HOW TO TEACH THE LANGUAGE

Reflections of the International Seminar on Teaching English to Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students

The seminar, in which foreign and Czech lecturers spoke about their experience with teaching English to hearing impaired students, was held at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, from 23 to 27 August 2004. It was prepared by Daniela Janáková, Ph.D., who organized the first international seminar aimed at teaching English to deaf and hard-of-hearing students in November 2000 as well (see Info-Zpravodaj 2/2001).

The second seminar was prepared for Czech teachers who teach English to hearing impaired students at universities and secondary schools. However, from taking part in the seminar could certainly benefit even the teachers of Czech language. Lecturers coming from the USA and Great Britain spoke namely about teaching English to the Deaf at their schools, and in their context teaching English to hearing impaired students is at the same position as teaching Czech language to the hearing impaired in our country – teaching the mother tongue of the majority of society, be it English or Czech. It means, we are speaking about teaching the second language, not the mother tongue of the Deaf. Therefore English is often for Czech hearing impaired, in fact, the third language to learn. But the seminar was very interesting and inspiring for every teacher who works with hearing impaired students.

The seminar, aimed at support of tertiary level education, was organized within the frame of the PEN-International project (Post Secondary International Education Network) and under the generous financial support of the Nippon Foundation. This project, the goal of which is improving teaching of the Deaf worldwide, represents cooperation of many individuals, as well as whole universities. The goal is to be reached by organizing the training courses for the teachers of hearing impaired, providing them with valuable information concerning new educational strategies or latest high-technology equipment. Charles University in Prague takes part in this project as well.

Majority of the seminar presenters were American colleagues from the National Technical Institute in Rochester which is a part of Rochester Institute of Technology. This is the institution which leads the PEN-International project. Besides them British colleagues from the University of Wolverhampton and Russian colleagues from Bauman State Technical University gave lectures at the seminar as well. All the presentations concerned teaching hearing impaired students at different universities. The seminar program was divided into two parts: morning presentations and afternoon workshops during which the presenters worked individually with the seminar participants making use of their teaching experience.

In this article we would like to inform you about several interesting, practically oriented contributions which could motivate all the people working with hearing impaired in a positive way.

The Nippon Foundation of Japan, through PEN-International, provided the funding for the Second Prague International Teacher-Training Seminar on Teaching English to the Deaf, the reflection of which is the above article.
A HANDFUL PRACTICAL PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

Ms. Joan Fleming, deaf teaching coordinator from the University of Wolverhampton, stressed in her workshop that the teachers of the Deaf should concentrate their teaching especially on the students’ strong points. She has been teaching English to the Deaf for many years and is the only English teacher who uses Sign language as a basic means of communication with her students while teaching them English at the University of Wolverhampton. Other teachers have to use sign language interpreters at their classes. Even though the students are divided into groups according to the levels of their advancement, each group differs a lot because there are many factors which the teacher of the Deaf has to take into consideration, e.g. the extent of their hearing impairment, their communication competences and preferences, various family background, etc. We would like to present here a few practical strategies of Ms. Fleming that really work for her students:

- The perception of the Deaf is based on vision, that is why the teacher should concentrate the teaching on visualization: create for each student a folder in which all language teaching materials you went through during the lessons will be filed. Let the student take care of the file himself/herself and create his/her own materials as well. Your student can always return to such a collection of study materials and make a great profit of them.

- Revise study materials with your students all the time.

- Have discussions about English or other foreign languages which you teach to the Deaf in Sign language but if you like to demonstrate something, write it always on the board or project it on the computer screen.

- In fact, all what you say or sign you have also to write on the board because if you do not do it, deaf students will remember signs, not words.

- Prepare handouts with a brief plan of the lesson for your students beforehand and pass them on the students before you start teaching. They can come back to it anytime during your lesson.

- If you don’t know what to start your lesson with, ask students to write for you a short composition on any topic, or choose a general and quite wide topic. When evaluating these compositions you will learn about the student mistakes and his/her strong and weak points as well.

- Stress his/her strong points.

- Learning new vocabulary is the easiest task for hearing impaired students because it is just about translating and explaining the new expressions.

- Teaching grammar is a bigger problem because syntactic structure of majority spoken languages is different from the structure of sign languages (topic-comment structure: the main topic of speech and its commentary). Therefore when teaching syntactic
structure of English, start with explaining the word order in English sentences (SVOMPT).

- When communicating with hearing impaired students use meaningful complex phrases (grammar structure of the sentence need not be complicated), vocabulary should not be too difficult. Note that your students are able to communicate in Sign language on a quite high level of proficiency.

- Mark all the English sentence constituents with their labels: subject, predicate, object, adverb, etc.; and also individual parts of speech: noun, verb, adjective, etc. = labelling because all the students wish to have the language “labelled”.

- At first, tell the students stories in Sign language, then start demonstrating the captioned films and finally start reading and translating English books with them. Reading is the necessary basement for learning writing tasks.

**HOW TO ANALYZE COMPOSITIONS OF HEARING IMPAIRED STUDENTS**

Prof. Gerald P. Berent informed the seminar participants about the coding system which he developed together with his colleagues from the NTID Department of Research that can be used when analyzing the written tasks of hearing impaired students. Each grammar category or any other grammar item, as e.g. verb tense, singular, plural, single parts of speech have their own marks which are most often abbreviations of the given word. While reading the text written by a hearing impaired student, the teacher inserts into it the special abbreviations. He labels not only the mistakes (-) but the correct student usage as well (+). Because hearing impaired students make in general lots of mistakes in any written text, it is not much motivating for them if they get back their written tasks, corrected by their teacher, full of red marks, stressing just their mistakes. This is, unfortunately, the traditional system at Czech schools. In this sense American colleagues could motivate Czech teachers for a positive change leading to their better collaboration with hearing impaired students.

In addition, Prof. Berent pointed out that when checking students’ written tasks it pays off to focus on just one grammar point at a time not considering other mistakes at all. But the decision what to stress is, of course, on individual teacher. As an example, see the following paragraph of student composition aimed at training the correct use of English verb tenses (+TNS or –TNS):

“One person name –TNS Bill Brown, he –TNS from MN (Minnesota) and +TNS went school with me in the Progressive School for the Deaf Children in Milltown MN. When I –TNS am freshman he +TNS was 7th grader that year.“

**Correct version:**

“One person name is Bill Brown, he is from MN and went school with me in the Progressive School for Deaf Children in Milltown MN. When I was freshman, he was 7th grader that year.“
The teacher labels by these marks the whole student’s text and when corrected this way, it is given back to the student to work on the text again. How? The student will look for his mistakes in the text and the abbreviation –TNS will let him/her know that he/she made a mistake there. It is up to him/her to think it over and make another, right choice. This way the student continues to learn by correcting his/her original text himself/herself and thus takes interactive part in the learning/teaching process. Czech teachers prefer writing the correct version above the wrong expression. The American system is based on the belief that if the student has to work on the same text several times, and he/she has to deal with the same problem repeatedly, he/she has to put more effort into it and this way he/she will fix certain knowledge better and for longer time.

HOW TO WORK WITH THE TEXTS
(example)

How does Ms. Kathleen Eilers-crandall, Professor of English language at NTID, work with her students? Many Czech teachers may find her teaching approach similar to their own. We have chosen an example of her class on reading non-fiction texts. During the semester each student has to bring to class whatever text: a newspaper or the Internet article, etc., which he/she was impressed by and has to present it to the colleagues. Thus the students work during the classes with the texts which they have chosen themselves and are interested in. And above that, the student who brought the article, acts as an expert on the given topic during the class and other students can ask him/her questions, e.g. regarding special vocabulary.

Here is a short example of text dealing with the car racing:

JEFF GORDON: began his racing career in quarter midgets and go-karts, winning national championships in both categories. He progressed into USAC open-wheel competition...

The students mark in the text the words which they wish to explain and try to find their meaning together. At the end of the lesson a clear chart with the new words and expressions is drawn, showing the parts of speech where they belong to and explaining their meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unknown Word</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Definition (meaning)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>quarter midgets</td>
<td>Adjective + Noun</td>
<td>A car for kids (1/4 size)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Gordon began to race in quarter midgets.</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>groups, categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>He was winning championships in both categories.</td>
<td>verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressed</td>
<td>He progressed to USAC open-wheel competition.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next step: the students concentrate on the grammar aspects of the text. In this case the teacher focused on various types of English questions. The students were given by their teacher written explanation of the grammar task, then followed a list of questions connected with the text and they had to decide what type of question it was and finally had to answer the questions briefly.

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To sum up, we could say that not only parents play an important role in the life of hearing impaired children but teachers (in this case the teachers of majority language of society), as well. They influence a great deal forming the attitude of the hearing impaired child towards the language of his/her native country in which he/she grows up and, in general, towards the educational process as a whole.

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