

THE SIGNON METHOD FOR DEAF LEARNERS OF WRITTEN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The Socrates (Lingua Action 2) project "Sign On!: English for Deaf Sign Language Users on the Internet", 2004-7 (cf. www.sign-on.eu) had the objective to enable adult Deaf sign language users to use written English for international contacts, with a special focus on internet usage. The target group were computer-literate deaf people with some knowledge of English. Using the insights and tools of sign bilingual Deaf education, the consortium developed a methodology based on the principle of staying within the target language (English) as much as possible, but having additional information in the national sign languages of the partner countries available on demand.

The output was a multimodal teaching tool: an interactive bilingual English course without a rigid course structure, grades or tests. To avoid the aspect of a "return to school", the deaf users can freely navigate within the ten lessons, the accompanying grammar explanations and exercises. The lessons are centred on "main texts" presented in written English. The topics are either internet/e-mail relevant or deaf-related in order to motivate the deaf users (e.g. travel, Internet shopping, Deaf art). The texts are fully translated into the national sign languages of the partner countries and International Sign. In addition, there are "tabs" which allow the users to choose between a signed translation of single sentences, selected words and selected grammar phenomena into the national sign languages. In this way, contrastive learning is made possible by comparing the English version with the signed version. The feedback to "SignOn!" highlighted the demand for a similar course for beginners. A follow-up project, "SignOnOne" (Grundtvig, 2009-10), was instigated, which uses the same principal approach, but was modified to suit the needs of (adult) beginners (i.e. a fixed sequence of lessons, visual aids for the grammar explanations, and "scenic representations" of single sentences).

1. Introduction

In our modern world, English serves as a "lingua franca" – a working knowledge of English is almost indispensable for travel, computers, distance communication and many other purposes. For the deaf, who are often not even totally fluent in the written language of their mother country, this poses additional difficulties. Not only do they learn English usually as a second or even third language, but mostly also with methods better suited to teaching hearing people. Most of the modern textbooks are aimed at oral communication (usually with accompanying CDs for teaching pronunciation and listening skills). Such courses focusing on spoken language are not accessible to the deaf. However, courses for teaching English as a second language to deaf learners (e.g. the adaptation of Headway [1]) are few and far between, especially courses which use a sign language as language of instruction. "SignOn!" tries to remedy this situation by offering deaf people who want to learn basic English a chance to do so with various translation options and help functions in the national sign languages of the six partner countries. The "SignOn!" team comprised hearing and deaf collaborators, and one of the most important maxims was to especially heed the input and the wishes of the deaf team members.

The two-year Grundtvig project "SignOnOne" was planned as a follow-up project to "SignOn!", a three-year project for teaching English for international communication. The feedback from deaf test persons showed clearly that a similar project for beginners' English would be welcomed by the deaf community. Due to other obligations and personal reasons, not all of the original partners (Austria, Finland, Great Britain, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain) could take part in the new project; Hungary and the Czech Republic joined the consortium as a replacement for Finland, Great Britain and the Netherlands. The project co-ordinator is once again the University of Klagenfurt (Austria). The basic design of the program was kept, although some changes and additions had to be made to the original concept to accommodate the needs of complete beginners. The target group are deaf and hard-of-hearing adults who want to learn A1 [2] English and who use their national sign language as

their first or preferred language. The first five lessons are complete; work on the next five lessons has already begun. The project will end in October 2010.

2. The "SignOn" method for teaching English

2.1 The basic structure of "SignOn!"

"SignOn!" is an on-line course which may be accessed via the homepage of the project (no download is necessary). It uses ten unconnected lessons without any mandatory structure; it is up to the deaf users themselves which topics they want to work through and in which sequence. The multimedia tool could be used as a self-teaching course, but also in a classroom with a teacher. While the Norwegian partner was responsible for the technical structure, the other partners designed the contents. Each partner delivered two lessons with either internet- or deaf-related topics. This resulted in the following topics: Deaf Art, Deaf Politics, Deaflympics, Travel, Web Search, On-line Shopping, Instant Messaging, Weblog, Netiquette, and On-line Translations.

On entering the "SignOn!" website (www.sign-on.eu), the user has first to choose a sign language (one of the seven national sign languages of the partners or International Sign) and then a topic. The lessons centre on the "main texts" – short texts or dialogues that give an overview of the respective topic and also introduce important words and phrases. Each "main text" comes with four "tabs" which allow the users to choose between different modes of translation.



Fig.1. "Main text" of the lesson "On-line Translations" in the "SignOn!" course

The tab "All" offers a complete translation of the whole text into sign language. "Sentence" gives the same translation, but in a sentence-by-sentence format. "Word/phrase" allows the users to get a translation of selected words/phrases which were regarded as difficult, but important for understanding the text by the text designers (these were chosen in close cooperation with the deaf collaborators of the project). The "Grammar" tab gives a summary of essential grammar information (it was assumed that the users had already learned that at some time in the past, therefore the signed information was not comprehensive but rather a reminder of the most important points).

The program contains also exercises linked to each of the lessons. There are three basic types: multiple choice, right order and drag and drop. All the exercises include sign language videos; the material itself was taken from the main texts.

Additional features are a "Dictionary", i.e. a word list made up of all the words and phrases for which a translation was available in the individual lessons, and a "Toolkit" (a list of useful links, e.g. to internet dictionaries, search engines and English on-line resources). A comprehensive description of "SignOn!" can be found in [3].

An unexpected benefit which was discovered through the feedback of the test users was that the deaf could also compare the different sign languages and find out e.g. how a certain word was signed in another sign language.

2.2. The basic concept of the "SignOn" method

The idea behind the "SignOn" method is that the user is to stay within the target language as much as possible. We recommend that the users read the English text first and try to understand the gist of it. Afterwards, they should work with the different translation tabs which offer help in their national sign languages. "All" gives them the full content of the text, so that they know what it is about. Then they can read each sentence separately, watch the translation and try to identify the structural units of the English version, by comparing it to the sign language version. Once they have done this, they can read the text again and only look up difficult words/phrases on the "Word/phrase" tab. This gives them either a translation, or – if this is impossible – a signed explanation. If grammar phenomena are unclear, the users can brush up their memory with the help of the "Grammar" tab. The actual sequence of actions depends on the user's preferences and level of knowledge. The free navigation and the lack of any tests or grades was emphasised because many deaf people remember bad experiences from school which they do not want to repeat.

3. Modifications for "SignOnOne"

Although the method described above seemed to work for advanced learners, both the contents and the program had to be modified for complete beginners. We stayed with ten lessons, but for beginners, a more rigid sequence of lessons had to be developed so that the users can build on what they have already learned. Again, the main texts were developed by the partners. The first five lessons are already finished and include short texts as well as dialogues. Before we started working on the contents, we asked deaf users about their wishes. As they decided against a continued storyline, we opted for a loose connection by using the same family in all of the lessons. A deaf perspective was added by having two deaf family members.

While the basic structure of the program remained the same, some tabs were changed: "All" was replaced by "Scenic representation", and "Word/phrase" was separated into two individual tabs, "Words" and "Phrases".

As for the exercises, mostly the same templates were used (except for a new template, a memory game), but they include now new material not previously used within the lessons. Any new words within a lesson can be looked up in the "dictionary" word list (it is no longer restricted to selected words/phrases within the main texts). A second word list serves as a "grammar glossary" where grammar terms are translated and/or explained to enable the users to use grammar books as well.

3.1. Further development of the "SignOn" method within "SignOnOne"

The main alteration is the addition of the "Scenic representation". It was argued that the "All" tab is not really necessary because the users can have the sentences translated one-by-one; instead, the scenic representation should give the complete meaning of each sentence (no more and no less) in some visual form – through acting, props, gestures, etc. In contrast to a national sign language, this would be understood by the deaf users from any country and would help them to get a first idea of what the sentence is about. In this way, we are following recent developments in linguistics and second language acquisition [4, 5]. The users are invited to explore English on their own, in a manner reminiscent of when they were children, learning their first language. The tabs were rearranged accordingly: it is now recommended to start with the scenic representation. Once you know the basic content of a sentence, you can look up the translation ("sentence"), followed by "phrases" and then "words". This allows the users to discover the meaning of smaller units (even a word-by-word translation - as advocated by many textbooks to allow a comparison with one's own language - is possible if the user so desires) and to develop grammar hypotheses which can then be checked with the aid of grammar explanations on the grammar tab.

Another difference to "SignOn!" is that in "SignOnOne" all the words may be clicked on instead of just a selection of difficult words. Wherever possible, the users will get a translation; if the word cannot be translated directly, an explanation will be signed instead (e.g. for the definite article "the"). The now separate tabs for "phrases" and "words" are intended to show the users that phrases are made up of single words but that the meaning of these words may change in the combination.

The grammar has been expanded as well. The grammar explanation exists no longer only in video form; it now includes some grammar visualisation (e.g. grammar tables next to the video, examples on a flipchart in the video) instead of the main text of the lesson. While the basic grammar explanations are the same for the whole consortium, the actual presentation was up to the individual partners. They

were also asked to contrast English with their national (written) language in the signed explanation, if they thought that this might further the users' understanding. In contrast to "SignOn!" which did not include any audio, "SignOnOne" will come equipped with a so-called "talking head" which shows the head of a native speaker pronouncing the individual sentences, phrases and words. The intention is to have the mouthing for deaf users while hard-of-hearing users can use the audio files themselves. As additional help, there will be a PDF-file of the pronunciation of the texts and words in a simplified phonetic alphabet (provided by the partners with regard to the special pronunciation needs of their countries); this was included because the deaf often try to pronounce a word based on its written form and wanted to have at least some idea of what a word sounds like.

Conclusion

The "SignOn" method uses a cognitive approach – the users are encouraged to discover language on their own, to experiment with the different possibilities of analysing the texts. Although "SignOnOne" has to have a more rigid structure than its predecessor due to the different needs of complete beginners, there is still a lot of freedom for the users. They are not forced to do tests, but instead should "play" with the content of the lessons, trying to get an idea of it through the "scenic representation" before they go into details. The special design of the "SignOn" courses also lends itself to contrastive learning, comparing English with the national sign languages of the users.

References

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