2	1
IT Education	8	2
Pedagogy	4	2
Artistic Education	3	2

Graphics	3	1
Administration	1	0
Geography	1	0
TOTAL	21	8

Source: data from BON UP

We can observe the growing popularity of faculties like Artistic Education, Pedagogy, and IT Education. Hearing-impaired students are intensely afraid to take up new challenges due to their low self-esteem. It is related to the fear of being discriminated, the lack of self-confidence (a sense of being worse because they do not understand their national language). That is why candidates for studies are influenced more by accessibility of faculties, or the opinions of already graduate friends, than their own interests and dream jobs.

Thanks to many years of experience we have distinguished a few types of candidates for studies:

- a. **certs** – candidates aware of their rights, privileges and educational possibilities. They choose faculties related to their interests, profiles, hobbies and dream jobs. They come to BON earlier than taking their school-leaving exam.
- b. **domino effects** – students influenced only by the accessibility of a faculty, wishing just to graduate and to get a better job, but not at the costs of paving the way. They are characterized by low self-esteem and the fear of being discriminated. At their school-leaving exam they chose subjects which do not require a lot of cramming.
- c. **independent** – not calling to BON, not wishing any support. Their “coming out” occurs at the moment when their lecturer contacts BON or when they are at risk of being crossed off the students’ list.
- d. **excluded** – a group of students who dreamed about another faculty but were not admitted as their dream faculty was not accessible. At the choice of faculty they took into consideration accessibility of studies and opinions of graduates.

Example of a student

Marzena K. – graduated from three artistic faculties, active in the Deaf community and artistic circles. Deaf since she was born, she has been using solely the sign language. She is not afraid to contact in Polish (e.g. e-mail, official letters) being aware of her limitations. It was during the studies when she took up her first job, to gain experience and to enrich her CV. She is self-confident,

aware of her rights and limitations. Assisted by an interpreter and given other forms of aid, she graduated with distinction and does not have to worry about getting a job.

Practices of BON

BON has been encouraging students for years to contact the office before choosing subjects taken at the school-leaving exam. If candidates have already decided about the faculty, we will provide them with all information about the requirements, we will instruct them what they are eligible for, where they can get financial support, and when they should apply for the place in a dormitory. There is also a career advisor at the disposal of candidates, who can help them to create their job profiles, and sign language interpreters, who are present at the candidates' entrance exams. We also cooperate with different schools in organizing study visits, during which students can get familiar with the educational offer of the university and dispel their doubts.

Problem No 6

Higher education institutions unprepared for admitting hearing-impaired students.

There are still higher education facilities which do not have a Bureau for Disabled Students or Rector's Plenipotentiary for the Disabled. Students' affairs are conveyed to deans, who are often not familiar with the issues of interpreters, courses, etc. It is mostly students with mild hearing impairment who apply for a place at such universities or academies. However, setting up an office is not the end of the challenge. It is essential to train the personnel. At each higher education facility there should be a person who can use the sign language at least at the communicative level. Otherwise, the number of candidates will be decreasing. It is also extremely important to train administration staff in the basic sign language.

Example of a student

Marcin G. – a deaf sportsman, participant of many contests. He desired to study at the Academy of Physical Education; however, he was informed by the admission committee that he was not entitled to any aid, even a sign language interpreter (commission 2014, 2 years after the Act on the Sign Language came into force). As a consequence of such a sense of discrimination, eventually he

chose a faculty in a science faculty and now he has to learn additionally to cope with certain subjects.

Practices of BON

Our unit has existed since 2009, and since 2002 we have been Rector's Plenipotentiary. Since 2010 we have been training administration and teaching staff in courses of the sign language. Courses are organized by our unit free of charge, and they are run by a hearing lecturer together with a Deaf assistant. Participants in the course are also taught the *savoir-vivre* of deaf people.

Summary

The above discussed issues are not the only ones hearing-impaired students and higher education institutions have to cope with. The remaining part of the problem involves certification of sign language interpreters, raising funds, technical support, resources of specialized personnel, and the eternal conflict between the Polish Sign Language (PJM) and Language-Sign System (SJM) supporters? users?. We have worked out an efficient model of support for hearing-impaired students throughout many years of practice. It was done by the trial-and-error method and in cooperation, and sharing experience with other institutions.

Most of barriers have their sources in the attitude of experts and parents towards the early intervention, in support of the child (or the lack of it) at the earliest stages of its development and unjust stereotypes. Research on the sign language and its effect on child's development is not as wide as it should be, yet this field is still developing. The separate problem is education of hearing-impaired people at the precedent stages of education.

There is still a lot to be done. It is work which requires many years of research, analyses and a tremendous amount of effort. However, if we compare the current state of research on sign language and education of the deaf with the situation 10 years ago, it has certainly been a giant step forward. The constantly growing number of deaf graduates is an excellent proof of it.

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Ustawa z dnia 18 marca 2011 r. o zmianie ustawy – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym, ustawy o stopniach naukowych i tytule naukowym oraz o stopniach i tytule w zakresie sztuki oraz o zmianie niektórych innych ustaw (Dz.U. 2011 nr 84 poz. 455 / *Journal of Laws 2011 no.84 item 455*).

Ustawa z dnia 19 sierpnia 2011 r. o języku migowym i innych środkach komunikowania się (Dz.U. 2011 nr 209 poz. 1243 / *Journal of Laws 2011 no.209 item 1243*).