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4 The Teaching of Gestural Communication as a Didactic Tool to Address Social Inclusion

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This text is an accompanying reading for the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) curriculum produced under the IN-COMM GUIDE project (Erasmus+, 2022–2023). The text is for those teaching courses derived from the curriculum, which aims to enhance communicative skills through methods developed from 1) travel writing, 2) nonverbal communication and 3) movement. A complementary objective of the curriculum is to sensitize students towards inclusion. In this text points 2 and 4 are thematized, initially through a review of the specialized literature on gestures, sign languages and intercultural as well as nonverbal communication. Additionnally, classroom experiences carried out by the authors are described: students performed tasks in the absence of language, that led them to adopt collaborative strategies. In addition, a brief overview of the current situation in the research and teaching activities of the DGS (Deutsche Gebärdensprache) in Germany is presented. In the subsequent reflections, the projection of one's own experience towards the situation experienced daily by people with communication barriers due to sensory disabilities (e.g., deafness) or migratory contexts is made. This projection, critically reflected, provides an interesting starting point for understanding the individual role of each citizen in ensuring social inclusion.

Keywords:
inclusion,
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4.1 Introduction

Human beings, when they find themselves in a situation in which they do not share a common language and there is a need to communicate, instinctively resort to similar strategies to establish communication. The contexts in which such a situation may arise are very diverse, but the response observed in very different contexts is comparable. It occurs, for example, in the case of Deaf children who are not in early contact with a sign language user environment (Horton, 2020; Goicio & Horton, 2023) or of congenitally deafblind children (Bruce, 2005). Similar situations have been observed in environments where Deaf adults who do not share a sign language or an oral language, who need to communicate, begin to negotiate meanings, to consensually establish signs and rules of combination (Zeshan, 2015). As other examples indicate, such as the case of the signed systems of the original inhabitants of Australia (Kendom, 1988), the signs used by Catholic monks (Kendom, 1990 or the sign system used as a lingua franca by the original inhabitants of North America in their intercultural exchanges before the displacement and destruction of their traditional forms of life by European settlers towards the end of the 19th century (Davis, 2010). All these gestural systems emerge as a collective and spontaneous option for overcoming communication barriers in a situation where somehow linguistic or/and cultural barriers are faced. In certain circumstances, when the majority of people who generate such systems are deaf and manage to establish permanent communities over several generations, sign languages emerge, which are a manifestation of the human capacity for language in a modality other than oral-auditory (Meier et al., 2002). The above observations highlight the relevance of gestural activity as a manifestation channel for human communication.

On the other hand, as recent research suggests (cf. Ciao & Chen, 2017; Gullberg, 2010, 2014), the use of gestures plays a fundamental role in second language acquisition, such as in the negotiation of meanings within learning groups and the learning of new vocabulary.

With such evidence in mind, various activities have been developed in the course of the project that aim to favour this approach. We start from the central idea that in the absence of a common language, which is the most basic instance of intercultural encounters, and being urged by the circumstances to establish communication in spite of such lack, people initiate contacts based on the intuitive use of gestures and

other nonverbal communication resources. Once a certain communication is established, the barrier is broken and empathy is established with The Other. This instance/experience can be recreated in the classroom. The activities developed for the curricula have just such a goal. Simply put, this is the beginning of inclusion.

In addition to the presentation of the teaching activities, which are detailed in an accompanying document, theoretical backgrounds follow at this point. In this reading, the information about Deaf communities and their sign languages plays an important role, which, due to their constant confrontation with communicative barriers, have developed sophisticated strategies to overcome them and establish the initial communication mentioned above.

4.2 Theoretical framework

4.2.1 Sign Languages

Sign languages can arise spontaneously as a means of communication among groups of people facing permanent damage to the auditory canal. Sign languages are an alternate manifestation of human language in the visual-gestural modality. They are natural languages that fulfill the same cognitive, social and cultural functions as spoken languages (Meier et al., 2009; Klima & Bellugi, 1979). Recent historical developments have allowed Deaf sign language-using communities to flourish in virtually every country in the world. Deaf communities are considered by a wide academic tradition as minority groups with their own language and culture. They are recognized and protected by both international and local laws (de Meulder et al., 2019).

Because sign languages arise spontaneously in the context of the social exchanges of several generations of Deaf people in a given place and generally under the influence of the spoken and written languages of each region, different sign languages exist in each country and sometimes several sign languages and or signed dialects on the frontiers of the same country (cfr. de Meulder et al., 2019; Mathur & Napoli, 2010 among others).

This could imply a major difficulty for the plan to use sign languages for the development of a common curriculum, since each member country of the project would have to consider the linguistic and cultural specificities of its own deaf community. This would require close cooperation with local Deaf communities, including the hiring of Deaf experts, for which the project does not have the financial resources.

4.2.2 International Sign

International exchanges between groups of Deaf people in Europe and the Mediterranean have been documented since the beginning of the 19th century (Allsop, 1996). In these encounters, the difficulty of communicating using the respective sign languages, which were for the most part unintelligible to each other, became apparent. To overcome this barrier, conventions for a basic vocabulary were agreed upon, which for the most part consisted of selecting lexicon from the different sign languages of those who agreed upon such conventions.

Such systems, which have been reissued several times (cf. Napier & Rosenstock, 2016), have a reduced stable vocabulary and exploit iconic and deictic (e.g. directional/pointing gestures) elements that seem to be common to all sign languages described so far. Among them are the expression of modality and intensification through facial mimicry and movement variations; the use of the hands and the space around the body as a stage to represent actions and dimensions as well as spatial anaphora created through virtually locating entities in space in order to refer to them with the hands or the gaze, etc. (cfr. Napier & Rosenstock, 2016).

International Sign (IS) is frequently used in some formal contexts (like international meetings) as an *ad hoc* means of communication. For more complex interactions, it is customary to use to sign languages of international dissemination, such as American Sign Language (ASL) or British Sign Language (BSL). However, the use of these systems involves the same barriers mentioned above, since they imply the previous complex process of learning them. So far, we do not consider making use of ASL or BSL for our curriculum.

On the other side, some signs/strategies from International Sign could be added to our curriculum in order to reinforce the ability of visual-gestural communication. Therefore, we propose to base our curriculum on gestures and further elements of nonverbal communication (cfr. Argyle, 1988). Both terms will be defined below.

4.2.3 Nonverbal communication

Here we understand "gestures" as the bodily activity (movements and/or postures of any part of the body) that appear in the course of a communicative act (cfr. McNeill, 1992). Gestures are an essential part of human communication. The gestures accompanying speech coincide with the meaning of what is said but are not entirely redundant. This means that gestures can constitute an autonomous source of information in discourse (Kita & Özürek, 2003). Most gestures are produced automatically and unconsciously, while others are produced intentionally. In each case, gestures are associated with certain meanings, the interpretation of which is also determined by cultural codes (Goldin-Meadow, 2003).

Gestures constitute the bulk of the NVC inventory. However, some elements of the NVC are not gestural. Among them we highlight the proxemics (Hall & Hall, 1990) and the symbolism of scenic elements such as space design and costume among others (Argyle, 1988).

Gestures play a key role in second language acquisition and learning. In this regard, aspects such as the following may be mentioned:

- Gestures are used by L2-learners to compensate for difficulties due to deficient or incomplete L2-acquisition (Goldin-Meadow, 2003);
- Comprehension of gestures produced by speakers can reinforce the L2 learner's understanding of the linguistic input (Gullberg, 2006).
- L2-learners tend to produce more gestures in L2 than in their own L1 (Gullberg, 2010, 2006).
- L2 vocabulary learning appears to be enhanced by the simultaneous production/reception of spoken word and gesture production, due to the activation of multiple brain areas. (Kelly et al., 2010).

4.3 Curricula Analysis

4.3.1 Sign Language and Gestures at German Universities

German Sign Language of the Deaf, DGS, is the subject of teaching and research in at least 9 academic centers (see Figure 1 below).

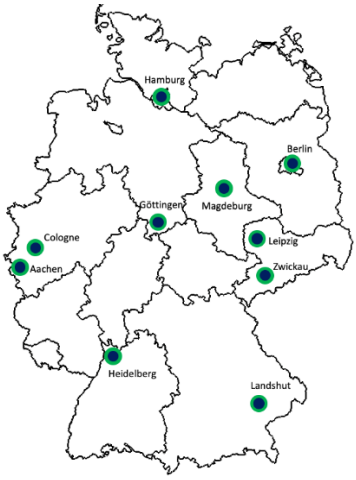

Figure 1: Academic centres where DGS is taught and researched
Source: own.

The first of these, the University of Hamburg, was a pioneer in the field, when it created a DGS research line in the late 1980s (Eichmann et al., 2012). Since then, it has emerged as the best known international reference in the field, through projects such as the DGS linguistic corpus (Hanke, 2016), the monographic collection Signum, and the specialized journal Das Zeichen. The DGS curricula at the University of Hamburg are oriented towards the teaching of DGS as a second language and second modality (Oviedo et al., 2020). In Berlin, since 1995, the Humboldt University has offered undergraduate and master's studies in which DGS interpreters as well as teachers of deaf children are trained. In the last ten years, the teacher training program has adopted an emphasis on a bilingual educational approach, which has generated important research on the acquisition of DGS as L1. Humboldt University additionally offers a Bachelor of Arts in Deaf Studies, which trains students in the basics of German Deaf culture and sign language, the only program of its kind in the country.

The third, fourth and fifth DGS teaching, and study programs are the DGS interpreter training programs at the Universities of Applied Sciences of Magdeburg (1998), Zwickau (2000) and Landshut (2017). Rather than on theoretical reflection, these programs place special emphasis on praxis and problem solving in interpreting. Such an emphasis is typical of Universities of Applied Sciences in the German educational model. In the case of the first two, the Magdeburg master's degree in interpreting (EUMASLI, an international European master's degree focusing on the use of international sign language and English) and the new BeQuiS master's degree in Zwickau, a pioneering part-time program for the development of advanced sign language skills conceived as blended learning, stand out. Special mention is deserved here for the University of Cologne, which has pioneered the development of curricula for teaching DGS both as L2 (for teachers) and L1 (for deaf children) (Urbann et al., 2020; Oviedo et al., 2018). University of Cologne also offers, since 2017, a new interpreting program in DGS in which relevant theoretical research on the relationship between gestures and sign languages is conducted. Finally, since 2021, a new DGS interpreting program at Heidelberg Pedagogical University has been added to the above list.

In addition to the programs described above, there are three other academic institutions that, although they do not offer undergraduate degrees, have made important contributions to research and developed projects that have an impact on the community. These are the North Rhine-Westphalia Technical University of Aachen, University of Göttingen and the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig.

4.3.2 Sign Language curriculum in university institutions

Regarding the curriculum followed for teaching DGS, most of the academic institutions mentioned above mainly offer DGS courses as L2/M2 to hearing adults, native users of German. The courses offered cover proficiency levels from CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) A1 to C1, include content from the culture of the country's Deaf community and are offered in a full-time, face-to-face format. There are some e-learning materials to learn DGS (Beecken et al., 2002; Schulmeister et al., 2004). However, at least until early in the Covid-19 pandemic, discussion of blended learning models for this language was relatively scarce (cf. Barbeito Rey-Geißler, & Geißler, 2018). Since the beginning of the pandemic, programs have progressively incorporated elements of distance

education. An evaluation of this experience and its impact on future developments in the teaching of DGS in academic settings has not yet been published.

The teaching of elements of nonverbal communication is an ordinary part of sign language as L2 teaching programs (Oviedo et al., 2020; Fries & Geißler, 2012). The positive influence of bodily stimuli at the time of learning on the learning itself has been the subject of research. Thus, for example, there is evidence of how dance can promote the learning of mathematical concepts in schoolchildren (Redman, 2016) or spatial perception in preschool children (Temple et al., 2020). The use of movement and/or nonverbal communication as didactic tools in teaching sign languages as L2 has been successfully tested in several DGS courses in programs run by the first author of this text. Through courses taught by a drama pedagogue and a dance pedagogue, students at the beginning level practiced relaxation techniques, stage presence, facial and body expression. Both the students themselves and the DGS teachers repeatedly expressed their conviction about the positive effects of this practice on the DGS courses. These experiences have not yet been the subject of empirical research.

The teaching of International Sign is regularly included as a subsidiary offering in most of the university programs mentioned in chapter 3.1. These are elective courses, which offer the theoretical and practical fundamentals of IS. Outside of these courses, private IS training offerings at the advanced level appear with some frequency.

4.3.3 Sign Language at German non-university institutions

The work described in the previous section has had a strong positive impact on the German Deaf community, which thus receives academic support in its development of a social discourse in defence of its rights. The DGS has thus received official recognition (BRD, 2009, 2002), from which important compensations such as access to professional interpreting (Oviedo et al., 2022) and employment assistance derive. Another consequence of the aforementioned legal support is the creation of a wide and stable offer of non-university courses of DGS as L2. Most of these are private, offered by small companies mostly managed by Deaf people. At the same time, there is also an offer of basic courses of DGS as L2 in the network of the adult education centers (*Volkshochschulen*) throughout the country.

4.3.4 National and international projects on non-verbal communication

Higher education programmes tend to focus on sign language research and education in the fields of linguistics or interpreting. Only very few institutions exist where non-verbal communication is the field of interest. In Germany, the North Rhine-Westphalia Technical University of Aachen (RWTH Aachen) has a unique centre of sign language and gesture research and education, SignGes – Center for Sign Language and Gesture. Apart from different sign language courses, their research aim regarding gestures is to develop empirical methods for multimodal communication and interaction research.

The Radboud University in the Netherlands also includes a centre for research on multimodal language and cognition. Additionally, to spoken and written language, the centre concentrates on forms of language expression through multiple modalities, including gestures.

4.4 Our practical experiences in the didactical use of NVC

In the first semester of 2022, we conducted various practical studies to underpin our theoretical considerations. First, we conducted a self-test within our team to get a start on conceptualising possible module content. The first idea for an exercise was to present short content in the form of a fable non-verbally or to communicate it to another person. For this, all non-verbal means of communication such as gestures, facial expressions, use of the own body and also possibilities of proxemics were allowed. The idea behind this type of exercise was to sensitise students to the benefits of non-verbal communication in communication situations and that people already naturally have many non-verbal resources at their disposal. The test was conducted with a team member who has no sign language skills in order to simulate the later perspective of the students who also do not know sign language.

The test showed that it was possible to convey the content of the fable to a large extent. It could be concluded that the importance of non-verbal communication could be conveyed to the students in this way. The statements of the presenting team member also showed that this exercise can also be used to simulate uncertain, ambiguous situations in which non-verbal means were recognised as a means of coping and overcoming it. Finally, the preliminary assumption could be confirmed

that it is possible to activate the repertoire of natural non-verbal resources via this form of exercise and to make it impressively visible in its abundance. In the evaluation, however, it was found that the format of a fable does not seem optimal. In order to achieve sustainable learning effects, the students should be confronted with situations that have a relation to their reality and correspond to their everyday life.

As a next step, we decided to invite an expert to help us with more practical ideas to raise students' awareness of non-verbal communication. In May 2022, Claudio Ocando led a workshop attended by our team, other members of the IN-COMM team via Zoom, and Deaf and hearing members of our faculty. Claudio Ocando is a sign language interpreter from Venezuela who works in Germany with Deaf refugees from Ukraine. The aim of the workshop was to get further impulses on non-verbal communication strategies for the IN-COMM module and to evaluate them again through self-experience and feedback from heterogeneous workshop participants.

The workshop included several activities focusing on non-verbal communication between people without a common verbal language. They emphasised facial expressions, gestures as well as the use of space and surrounding objects. This was followed by a feedback session and further discussion to share experiences and develop our ideas on how to link the workshop experiences to the next steps in developing the contents for the IN-COMM project. Particularly insightful were the comments on experiencing simulated as well as actual communication barriers within the event. A wide range of emotions and struggles were evoked in all participants, which once again made it clear that ambiguity tolerance as a concept would necessarily have to be included in theoretical and practical considerations of the module. Ambiguity tolerance refers to the ability and willingness to "acknowledge and endure ambiguity and uncertainty" (Häcker/Stapf, 2004, 33). This means that despite not being able to classify the communicative behaviour of another person or not understanding an (intercultural) situation, the person concerned still remains capable of acting and working. Ambiguity tolerance as a basic attitude helps to productively, purposefully endure uncertainties and ambiguities in human interaction (Reis, 1997). Both, the experiment and the workshop showed that non-verbal communication resources helped the participants to remain capable of action and to avoid communication breakdowns.

4.5 Conclusion

We have offered a series of short readings here to provide theoretical support for the developed activities and to reduce possible fears of contact with the subject among teachers. In this reading, the information about the Deaf communities and their sign languages plays a major role, which, due to their constant confrontation with communicative barriers, have developed sophisticated strategies to overcome them and establish the initial communication mentioned above. Although it was not the aim of this material to provide training in the use of such strategies, we consider it important to refer to them as a valuable didactic resource that teachers responsible for the courses can deepen through the visit to local sign language courses and contacts with their community of users.

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