



Educational Opportunities Dependent on Hearing Status? Experiences of Hearing-impaired Students

Nathalie Zechner, B.A. MA

University Klagenfurt, Faculty Center for Sign Language and Deaf Communication (ZGH), Austria

Abstract

The study presented here deals with the educational opportunities of hearing-impaired (hard of hearing and d/Deaf) people in Austria. In the Austrian education system, hearing-impaired students still play a secondary role despite official legal equality and the recognition of Austrian Sign Language (OEGS) as an independent language in the Austrian constitution. For example, teaching methods continue to be basically oriented towards spoken language. This and the lack of sign language training opportunities for teachers are just two of the reasons why hearing-impaired people's access to education is still more difficult when compared to hearing students. The following questions will be examined: What are the experiences of hearing-impaired students in the Austrian education system? What are their suggestions to improve the current situation in the future? The answers to these questions will serve to elicit which aspects need to be considered in an educational concept to make teaching barrier-free, based on the viewpoints of hearing-impaired students. For the investigation, interviews with hearing-impaired students in secondary education (in Austria) as well as participatory observation in different lessons will be conducted. The results will show where – in the opinion of the stakeholders – the current education system has deficits and/or room for improvements. The aim is to get one step closer to equal opportunities.

Keywords: hard of hearing, deaf, sign language, education, equal opportunity, inclusion

1. Introduction

Already in 2011 it was clearly expressed that it is not sufficient that people with an impairment (have to) take care of their education alone [1]. They need a society that supports them. This could be (with regard to) hearing-impaired people for example the enabling of a bilingual communication level, in sign language and spoken language. In this way, a self-determined life can be established for those affected [1].

2. Hard of hearing or deaf?

Historically, the terms related to hearing-impaired people kept changing. For a long time, the term "deaf and dumb" was erroneously used to refer to all hearing-impaired people. Although this term is perceived as discriminatory by those affected, it is still sometimes used today, mainly for deaf people. Therefore, this term has been replaced by the terms "deaf" and "deafened". Moreover, the hard of hearing and the deaf are considered as two different groups of people. Distinguishing between the two groups of people can help outsiders to more easily address the individual person and their concerns [2]. "Hearing-impaired people have [...] a reduced hearing ability but are still able to perceive spoken language through the ear, possibly with the help of hearing aids" [3]. Culturally, hearing-impaired people mostly grow up in the society of hearing people and are spoken language oriented. Communication among or with (hard of hearing) people is predominantly in spoken language, but they often rely on lip referencing to do so. Rarely do they communicate in sign language. Deaf people can no longer perceive spoken language in an acoustically intelligible way, even with hearing aids. They are visually oriented and communicate mainly in a sign language [4].

3. Historical development of education of hearing-impaired people.

Until the 20th century, hearing-impaired people, at that time the deaf and dumb, [2] were considered uneducable [5]. This view prevented the education of the hard of hearing and deaf people for a long time [2]. Hearing-impaired children were taught in spoken language or a mixture of spoken language and sign language, but each school decided individually for or against the respective sign language [6]. In 1880, on the occasion of the Second International Congress of Teachers of the Deaf and Dumb in Milan, hearing teachers of the deaf and dumb expressed the recommendation that sign languages should no longer be used in the classroom, but that the focus should be entirely on spoken languages. In the years that followed, this recommendation was understood as a sign language ban, whereupon the majority of deaf teachers were dismissed and spoken language-oriented teaching methods were



enforced. Hearing-impaired school children were subjected to strict speech training and were no longer allowed to sign [5]. The "spoken language versus sign language" method controversy still exists today.

The Federal Disability Equality Act (2006) states that people with impairments who face barriers in their daily and professional lives must not be discriminated against. The aim is to ensure equal participation in life for people with impairments and to enable them to lead independent, self-determined lives. Accordingly, legal frameworks have been created to reduce deprivation of rights [7]. Equality and equal treatment of people with impairments is also defined in Article 7 of the Federal Constitutional Law: "[...] No one may be disadvantaged because of their disability [8]. Despite these legal measures and the recognition of Austrian Sign Language (OEGS) in 2005 as a language in its own right, a right to sign language for hearing-impaired people - especially in education - is not guaranteed [9]. Hearing-impaired students have a more difficult access to knowledge and information, they are (indirectly) discriminated against. Despite the legal situation in Austria, which demands full accessibility for impaired people, inclusion has been insufficiently implemented [11].

4. State of research

Two studies in the field of educational research focusing on hearing-impaired people in Austria have already investigated the situation in education:

"CHEERS Study. Chances of the hearing-impaired for successful school development" by D. Holzinger in 2006 at the Institute for Sensory and Speech Neurology in Linz. In different schools in the region of Upper Austria the performance, linguistic competences and psychological development of hearing-impaired pupils were examined. The results of this study show that there are drastic differences in the academic performance of hearing-impaired school children compared to hearing school children. Reasons for this include lack of language skills and lack of supportive measures [10].

"Language Power Knowledge - On the situation of deaf and hearing-impaired pupils, students & their teachers, and on OEGS in schools and the University of Vienna." by V. Krausneker and K. Schalber in 2006/2007 had the aim to determine the actual state of the Austrian education system for hearing-impaired and deaf pupils and students at the University of Vienna. The authors came to the conclusion that the educational opportunities of hearing-impaired children are limited compared to hearing school children due to social barriers. The lack of OEGS as educational language leads to a low level of education as well as to poorer job opportunities for those affected [11].

5. The investigation

The majority of hearing-impaired and deaf school children are in integration classes, in schools where the teaching method is directed towards the hearing majority, namely with spoken language. There are few schools for the deaf and hard of hearing in Austria where special attention is given to hearing-impaired school children. Currently, within the framework of my dissertation project, further research is being conducted in the field of education of hearing-impaired school children. The following research questions are addressed:

- 1.) What experiences do hearing-impaired schoolchildren have in the Austrian educational system?
- 2) Which aspects should be considered from their point of view in an educational concept in the sense of barrier-free participation in lessons for hearing-impaired people?

The focus is on the experiences that hearing-impaired pupils have made on their educational path and how they have overcome the challenges. In addition, it will be investigated how, from their perspective, teaching can be designed to be barrier-free. The results of this research will be used to design approaches for implementing inclusion in the classroom. To answer the research questions, since 2021 the dissertation project "UnHEARD of! Educational opportunities for hearing-impaired people. Approaches to school education in Austria from the perspective for the hearing-impaired secondary school students", investigates the current educational situation of hearing-impaired students and the associated challenges in inclusive education are being educational situation number of schools in Austria. This includes interviews with hearing-impaired students. In addition, some participant observations were conducted in different lessons. A selected example: In a class of a middle school there were two deaf children. They were taught the subject "German" by a hearing teacher (without OEGS competence) and a hearing sign language competent special education teacher. The special education teacher interpreted what the teacher said into OEGS. The children were assigned to read a book together. The hearing children took turns reading a particular chapter aloud. The two deaf children, however, were occupied with the previous chapter, which the hearing children had discussed the hour before. Later, groups were formed, and the deaf children had to separate - one stayed in one group in the class, the other went out into the hallway with the other group. The sign language competent spe-



cial education teacher stayed with the deaf child in the class. When asked how the deaf child in front of the class can now follow what is being said without sign language interpretation, the deaf child in the class replied, "She can't, it all passes her by. We get separated a lot." Previous observations show that there are problems especially with knowledge transfer in class. The lack of OEGS as a language of instruction could be the main reason. It could be observed that some teachers have worked on well-intentioned stopgap solutions to enable hearing-impaired school children to attend classes as barrier-free as possible. An example from the study: The teacher organizes a seat for the hearing-impaired child in the front row so that he/she can follow the lesson better. However, the child cannot acoustically understand the questions and feedback from the other students in the back row, and the teacher does not repeat them. Another example shows the comprehension problems that can occur in foreign language or mathematics classes: Unknown technical terms are not explained (in OEGS) due to lack of time, so that the hearing-impaired child has to work them out by himself at home. Some of the interviewees stated that the previous problems in class lead to a lack of motivation to learn on their part. First results show that accessible teaching for deaf and hard of hearing students has not (yet) been implemented.

6. Conclusion

It is evident that there is still a great need for improvement in the education system for hearing-impaired and deaf students. The lack of trained sign language interpreters in Austria as well as the few sign language competent teachers are another problem for teaching in a bimodal-bilingual way. Among other things, those affected demand a sufficient budget, the anchoring of OEGS as the language of instruction as well as the right to bimodal-bilingual instruction, so that deaf and hard of hearing students are no longer disadvantaged in the educational system.

References

- [1] Jarmer, H.: Schreien nützt nichts. Mittendrin statt still dabei. München, Südwest, 2011.
- [2] Leonhardt, A.: Einführung in die Hörgeschädigtenpädagogik. 3. Auflage. München, Reinhardt, 2010.
- [3] Jussen, H.: Schwerhörige und ihre Rehabilitation, In: Deutscher Bildungsrat (Hrsg.), Gutachten und Studien der Bildungskommission. Band 30. Stuttgart, Klett 1974, S. 185-316.
- [4] Löwe, A.: Früherfassung, Früherkennung, Früherziehung hörgeschädigter Kinder, Berlin, Edition Marhold, 1992.
- [5] Steixner, P.: Taubstumm oder gehörlos? Zur sozialen Situation Gehörloser zwischen Diskriminierung, Integration und Anerkennung der Gehörlosenkultur, Universität Klagenfurt (Zentrum für Gebärdensprache und Hörbehindertenkommunikation), Eigenverlag, 2009.
- [6] Krausneker, V.: Bilingualer Unterricht für gehörlose VolksschülerInnen: vom Umgang mit Mehrsprachigkeit am Beispiel von GebärdensprachbenutzerInnen. SWS-Rundschau, 44(3), https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/16492/ssoar-2004-3-krausneker-bilingualer_unterricht_fur_gehorlose_volksschulerinnen.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-2004-3-krausneker-bilingualer_unterricht_fur_gehorlose_volksschulerinnen.pdf, 2004, S. 289 – 313. (Accessed on 08. May 2022).
- [7] ÖZIV Bundesverband. Für Menschen mit Behinderungen. Die Rechtsdatenbank des ÖZIV. Behindertengleichstellungsrecht. Schutz vor Diskriminierung aufgrund einer Behinderung im Alltag und in der Arbeitswelt. <https://www.oeziv.org/rechtsdatenbank/gleichstellung/behindertengleichstellungsrecht> (Accessed on 15. May 2023)
- [8] Rechtsinformationssystem des Bundes (RIS). Bundesrecht konsolidiert: Gesamte Rechtsvorschrift für Bundes-Verfassungsgesetz. <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=1000138>. Fassung vom 31.05.2023. (Accessed on 31. May 2023).
- [9] Jarmer, H.: 13 Jahre Anerkennung der Österreichischen Gebärdensprache in der Verfassung. OTS https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20180705_OTS0057/13-jahre-erkennung-der-oesterreichischen-gebaerdensprache-in-der-verfassung, 2018. (Accessed on 07. May 2022)



- [10] Holzinger, D./ Fellingner, J./ Strauß, U./ Hunger, B.: „CHEERS-Studie. Chancen Hörgeschädigter auf eine erfolgreiche schulische Entwicklung.“ <https://docplayer.org/37298874-Cheers-chancen-hoergeschaedigter-auf-eineerfolgreiche-schulische-entwicklung.html>. (Accessed on 30. May 2023).
- [11] Krausneker, V./ Schalber, K.: Sprache Macht Wissen. Zur Situation gehörloser SchülerInnen, Studierender & ihrer LehrerInnen, sowie zur Österreichischen Gebärdensprache in Schule und Universität Wien. Abschlussbericht des Forschungsprojekts 2006/2007. https://sprachemachtwissen.univie.ac.at/files/SpracheMachtWissen_Nov.pdf, 2007. (Accessed on 08. May 2022).