

Chapter Five

Teaching English to Deaf Learners: A Visual-Literacy Approach

The last decade witnessed a tremendous movement toward humanism in the field of foreign language teaching. Consequently, educators have been giving more attention to humanistic methodology which adopts a sympathetic attitude towards meeting individual foreign language needs (Arnold, 1999; Nemiroff, 1992; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Stevick, 1990). Not only have normal foreign language learners' needs been considered, but emphasis has also been addressed to meet the needs of exceptional foreign language learners with significant physical, cognitive, mental, or psychological challenges or disabilities (Elaine, 1993; TESOL Research Agenda, 2000).

The present study chapter deals with the teaching of English as a foreign language to deaf learners in the Egyptian setting. Rationale for discussing such a can be described in the following points:

1. Generally, the size of deaf population is relatively large. For example, Smith's (1994) study reveals that only in the USA 15 million people are deaf citizens. In addition, professional special educators mention that about 0.5 / of inhabitants have mild, moderate, severe, or profound hearing loss (Ahmad & Ahmad 1991, p.16; Kirk & Gallagher, 1983, p.273).
2. It is a persistent requirement of the contemporary age of knowledge and technology to be literate of EFL. Moreover, recent studies assure that the instruction of foreign languages to deaf learners should be given a special attention, care, ways of treatment, and course-design procedures (Christensen & Delgado, 1993; Evans, 1998; Evans & Zimmer, 1993; Holcomb & Peyton, 1992; Strong, 1995).
3. There is a universal professional tendency toward researching the instruction of foreign languages in special education settings. TESOL Agenda (2000, p.2) recommends researchers to give priority to research areas

that meet with individual language learners' and special groups' needs. This agenda provides suggestions for conducting researches that can treat the difficulties faced by foreign language learners with significant physical, as well as, cognitive disabilities.

4. There is an international interest in educating exceptional people as a societal moral commitment. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1990)² declares, among other things, that "the disabled children have the right to benefit from special care and education for fuller life in society".
5. There are governmental legislative decisions, in the Egyptian community that describe, plan, and manipulate the special education of disabled learners such as the Ministerial Decision numbered 37, issued in 1990. According to this decision, deaf learners should be taught English as a foreign language. Thus, the issue needs to be studied researching the teaching/learning actions that should take place in EFL.

¹ **Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child**

classes of deaf learners.

6. There is a local, as well as international, academic movement that stresses the adjustment of curricula to meet with the special needs of disabled learners. For example, the First Egyptian National Conference on Special Education held in 1995 ended up with a recommendation that the curricula of learners with special needs should be reconsidered. Consequently, educators are required to reconsider the aims, content, methods of teaching, instructing aids, and teacher's guide of English syllabus provided to deaf learners, for the sake of offering better education to such learners.

Influenced by the aforementioned information, the present author conducted a pilot study in order to investigate the current actual status of teaching English to deaf learners in the Egyptian schools. That pilot study took place through three phases: (a) surveying the English curricula, that the Egyptian deaf learners study, and the ministerial plan to teach such syllabi; (b) visiting a school of deaf learners to meet and

discuss with the EFL teachers and the administrators the actual situation of deafness and EFL instruction; and (c) interviewing a sample of 16 deaf EFL learners in order to investigate their experiences in studying EFL.

The results of that pilot study revealed the following facts:

1. The English curricula that deaf learners study, Hello series, have been designed on the basis of the Communicative Approach. This approach makes use of the ear as an entrance to language learning. In addition, it focuses on listening and speaking at earlier stages (Richards & Rogers, 1993, p. 81). Losing these two skills, the deaf learners build their EFL learning on a *destroyed basis*.
2. There is no special English curricula designed for deaf learners, they study limited parts of the syllabi specified for their normal peers. In that sense, the content consistency is collapsed. Consequently, EFL deaf learners study *faulty curricula*.

3. The interviews that the author conducted, with the help of a sign language expert, with a sample of 16 first-year preparatory-school deaf learners revealed that the subject that they hated the most was English. In addition, their English proficiency level was extremely modest. When the present author asked them about the meaning of ten words found in their textbook only three students were able to recognize the meaning of three words. Meanwhile, the rest of them recognized zero (N=9), one (N=2), or three (N=2) words out of the ten words offered to them. Moreover, all the pupils failed to use "is" and/or "are" correctly in full sentences.

Thus, the author of the present book suggests an approach to design a course and then to teach it to deaf learners. This approach had to depend on teaching reading and writing on the basis of utilizing the visual ability which is the vital energizer of deaf learners. The literature of language teaching refers to such an approach as visual literacy which Hortin (1994, p.25) defines as the ability to read, write, understand, think, and learn depending on images rather than

sounds.

Deaf Language Learners

Since the 1960s there has been a professional movement to consider deaf language learners as a linguistic minority group that needs special language pedagogy (Strong, 1995). Thus, researchers have directed their attention to give a different care to deaf students studying English as a foreign or second language (Cline, 1998).

Hearing as a human sense is measured and reported by decibels (dB); and human beings may be normal or hearing impaired. Hallahan and Kauffman (1988, p. 260) mention that the term hearing impairment, which refers to a hearing disability, is an umbrella term that includes both deafness and hard hearing.

Kirk and Gallagher (1983, p. 232) distinguish between hard hearing and deafness through the following description:

1. A hearing loss of up to 25 dB is not considered a significant

hearing deficit. Meanwhile, hard hearing varies from 35 to 69 dB. Hence, a person is considered deaf with a hearing loss starting from 70 dB.

2. While the hard-hearing person can receive the oral language through certain aids, deaf learners can not.
3. Whereas hard-hearing students can study at schools of normal students with special care (*Integrated Special Education*), deaf learners should go to schools of deaf learners (*Segregated Special Education*).

It was reported that research has revealed that deaf learners have serious problems with syntax and reading achievement (Kirk & Gallagher, 1993, pp. 244-247). However, it was found out that ordinary deaf people do not lack intelligence, and their linguistic problems might be due to methods of educating them the targeted linguistic symbol system (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1988, p. 270-276).

Bouchuer and Albertini (1988, pp. 5-6) report that deaf

language learners, compared to normal ones, have certain linguistic features. Some of these features are listed below:

1. Their written sentences are short,
1. Their reading comprehension skills are weak, and
2. Their most persisting grammatical problems are mainly the use of articles, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, auxiliaries, inflectional and derivational suffixes.

Lou (1988, p.96) concludes her study declaring that one of the reasons of linguistic literacy problems faced by deaf learners could be educators' adaptation of courses and methods of teaching, designed and developed for normal language learners, to be implemented with deaf students.

Instructing Deaf Learners

Generally, research findings indicate that deaf learners require from teachers to use visuals, shapes, and special classroom activities for the sake of activating their working sense, and consequently enhancing their perception and learning (Allinder & Eccarius, 1999; Lartz, 1999; Paul, 1997).

The studies of Holcomb (1992); and Peyton, Michaud, McCoy, and Pennington (2000); and Silvestre, and Laborda (1998) recommend educators interested in tutoring deaf learners to consider the following suggestions:

1. Pay particular attention to the social interaction that takes place in the classroom.
2. Allow special seating arrangement in order to activate visual learning.
3. Make your face and body fully visible.
4. Make use of sign language when teaching literacy skills.

One of the international efforts done for developing the instruction of deaf learners is the *Policy Guidance* developed by the *U.S. Department of Education* (1992). The report of the Department included, among other things, the following points:

1. Deaf learners have a tremendous challenge to acquire basic English language skills.
2. Effective methods of teaching English to deaf learners are still negotiable.

3. The needs of deaf language learners have to be uniquely met. In other words, curriculum content and methods of delivering such a curriculum have to meet their needs.
4. Teaching written languages to deaf learners does not only transmit knowledge to them, but it also develops their self-esteem and personality.

Smith (1994) recommends educators the following suggestions for better teaching practices in deaf classes:

1. Cooperate with the families, psychiatrists, and physicians involved in the community of your deaf learners.
2. Conduct fair and appropriate assessments,
3. Give special care to the cultural and ethnic background of your deaf learners.
4. Make your curriculum and instruction address the deaf learners' characteristics.
5. Continue to evaluate and modify the deaf learners' curriculum and its teaching as well as testing techniques.

Burkholder (1999) and Miller (1998) illustrate that

storytelling can be used as an effective way of developing deaf learners' literacy skills. They add that their language courses need to include aspects of their background knowledge and culture.

Previous Programs Developed for Teaching Deaf Learners

The ICICLE Project

The ICICLE refers to Dominguez and his colleagues' (1998) "*Interactive Computer Identification and Correction of Language Errors*" project developed for providing assistance to deaf language learners. This project aimed at improving the deaf learners' grammatical performance since the order of sign language did not correspond to English word order. The project was designed on the basis of making use of the computer as a tutoring tool for improving the written products of deaf learners. One of the major principles of using such a program was to take into account what the students already know.

The procedures of selecting the grammatical rules to be

involved in the targeted computerized program included the following steps:

1. The students had to write their texts.
2. Their texts were to be analyzed and all of their errors were identified and highlighted. Then, simple explanation and correct examples were given.
3. Later, the deaf users were given an opportunity to edit their products according to the assistance previously provided by the computer program.

Finally, the project ended up with a window-based program that can assist deaf language learners improve their grammatical performance. Moreover, future plans for modifying the program were suggested.

DfEE Innovations Project

Mole (2000) illustrates that the project developed by the *Department of Education and Employment* gave a special attention to the deaf community. This project was conducted because of two main reasons: (a) the average deaf person was

reported to leave school at a chronological reading age between 8.75 and 12.5 years, which meant that they were significantly behind their normal peers; and (b) there was not any course catering English for deaf people at the department.

The project aimed at developing the literacy skills of deaf learners. Furthermore, it was planned to help deaf learners join higher education on one hand, and enable them participate positively in the community on the other. In addition to the tutoring team, the project had a management team including a sign language specialist, a manager, and a librarian.

Among other outcomes, the project ended up with: (a) a glossary that was prepared to cover technical, critical, contextual, and professional practice terminology; (b) an interactive video-based web site prepared for deaf students; and (c) a guidance pack for lecturers working with deaf learners.

Visual Literacy and Deafness

Literacy

Albertini (1993, p. 61) reports that the Commission of the Deaf declares that some 175 years of research on the teaching of English literacy to learners reveal that deaf learners still have low achievement scores in reading and writing. Consequently, further studies need to be conducted for the sake of developing the literacy skills of the deaf people.

Mahiri and Godley (1998, p. 419) claim that literacy is essential for developing the analytical and higher thinking skills of human beings. As they say, literacy changes the mode of thought and cognitive abilities of the individuals.

Weaver (1998) mentions that literacy includes more than merely being able to read and write. According to her, a literate person can read and write for his or her own reasons and purposes. In addition, Weaver believes that literacy is not merely a goal but a means; not merely a product, but a lifelong process of learning (p. 327).

Cooper (1993) illustrates that literacy involves instructing reading and writing to learners and motivating them not only to acquire these two skills but also to be independent readers and writers. Moreover, Cooper says that vocabulary development requires special treatment from the designers of literacy programs. In the sense that literacy programs should primarily focus on building vocabulary, especially at earlier stages.

Visual Literacy

Hortin (1994, p. 6) refers to visual literacy as finding meaning through visual language rather than verbal utterances. Seels (1994) relates vision to four different terms as follows:

- a. Visual Literacy:** The ability to understand, and use images; and the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images.
- b. Visual thinking:** Organizing mental images around symbols, lines, shapes, colors, and compositions.
- c. Visual learning:** Learning from visuals and research on designing visuals for instruction

d. Visual communication: Using visual symbols to express ideas and convey meaning.

Source: Seels (1994, p. 109)

The study of Arthur, Hitch, and Halliday (1994) shows that the human working memory consists of three units: (a) the central processing unit (CPU) which is the operational center of attention, (b) the phonological loop through which information reaches the CPU in a phonological form, and (c) the visuo-spatial sketch pad through which information enters the CPU in a visual form. In that sense, language learning, as any other type of learning, depends on the previously mentioned three units. However, educators are recommended to instruct literacy skills to deaf language learners depending only on the visual working memory and ignoring the non-working phonological loop (Shirmer, 1994).

Utilizing Visual Literacy In Teaching Language to Deaf Learners

Andrade, Kretschmer and Kretschmer (1993) report that many deaf people can learn distinct, but visually-based language systems. The studies of Ewoldt (1990); and Yoshinoaga-Itano, Snyder and Mayberry (1996) reveal that the utilization of the visual modality is essential for teaching reading and writing to deaf learners.

Harris and Beech (1998) and Scouten (1994) explain that deaf education methodology, in the area of literacy, was previously depending on phonics approaches. These phonics approaches, as Harris and Beech (1998) have proven, led deaf learners to attain scores significantly less than their normal peers in a reading test administered after one year of reading instruction. Harris and Beech's interpretation of these results assures the fact that normal people, unlike the deaf, acquire the spoken language before being involved in literacy programs. Thus, the phonics approaches were effective with the normal learners who had had a previous phonic background, and non-

effective with the deaf ones who did not have such a background.

Conclusion

Visual literacy based programs are recommended for the teaching of language to deaf learners for cognitive as well as affective reasons. As for the cognitive reasons, there is an intimate connection between knowing and seeing, which is the working receiving sense of deaf learners (Albertini, 1993; Arnold, 1999). In addition, deaf learners depend basically on the visual modality which is essential for their learning because it activates their attention, perception, and thinking (Hortin, 1994; Miller & Burton, 1994).

As for the affective reasons, the activation of the working senses makes deaf learners feel self-confident, and helps them overcome the social-behavioral barriers (Albertini, 1993; Andrade, Kretschmer, & Kretschmer, 1993).

The following suggestions need to be considered by educators, especially those interested in the teaching of

students with special needs.

1. It is a moral requirement that different course designers need to direct their attention to develop courses for learners with special needs.
2. Such courses have to be used in special education schools, instead of adapting courses designed for regular students. These special courses will not only help those learners academically, but they will also assist them emotionally, and socially.
3. Field studies need to be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of visual literacy based programs on developing the deaf learners' achievement. These courses need to involve the written signal language
4. Researchers may compare the effects of using the Arabic Alphabet with the written signal language (as a visual script) in teaching, English to deaf language learner.
5. The use of computer in the teaching of English as a foreign

language to deaf learners needs to be investigated.

Researchers need to find out the effects of using fixed visuals on one hand, and animated visuals, offered by the computer, on the other when teaching English as a foreign language to deaf learners.

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