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Teaching Polish sign language as a foreign language to people who can hear

In this article we draw particular attention to the significance of teaching Polish sign language (PSL) as a second language (L2) to people who can hear in building an inclusive communication space. We refer to the European Framework of Reference for Languages (ESOKJ)¹ as a source of information which facilitates creating teaching programs for sign languages. We also refer to documents regulating the legal status of the Polish deaf community and discuss the actions undertaken to facilitate communication and general interaction between deaf people and people who can hear. We offer a presentation of the deaf community in Poland and highlight the problem of acknowledging them as a linguistic minority.

In 1960 William C. Stokoe Jr published his groundbreaking piece – the first linguistic description of sign language: *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf*². The piece was published by the Linguistic Society of America involved in promoting knowledge about the significance of language in communication. In subsequent years the dynamic development of interdisciplinary deaf studies was observed. Inability to hear was not considered to be an infirmity or defect, but as a differentiator of a communication community.

With the progress of the studies, the deaf community was considered to be a linguistic minority for which natural sign languages³ are a cultural differentiator. In some Europe-

¹ *Europejski System Opisu Kształcenia Językowego. Uczenie się, nauczanie, ocenianie*, Warszawa 2003.

² W. C. Stokoe Jr., *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf*, New York 1960.

³ P. Tomaszewski, *Kształtowanie kompetencji socjokulturowej w nauczaniu polskiego języka migowego*, [in:] P. Tomaszewski, K. Bargiel-Matusiewicz, E. Pisula (eds.), *Kulturowe i społeczne aspekty niepełnosprawności*, Warszawa 2015, p. 21.

an countries articles concerning sign languages are included in the most important legal act – the constitution. It happened in the case of Slovakia (1995), Finland (1995), Portugal (1997), Czech (1998), Greece (2000)⁴. In other Member States lower rank legal acts were passed which respect the right to use natural sign languages⁵.

The law concerning communication using Polish sign language by the community of deaf Poles is found in *the Act on sign language and other means of communication*⁶. The Act was the first legal act in Poland to provide a definition of Polish sign language (PSL) as a natural, visual and spatial language for communication of people who experience permanent or temporary difficulties in communication. The legal act which defined PSL as a natural language can constitute a foundation for efforts to establish the Polish deaf community as a linguistic minority in the future.

Currently in Poland the Polish deaf community is not defined in law as a linguistic minority. There are also no laws concerning respect for its culture⁷.

The *UN Convention about the rights of disabled people*⁸ speaks about communication using sign languages. The objective of the Convention is to protect and ensure complete and equal use of human rights and basic freedoms by disabled people at the same level as other citizens. Poland is obliged to introduce standards of proceedings included in the Convention to ensure that the rights of disabled people are substantiated⁹. Article 24 of the Convention, which refers to the area of education, speaks about enabling the learning of sign language and promoting the linguistic identity of the deaf community. Moreover, it obliged countries to guarantee education for disabled people, in particular children, deaf people, blind people, using languages and communication measures most suitable for a given person in the environment allowing maximum intellectual and social development. Article 30 *Participation in cultural life, recreation, sports activities*, section 4 has the following content:

“disabled people will have the right on an equal basis with other citizens to support and acknowledgement of their exceptional cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and culture of deaf people”¹⁰.

The World Federation of the Deaf (further: WFD) recognizes the deaf as a linguistic minority with common experience which is manifested in the culture of the deaf. WFD combines beliefs, attitudes, values and standards, literature and art of the deaf commu-

⁴ I. Grzesiak, *Glusi jako mniejszość językowa posługująca się językiem migowym*, [in:] S. Gajda, A. Markowski, J. Porayski-Pomsta (eds.), *Polska polityka komunikacyjno-językowa wobec wyzwań XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2005, p. 355.

⁵ Detailed information about legal acts on the basis of which and to what extent the rights to use sign languages are respected in the Member States can be found in the report about the status of sign languages in Europe which was issued by the European Council in April 2005: http://www.coe.int/t/e/social_cohesion/soc-sp/5720-0-ID2283-Langue%20signe_GB%20assemblee.pdf.

⁶ *Act on sign language and other means of communication dated 19 August 2011*.

⁷ One should only hope that legislative action will be undertaken soon.

⁸ *The UN Convention on the rights of disabled people* was approved by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006. The government of the Republic of Poland signed it on 20 March 2007. Ratification of the Convention by the Republic of Poland took place on 6 September 2012.

⁹ Website of the Ombudsman: <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/osoby-z-niepelnosprawnoscia>.

¹⁰ *The UN Convention on the rights of disabled people*, Art. 30 Participation in cultural life, recreation, sports, sec. 4.

nity. Each deaf community is a culture group which uses sign language and common heritage. Identification with the deaf community and its culture is related to the individual choice of a person, regardless of having a hearing defect or the degree of its impairment. Therefore, members of deaf communities are also family members who can hear, translators of sign languages, people working or socializing with the deaf, i.e. people who are characterized by identification with the deaf community and recognition by the members of the community. Most frequently acceptance is strictly connected with communication competence in sign language¹¹.

Deafness as an identity differentiator and a source of linguistic distinctness is perceived mostly as a medical problem by most people who can hear and from this perspective – as a disability. Specialists and physicians who can hear seek to completely restore deaf people's ability to communicate using speech. They look for medical solutions, using among others hearing aids, cochlear implants¹². The deaf constitute a heterogeneous community. The community consists of members of a linguistic minority who communicate using sign language in daily life¹³. Most frequently, they are deaf people brought up in families where people can hear, who went through long hearing rehabilitation including especially in recent years surgeries involving cochlear implants. We also come across hard of hearing people with large remnants of hearing which allow much more efficient learning of speech than in the case of people who are completely deaf.

The medical perspective does not allow treatment of the deaf as an ethnic minority¹⁴. The problem in defining the deaf as an ethnic minority also involves the fact that deafness in numerous cases is not hereditary, and the process of inculturation often takes place after commencement of education at schools for the deaf, and therefore it is difficult to speak about ethnicity of the deaf, if the ethnicity was conditioned by blood¹⁵. It should be added that the process of inculturation in the environment of senders and recipients who can hear takes place mainly through speech.

For the coherent functioning of both communities – deaf and hearing – activities aimed at abolition of communication barriers are essential. The need for communication between deaf people and people who can hear is manifested in numerous areas of daily life. However, the greatest motivation to learn PSL among people who can hear can be observed in parents of deaf children, teachers working with deaf people and hard of hearing people¹⁶, translators of the sign language system (SLS), employees of public

¹¹ Website of the World Federation of the Deaf: <http://wfdeaf.org/our-work/focus-areas/deaf-culture>.

¹² However, identification of a group of people whose common feature is a hearing defect and communication using sign language gives some evidence that conditions set in the law for ethnic minority are met. See also P. Tomaszewski, M. Garncarek, P. Rosik, M. Jaromin, *Nauczmy się rozumieć nawzajem. Poradnik dla słyszających o niedosłyszających i głuchych*, (*Let us learn to understand one another. Guidebook for people who can hear about the hearing impaired and deaf*), Warszawa 2009, p. 12.

¹³ Members of the deaf community can also be children of deaf parents for whom sign language is the first language.

¹⁴ See B. Marganiec, *Kultura Głuchych*, [in:] *Sytuacja osób Głuchych w Polsce. Raport zespołu ds. Głuchych przy Rzeczniku Praw Obywatelskich*, Warszawa 2014, p. 154.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Teachers working in special educational centers, integration schools or with integration departments, schools implementing inclusion education.

administration, medical entities and services obliged to contact participants or witnesses of a threatening situation, social employee, psychologists, educators and lawyers¹⁷. The communication barrier occurs due to poorly selected communication tools¹⁸, which are a consequence of not perceiving the deaf as native users of sign language and members of language minorities, but as people with hearing disability, the consequence of which is only limited reception of audio signals without impacting the communication language. Currently, in most European countries activities aimed at abolition of communication barriers are conducted. How are they implemented? They are: broadly understood hearing rehabilitation combined with the most modern technological solutions in the field of medicine, education of deaf children, common access to translators of sign language, teaching sign language as a second language to people who can hear.

The deaf, due to limited reception abilities of the sense of hearing, have problems with communication based on the voice-hearing channel. In order to decrease negative consequences of the loss or lack of hearing for the communication process or to completely solve the communication problem between people who can hear and the deaf, numerous useful inventions were developed: hearing aids, induction loops or cochlear implants. These devices are characterized by innovativeness, they constitute specific milestones in the field of audiology, as thanks to them people with a hearing defect can receive sounds of the surrounding and human speech as much as people who can hear. They constitute important achievements helping to satisfy the need to hear especially for deaf people. Returning to the world of sounds mostly concerns those who could hear in the past, and therefore they acquired linguistic competencies in the phonic language in the post lingual period and the phonic language is their first language. What about people who lost hearing in the prelingual period? The Regulation of the Minister of Education dated 11 October 2013 on organization of early support for children's development determined the principles of early intervention which apply in the case of identifying a hearing defect diagnosed during common screening tests. Children, in whom a hearing defect was diagnosed, are equipped, depending on the degree of the defect, with a hearing aid or cochlear implant and they are subject to the rehabilitation process aimed at the most complete possible reception of sounds. They also receive psychological and educational support, speech therapy, therapeutic and specialized support depending on the needs of a given child¹⁹.

¹⁷ Data based on five years of work of the Facility for Continuing Education "Migaj Naturalnie" (Sign naturally) in Łódź, focused on teaching PSL as a foreign language. This facility is a facility for continuing education specialized in teaching Polish sign language (PSL) according to standards of the European Framework of Reference for Languages. The purpose of the facility is to bring two cultures closer: people who can hear and deaf people, thanks to visual and spatial communication, i.e. the natural language of deaf Poles. The school has been operating since November 2011. By 2016 they conducted more than 120 courses of PSL at various levels for various groups of recipients, i.e. families in which a deaf child was born, employees of public administration, health care institutions and intervention services.

¹⁸ Communication tools between the deaf and people who can hear: Polish phonic language, written Polish language, Polish sign language, pigeon sign language, language and sign system, homesigns, cued speech, finger alphabet, infant sign language.

¹⁹ M. Sak, *Decyzje specjalistów a osoby głuche i słabosłyszące*, [in:] *Sytuacja osób Głuchych w Polsce. Raport zespołu ds. Głuchych przy Rzeczniku Praw Obywatelskich*, Warszawa 2014, p. 110.

Early intervention is characterized by activities aimed at rehabilitation of hearing and speech and it simultaneously ignores the possibility of combining sign communication into the process²⁰.

In the medical approach, it is observed that the contact between deaf children and deaf adults is broken off. Danielle Bouvet observes:

“According to specialists, discovery of the fact itself that a child is deaf constitutes a challenge; we do not have to worsen it by making them meet deaf adults. They are deaf children who could not take advantage of the recent technological progress”²¹.

The problem of accepting deafness and visual and spatial communication as well as acknowledging the deaf community as a language and cultural minority is particularly important in the relation: community of people who can hear – community of deaf people. It is observed in numerous countries. Acceptance is a starting point for bilingualism. Bilingualism itself, similar to hearing rehabilitation, in its assumptions leads to the access to language for the majority who can hear. However, it applies different measures. It can be observed in the activities within early intervention in the form of bilingual education – in education of deaf children.

Deaf children – due to the sensory barrier – do not have any access to phonic linguistic models from closer and further surroundings of a given child. Taking only deaf children born in families where sign language plays the most important communication role into account, it can be concluded that languages based on visual and spatial modality constitute a natural form of communication for people for whom phonic languages are physically unavailable²². Approximately 90% of deaf children are born in families who can hear in which sign languages did not constitute a communication measure²³. Such families require activities within early intervention not aimed only at the medical aspect of deafness, but on psychopedagogic processes. The objective of these is to support the development of children and their families in the child’s first years of life. In relation to this concept an experimental early intervention program was conducted in Avon (Great Britain). It aimed at preparing deaf children and their parents who can hear to bilingual education by: enabling contact of deaf children with deaf adults; enabling parents to get to now deaf adults; supporting parents who can hear in understanding that deaf adults are the same as they are, that they can have similar abilities and possibilities; supporting parents in accepting deafness and building a positive approach towards it; introduction and improvement of sign language used at home²⁴.

²⁰ Efficiency of hearing rehabilitation from birth in the prelingual period applying the latest technological inventions in the field of medicine, i.e. cochlear implants, is difficult to determine clearly. This is one of the opinions: „One of the most important areas of decisions made by specialists are medical decisions. It seems that they are made based on vague predictions and forecasts, which is shown by numerous deaf people whom the implant did not help or helped only a little.” M. Sak, *Decisions made by specialists and the deaf and hard of hearing people*, [in:] *Situation of the deaf in Poland. The report of the team for the deaf cooperating with the Ombudsman*, Warszawa 2014, p. 110.

²¹ D. Bouvet, *Mowa dziecka. Wychowanie dwujęzyczne dziecka niesłyszącego*, Warszawa 1996, p. 136.

²² M. Świdziński, M. Czajkowska-Kisil, *Czy głuchoniemy jest naprawdę niemy?*, „Kosmos. Problemy Nauk Biologicznych”, nr 3, Warszawa 1996, p. 243.

²³ M. Czajkowska-Kisil, A. Laskowska-Klimczewska, *CODA: inność nierozpoznana*, [in:] *Sytuacja osób Głuchych w Polsce. Raport zespołu ds. Głuchych przy Rzeczniku Praw Obywatelskich*, Warszawa 2014, p. 117.

²⁴ M. Czajkowska-Kisil, *Wczesna interwencja*, [in:] *Edukacja Głuchych*, Warszawa 2014, p. 41.

Early intervention programs for families who can hear, in which a deaf child was born, lead mostly to a change in approach towards deafness of their own child and respecting their right to sign language as the first language. In the bilingual education model, considering sign language as the primary language should not raise objections due to the fact that it is communicated and received at the gesture and visual level. It is also completely adjusted to the perception possibilities of a deaf child, assuming that hearing impairment is not accompanied by other organic disorders²⁵. Bilingualism is knowledge and regular use of more than one language. In the case of a deaf pupil, bilingualism involves learning sign language (L1) first, and then based on L1, learning the phonic language of the majority of people who can hear – in the case of Polish, mostly in writing²⁶. However, teachers, in particular CODA²⁷ draw attention to the fact that a deaf pupil does not have the chance to develop their language at a Polish school²⁸.

Deaf communities in numerous countries, not only in Europe, are perceived as language minorities, with the right to maintain and develop their own sign languages and cultures. The legal status of the Polish deaf community as a linguistic minority has not been secured.

Bilingual education in Poland does not exist. Currently, it is based on the verbal method or total communication. The sign language system using the visual and spatial channel prevails. Greater possibilities of communication between people who can hear and deaf people are provided by promoting Polish sign language (PSL) and teaching it to people who can hear.

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²⁵ M. Bryndał, *Koncepcja bilingwalnego wychowania dzieci niesłyszących*, „Audiofonologia”, vol. XII, Warszawa 1998, p. 89.

²⁶ P. Tomaszewski, *Rozwój językowy dziecka głuchego. Wnioski dla edukacji szkolnej*, „Audiofonologia”, vol. XVI, Warszawa 2000, p. 48.

²⁷ CODA is an acronym: “children of deaf adults”.

²⁸ The following extract is by a CODA, a person working at the Institute for the Deaf, who was one of the first people to get involved with the subject of Polish sign language and with the idea of introducing bilingual education for the deaf: “There are no schools in Poland where PSL would be an academic language or an obligatory teaching subject. There are no programs teaching PSL or standards which apply to teachers of the language. [...] Deaf pupils cannot develop their language in a different way than a child who can hear, who develops their language within the subject of Polish language.”, zob. M. Czajkowska-Kisil, *Edukacja głuchych w Polsce*, [in:] *Sytuacja osób Głuchych w Polsce. Raport zespołu ds. Głuchych przy Rzeczniku Praw Obywatelskich*, Warszawa 2014, p. 13.

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Abstract

Teaching Polish sign language as a foreign language to people who can hear

Didactics of foreign phonic languages in Europe is often based on the Common European Framework of References for Languages. Teaching Polish Sign Language (PSL) to hearing people is substituted by teaching them Signed Polish, which results in many obstacles in the communication process between deaf and hearing. This article concentrates on different measures to make communication possible and emphasizes the need of teaching PSL to hearing people using standards of Common European Framework of References for Languages.

Keywords: Deaf, sign language, Polish sign language, signed Polish, teaching sign language, Common European Framework of References for Languages, linguistic minority, inculturation, deaf culture.