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**The second language acquisition:
problems and challenges for Georgian Deaf
community**

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The second language acquisition: problems and challenges for Georgian Deaf community

ABSTRACT

As stated in the title, the paper is devoted to the issue of second language acquisition by Deaf people in Georgia, describing the current situation and the challenges. There are about 2500 Deaf and hard of hearing residents in Georgia. Being the linguistic minority in the country, these people communicate with each-other in the Georgian Sign Language – GESL. The second native language for local Deaf and hard of hearing people is the Georgian spoken language – the State language. In many countries Deaf people are bilingual, while it is hard to consider the local Deaf and hard of hearing people bilingual, as the knowledge of spoken Georgian on the level of a native language among the Deaf residents is not observed. Unfortunately in Georgia there are no studies concerning the second language acquisition for Deaf and hard of hearing people. The main problems are the agrammatism in written communication on the state language and the ignorance of deferent hierarchical levels of spoken Georgian. This short paper offers the key issues for the plan of strategy of spoken Georgian acquisition for local Deaf and hard of hearing residents.

Key words: *Sign languages, Georgian sign language – GESL, Second language acquisition, Multilingual education, Inclusive studies*

Introduction

There are about 2500 Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents (DHH) in Georgia. They are considered bilinguals like everywhere else in other countries, but this looks as a very superficial approach in this case. Their first native language is the Georgian Sign Language (GESL), which is a natural language with strong influence from Russian Sign Language (RSL), as there was only one Soviet Sign Language (of course based on RSL) for all DHH-s in the Soviet country.

The second native language for local DHH is the Georgian spoken language – the State language. Unfortunately, due to the absence of proper education and due the poor Deaf education system in the country, the local DHH have the problems with the knowledge of state language and this turns into a serious barrier to their full integration into the wide civil society. For example, on social media such as facebook, which is the most popular with local DHH users, they prefer to communicate with each-other using GESL, avoiding written Georgian texts and written communications with other ordinary people, because they are ashamed for their

mistakes. As GESL is the first and basic communication language for Georgian Deaf community members, the first ‘second language’ is spoken Georgian. It should be noted, that the most DHH in Georgia are originally non-Georgians. Deafness is hereditary for the most cases, and Georgian genome has a tiny little number of Deaf Georgians. In the most cases we observe the secondary Deafness among Georgians, such as deafness developed due the overdoses of antibiotics, age-deafness, stress-caused deafness, etc. The local DHH in the majority of cases are non-Georgian nationalities, and they (their family members as well including the hearing family members) do not know spoken Georgian well. There is a challenge to learn the spoken Georgian for local DHH. The main problem is that the members of Georgian DHH as Late learners are facing the problem of agrammatism in written communication of the state language – the spoken Georgian language. As mentioned above, DHH always tries to avoid written communication and therefore often stays away from the wide civil society giving an advantage to the signing communication among the community members. This problem has a negative effect on the entire communication process at the different levels, significantly limiting the process of integrating local DHH into the civil society in the country.

1. Second language acquisition for local DHH

1.1. Current situation

In Georgia, there are three schools for Deaf children: in Tbilisi, in Kutaisi and in Batumi. Deaf Children living in these cities study in these schools. According to the general educational plan they should follow the same educational program covering the same disciplines as any other schools in the country. I have to say with regret that unfortunately, there are serious problems in Deaf education in Georgia. There is no preschool at all, and mainly children study and improve the knowledge of GESL at Deaf schools. GESL is the main communicative language for these residents, and they have a very poor knowledge of the state language – spoken Georgian. Thus the second language is the spoken Georgian language for local DHH. Here we should outline the differences in linguistic skills and language knowledge between the following groups of children: A. Children with Deaf parents and B. Children with hearing parents. Usually A-group children know GESL better than B-group children. The parents of B-group children need to have the certain trainings to understand the meaning and importance of the local sign language (GESL) and to learn it in order to help their children in communication process.

The difference between these groups (A and B) is observed in the other countries as well. The strategy for second language acquisition and the Deaf education in general as well very much depends on the specifics of these groups.

It should be also noted that besides children, it is a challenge to learn the second language for adult DHH and the other types of Deaf Late Learners as well. As it was highlighted by working with the Georgian Deaf community members, the main problems are the agrammatism in written communication of the state language and ignorance of deferent hierarchical levels of spoken Georgian.

I learned that in elementary grades at Deaf schools in Georgia 5 hours are devoted to GESL in a week and for spoken Georgian are 6 hours (including the courses of Georgian literature). In the upper classes 2-4 hours are devoted to GESL in a week, and for spoken Georgian (language and literature) are 6 hours again. The results prove that the number of hours for spoken Georgian must be increased at these schools; and a new method and new approaches must be elaborated.

In Georgian Deaf schools Deaf children do not really study any other languages, such as English, Russian or German. This is just a formality on paper. Only a very few members of local Deaf community know the other foreign languages. These members are mainly the hearing children of Deaf parents, who work as GESL interpreters at this community.

It must be outlined, that the young generation of local DHH has a great wish to communicate with foreign Deaf people via specific websites and social nets. They try to make their first steps to learn English by themselves. Of course, in this case the International experiences of learning-teaching foreign languages to DHH can be shared successfully.

1.2. The key issues for the strategy plan

It is necessary to construct the proper environment at home and in the Deaf schools for Deaf children to learn the second language. The strategy plan should be elaborated and developed by the multi-professional groups including the teachers of Deaf schools, linguists of sign languages and second language acquisition specialists, psychologists, parents of Deaf children, and stake-holders.

First of all it should be mentioned that we need to have step by step actions. I regret to point out that in 2012 in a close collaboration with the local Deaf community I have elaborated the Georgian dactyl alphabet, which is mainly based on the copied letters from modern Georgian written alphabet – Mkhedruli. Till now, the local Deaf schools use Russian dactyl

alphabet, which in turn is based on Cyrillic, and of course it creates a problem in learning-teaching process of spoken Georgian – writing one type of letters (Mkhedruli) and orally using the different (Russian) system. It is very important to bring the Georgian dactyl alphabet into the local Deaf schools. The Georgian Deaf children at this age do not have good linguistic skills and learning the different systems (for dactyls and graphemes) simultaneously is very confusing for them. The Deaf schools should use the National alphabet – Georgian dactyl alphabet. This will positively affect their studying process.

To elaborate a good real strategy we need to follow the specifics of the abovementioned groups.

The work must be divided for three brunches:

1. Strategy for A group;
2. Strategy for B group;
3. Strategy for and adult Deaf and Deaf Late Learners.

The A-group will be mainly based on the knowledge of GESL to learn spoken Georgian, as these children know the sign language. B-group Deaf children have better knowledge of spoken Georgian, and they will mainly improve this knowledge with bilingual methodology. On the following steps the program can be untied for these groups, but for the beginners it is very important to have the right approach.

Learning spoken Georgian for adult members of local DHH and Deaf Late Learners will be based on detailed explanations of linguistic specifics on different hierarchal levels of the language – mainly morphological, syntactic and lexical levels. First of all, it is necessary to provide the research in order to reveal the types of mistakes that DHH make in written communication in Georgian. Then the concrete plans must be elaborated to teach the correct forms of spoken Georgian. It must be also taken into consideration that this kind of teaching must exclude too heavy grammatical explanations. The spoken Georgian acquisition can rely on the knowledge of GESL for Deaf adult groups and the other types of Deaf Late Learners. The approaches can be quite individual.

It is noteworthy that non-professional activities in the fields of Deaf studies and Deaf education are very damaging. Unfortunately, we had such negative experiences in these fields.

2. The methods of study

The method of the presented paper is analytical and descriptive, along with a comparative method, as I learned the Deaf education problems world-wide in order to share the best

experience. The information on local DHH was collected at the Union of Deaf of Georgia using the survey method and elicitation as well. To estimate the level for the knowledge of spoken Georgian – I used the written communications at face-book between the community members and other people. The language sources for the study were DHH of different age and gender, who signed the *informed consent* according to the International ethic rules.

3. Conclusion(s)

The main conclusion of this paper is that Georgian DHH needs the better integration process into the wide civil society, and for this goal, they need to have a good knowledge of the state language – spoken Georgian. The above mentioned strategy plan with the discussed key issues must be realized and the Georgian dactyl alphabet must be implemented in Deaf studies, preschool program must be elaborated including spoken Georgian teaching; and the education program and methods for local DHH must be significantly improved. All these topics and issues are challenging for everyone, both for the teachers and the learners.

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