

The SignOn method for deaf learners of written languages

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Abstract

"Sign On!: English for Deaf Sign Language Users on the Internet", 2004-7 (cf. www.sign-on.eu) had the objective to enable Deaf sign language users to use English written language. The target group were Deaf people who use email and the internet in their national language, have also some experience with English and want to use the internet for international contacts. Using the insights and tools of sign bilingual Deaf education, the consortium developed a methodology and materials. The main principle was that the learners were asked to stay as long in the target language (English) as they were able to do so, but that every time additional information was available (on demand) in the instruction language (sign languages) or the translations.

The output was an interactive bilingual English course consisting of 10 lessons with Internet/e-mail relevant or deaf-related topics (e.g. travel, Internet shopping, Deaf art). There is no rigid course structure, there are no grades or tests. The texts shall motivate deaf people with some knowledge of written English to improve their competences by working with the materials. The main parts of the course are "main texts" which are presented in written English, and in a translation into the sign languages of the partners as well as into International Sign. The translations are organized in a way that the learners can get a full translation of the whole text, a translation sentence-by-sentence and translations of important or difficult phrases or words. These three sorts of translation should open their minds for the different structural units of English in contrast to their sign languages. Help for finding out these information, is also given by a "grammar" section (also in sign languages) and exercises (with sign language explanations). A small toolkit offers interesting links as to English dictionaries.

The reaction of the target group towards the course included the following statements: This is an interesting and motivating course and should be further developed. A surprise was the feedback that this course was also used often in order to look on the several sign languages represented to get an idea of their difference to the respective own one of the users.

The two main demands were: There are so many deaf beginners of English, why not authoring a course for them. And: There should be more visualisation for grammar.

Following these recommendations, SignOnOne (2008-10) is now developing a beginners' course, using the same principal methodology with some changes: there is a clear sequence of lessons now, the grammar instructions will be more visual and there will be a scenic representation of the sentences in the different text (in order to motivate the learners to apply one more learning strategy, following the "direct method", and to use these scenes together with grammar and lexicon to find out the meaning of the single sentences without instantly using a translation).