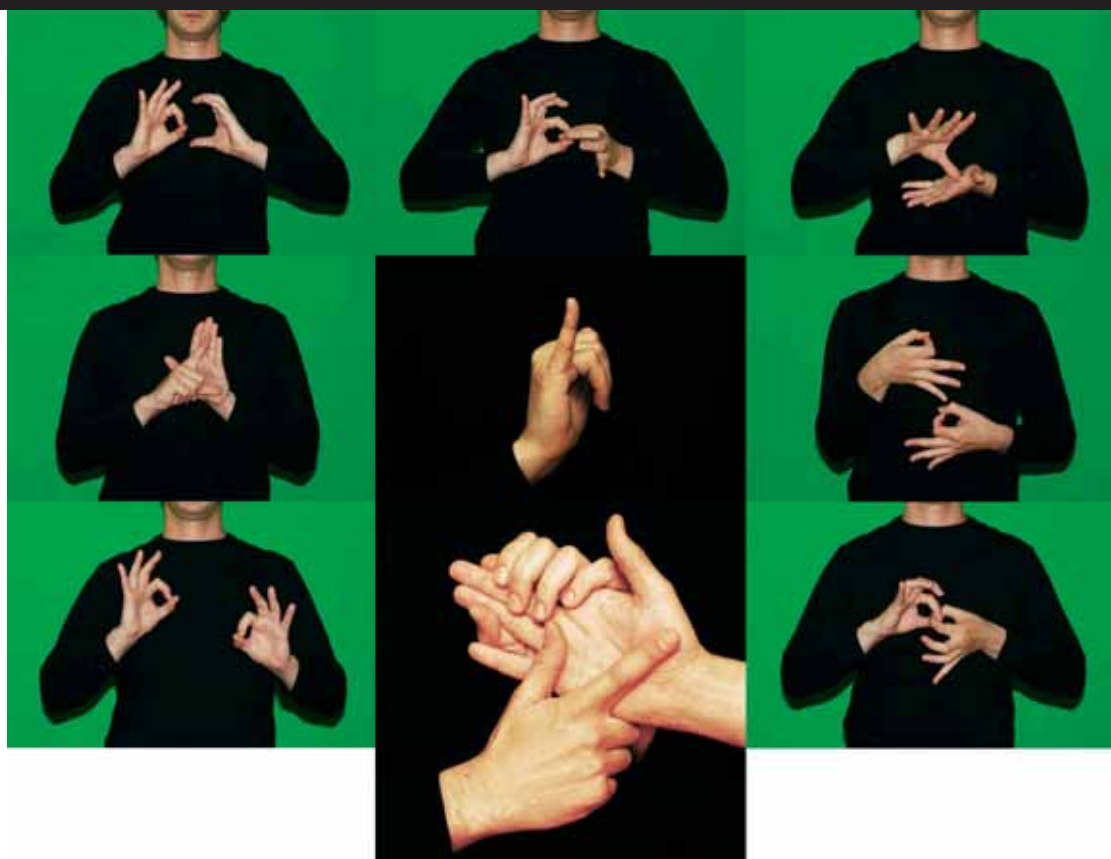


An E-Learning Model for Deaf People's Linguistic Training

Acts of the DEAL Project Final Meeting

(Deaf People in Europe Acquiring Languages
through E-Learning)

Simonetta Maragna and Giuseppe Nuccetelli (Eds.)



UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA



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Rome, September 24th, 2008

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For further information, please refer to the site

<http://www.deal-leonardo.eu>

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Introduction to the DEAL Meeting

by Ivano Spano

Istituto Statale per Sordi

This Meeting closes and presents the works carried out by the DEAL Project (Deaf people in Europe Acquiring Languages through E-Learning), financed by the European Union within the Program "Leonardo da Vinci".

While thanking the Project partners, and most of all, Mrs. Simonetta Maragna, Project Manager, for their significant effort and fruitful cooperation, I would like to give my regards to all the people who intervened and, in particular, reporters, but, most of all, share some reflections starting from the experience of the Project.

First of all, I think that, beyond its specific results, the Project is a significant help to give more visibility to deaf people, who actually enjoy the same rights of citizenship but cannot find a suitable attention and consideration both on the institutional level and in the collective behaviours. This proves to be the case, for example, for the lack of certain and updated data on the national level, the difficult access deaf people every day meet in relating with (public, social, educational, health...) institutions and different services and in orientating in their practical life.

Giving visibility to deaf people is a collective duty and implies a strong increase of the awareness that the concept of citizenship includes the real acknowledgment of people's (overall) diversity as founding principle. This awareness must not therefore be only the expression of a feeling of equality and solidarity, but it must be translated into concrete indications for every social action able to increase each person's life level.

I strongly believe that deaf people's reality must necessarily be given visibility, in order to let them acquire a real, equal, universal "right of citizenship", like all human beings.

What has been decided by the International Convention on Disabled People's Rights goes in this direction, and it has been recently approved by the United Nation Organization (2007).

Therefore, it is necessary to:

1. fight against any "Discrimination on the basis of disability". This implies cancelling any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of disability which has the purpose or effect of jeopardizing or cancelling the acknowledgment, enjoyment or exercise of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, on a basis of equality with other people, in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil field, as well as any other field. It includes any form of discrimination, and the refusal of a decent accommodation;
2. favour any "decent accommodation". We refer here to the necessary and suitable modifications and adaptations which do not impose an excessive burden, if necessary for particular cases, in order to ensure the disabled people their enjoyment and exercise of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, on a basis of equality with other people;
3. plan and implement actions of "universal Planning", meant as planning (and *carrying out*) products, environments, programs and services which can be used by everybody, as much as possible, without the need for adaptations or specialized planning.

The DEAL Project, which has just come to an end, is actually located in this cultural context giving deaf people concrete and accessible tools such as computer technologies to learn foreign languages, using instruments for distance training and self-learning.

The latter is a strategic purpose which can express an important methodological dimension. We could properly define self-learning as "learning to learn", a constant ability to learn. Tools must therefore be given to allow such a learning autonomy to allow everybody to build their own cognitive competences.

The fact that the knowledge of foreign languages has been put at the centre of the Project gives then a further meaning to the value of the Project itself. The acquisition of a foreign language does not just imply an exclusive linguistic competence, but allows to compare experiences of different cultural contexts through the translation of words.

This is actually an exercise of further opening to the world and existence, allowing all experiences to meet, compare and enrich one another.

The wish, therefore, is that this Meeting could be a further real step ahead towards the active acknowledgment of all the people's rights, as well as their enjoyment.

INTRODUCTION

Simonetta Maragna and Giuseppe Nuccetelli

Istituto Statale per Sordi

A project, many challenges. This sentence could sum up the characteristics of the DEAL project (Deaf People in Europe Acquiring Languages through E-Learning), because it has represented and represents an important challenge for the *Istituto Statale per Sordi* [State Institute for Deaf People] in Rome and its partners: Barcelona University, Klagenfurt University, Illescat Association, ISISS [State Institute for Deaf People's Specialized Learning]/Magarotto, the *Istituto di Scienze e Tecnologie della cognizione* [Institute of Sciences and Technologies of Knowledge] of CNR [National Research Centre].

The challenge to create a model to learn written foreign languages, thought and planned for deaf people, who already have a lot of problems in learning the oral language of their country of origin.

The challenge to contribute to carry out the project within the scope of a partnership composed by deaf and hearing people of three different nations – Italy, Spain and Austria – each with different mentalities and habits, but sharing the same philosophy of psycho-educational and not clinical approach towards deafness.

The challenge to work together – deaf and hearing people – with all the differences existing between the two worlds in looking at reality, their working ways and rhythms.

The challenge to put into practice suggestions and indications coming since a long time from scientific studies in Italy and other countries,

building a bridge between the world of research and that of school, showing how theoretic intuitions can and must have a practical relapse.

The challenge to show that the use of the sign language of the various countries the learners come from, as well as the subtitles, are crucial and impressive supports to favour deaf people's learning, even in complex domains such as that of learning a written foreign language.

The challenge to carry out a model where six different languages are used, of which three oral, i.e. Italian, Spanish and German, and three sign languages, such as Italian Sign Language, Catalan Sign Language, Austrian Sign Language.

The challenge to produce a flexible prototype, i.e. adaptable to other foreign languages, which can be improved with other educational units and morphosyntactic structures for a lexical enrichment, enjoyable for free by schools, training centres, associations.

Now follows the detailed description of the DEAL project.

The project started on October 1st 2006 with the purpose to create deeply innovative tools to prepare and offer linguistic training for deaf students: these tools aim at carrying out e-learning courses addressed to **groups** of deaf learners, gathered together in **virtual classes** under the guide of teachers and *tutors*.

The bet of DEAL, therefore, consisted in the first place of finding solutions to build an e-learning environment suitable for deaf people's learning styles and resources.

Moreover, the project aimed – in accordance with the professionalizing vocation of «Leonardo da Vinci » program – at preparing real educational courses to teach/learn Italian, Spanish and German as foreign languages on the part of deaf students engaged in professional training courses for a job of secretary in a company.

These courses are directed to absolute beginner deaf learners in the target language, with the purpose to lead them, at the end, to a skill level comparable with the A2 level of the *Common European Framework of reference for Language Learning and Teaching*.

Of course, this purpose must be contextualized in the framework of written business communication, with a priority of the external dimension of business communication: learners, in fact, get prepared to work, foreseeably, in companies of their own Country, where the foreign language is mostly used to communicate with foreign customers and partners. The dimension of the communication inside the company remains therefore subordinate, even if not excluded, since it is relevant only in the case of employment in companies with a supernational dimension, or in the less probable one of moving to the Country where the target language is spoken.

The level foreseen at the end can therefore be summed up as follows:

Synthesis of the profile of skills in language and communication foreseen at the end of the DEAL course
<i>Understanding frequently used written sentences and expressions concerning fields of immediate relevance (ex.: personal data pertaining to business communication, the company places and roles). Communicating in written form in simple and ordinary activities which require a simple exchange of information with foreign customers and partners of the company. Being able to express in simple terms matters of fact and significant events in the relation of the company with foreign customers and partners (ex.: closing periods, delivery times, etc.).</i>

It must be underlined, however, that the course – directed to absolute beginner learners – had to include a series of basic linguistic and communicational aspects which were not linked to the business context, but:

- to the profile of every speaker as such (for example being able to introduce oneself, communicate one's own personal data, etc.);
- to the possibility to effectively interact in the educational setting, for example asking for explanations directly in the target language.

Once these purposes were clear, one of the first actions carried out by the partnership was to fix the guidelines of an approach and some consequent general methodological options. The job which has been carried out, witnessed, documented and recorded by this volume as a whole, consisted of trying to decline these firm points in concrete articulations of the course.

These guidelines can be summed up as follows:

- the centrality of national sign languages as pin of the communication among learners, as well as among learners and teachers, i.e. as tool of processes of research, problem setting and problem solving, building of linguistic skills in the target languages;
- the centrality of co-operative learning procedures, where deaf learners are called to actively and creatively co-operate in carrying out tasks;
- the role of teachers conceived in the perspective to facilitate the work of individuals and groups and of the integration of its results, and configured by the intersection of four different skill domains: those in the education of deaf people, those in the educational use of the SL, those in the target language and those in the didactics of languages.

It is clear that only the regulated and orientated use of sign languages can ensure those communication flows among peers and with the teachers that coincide with the real structure of the *class*, which is the whole of learners in a e-learning environment. Starting from this fundamental

principle, the characteristics of regulation and orientation of the use of sign languages in educational communication have been specified as follows:

- the use of sign languages happens in two ways: a) in videos recorded and placed in strategic points of the course, with instructions, helps, procedural and linguistic explanations (monodirectional communication); b) through a quite dense flow of video communication exchanges among peers and with teachers (bidirectional and pluridirectional communication);
- the recourse to sign languages is possible in every strategic point, but always in an optional way, that means if asked by the learner;
- sign languages are not used, in general, as a translation tool, but as a tool for reflection and research always oriented on the target language of the course.

On the basis of these assumptions, the learners had to experience different learning situations in the course:

- individual work, with tasks to carry out on average with closed answers;
- work in small groups, with video communication exchanges, with tasks to carry out with closed, semi-open answers or to simple open tasks of co-operational writing;
- work with teachers, who answer in video to doubts and problems coming out from the works of situation no. 2

All this allowed to find out a certain number of educational activities – inside which those used in the construction of courses were effectively taken – connected by some basic characteristics:

- the provenance of better practices in the horizon of didactics for foreign languages;
- the bigger potential efficiency with deaf learners;
- the strong visual connotation.

As it has previously been said, the book witnesses the course carried out and the results achieved – not without troubles – starting from these assumptions.

Virginia Volterra sketches out the results of the first segment of the project course: the reconnaissance of the state of the art on the researches concerning deaf people's learning of written language.

Andrea Villarini explains the glottodidactic coordinates, taken from the most evolved perspectives on teaching/learning of an L2, which orientated the progressive construction of the linguistic training model of e-learning aimed at deaf learners.

Marlene Hilzensauer reports the results of the field research carried out in the three partner Countries with questionnaires and interviews addressing to employers, deaf students and deaf privileged witnesses, to acquire as many elements as possible for the real contextualization of the courses which were later carried out.

Stefano Penge sees what the situation is for the e-learning perspective applied in the project and the tools used and created for its real declination of courses.

Carla Battista considers the basic problems of teaching/learning foreign languages with deaf students, looking for perspectives and problems which are presently open.

In the intervention of the I.S.I.S.S. "Magarotto"; the DEAL proposal is seen on the part of the addressees, meant both as School Institutions engaged in the deaf students' training and as final addressees, deaf students themselves.

Luciana Menna goes over the system structure again, highlighting its actors' roles and specificities as well as the characteristics of the different elements composing it, and looking at the most delicate issues the construction of a model not lacking complexities gave to the partnership.

Giuseppe Nuccetelli runs again through the structure of the educational units, which are the most effective and concrete expression of the

architecture of the system itself, as organized synthesis of very differentiated codes and tools.

Elena Tomasuolo analyses the main results and aspects of the experimentation carried out at the I.S.I.S.S."Magarotto", experimentation which concretely tested the prepared tools, with very interesting results.

Alessio Di Rienzo and... reflect on one of the most interesting points of the project, the realization of the linguistic helps in the addressees' national sign languages, realization which gave origin to many interesting experiences and many stimulating reflections on the metalinguistic potentialities of the sign languages.

Maria Pilar Fernandez Viader finally takes into consideration the results of the project and hypothesizes possible future developments, introducing some of the proposals carried out by Barcelona University staff.

We hope that the reader can share the basic satisfaction which encourages this partnership.