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# **ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT**

Konyicska-Székely Ágota

Anglisztika alapszak

Angol szakirány

2015

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# ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*Hallássérültek angol mint idegen nyelv tanulása  
Európában*

*Deaf students learning English as a foreign  
language in Europe: an overview*

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## **Abstract**

Learning English is essential in order to become successful in several fields of life, therefore deaf people's foreign language development is of great importance nowadays. However, deaf foreign language education faces several difficulties, due to the inadequate teaching methods, the limited number of signing teachers and the lack of printed learning materials designed for deaf students. Several European projects addressed this problem by creating web-based English learning materials which conform to the special needs of deaf learners. The projects SignOn!, SignOnOne, SignMedia and Vibelle provide free and accessible e-learning courses designed for deaf users. The learning tools adopt bilingual teaching methods through offering an interactive and learner based foreign language learning platform in order to successfully develop deaf people's written English skills.

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## **1 Introduction**

The importance of learning English has increased in the past few years, as English has become an international communication tool in our globalized world. English is considered nowadays a key to success, therefore teaching English as a foreign language to deaf people is essential. Moreover, it is also of great importance to provide language learning opportunities and to create learning programmes for deaf people.

Deaf foreign language teaching is still problematic in most European countries, and deaf people encounter several difficulties during language learning. The main problem deaf people and language teachers face is the lack of specialized teaching methodology and teaching materials (Kontra, 2013). Without effective teaching methods and appropriate textbooks, the successful foreign language acquisition of deaf language learners is nearly impossible.

This thesis intends to call attention to the importance of teaching English as a foreign language to deaf and hard of hearing persons and to give an insight into the learning process and the difficulties of language teaching to deaf students. The aim of this thesis is to find out what kind of effective teaching methods, programmes and projects exist in Europe to help deaf foreign language learners to overcome learning difficulties and provide language teachers useful teaching strategies and materials.

Firstly, the thesis provides a brief introduction of deaf and hard of hearing people, presenting the main information and data necessary to understand deaf people as foreign language learners. It also highlights the importance of learning English for deaf people and presents the main problems and difficulties of deaf foreign language teaching. The main body of the thesis focuses on European learning programmes and web-based projects created for deaf people who intend to learn English as a foreign language. It is of great importance to introduce these E-learning projects, as they are free, easily accessed through the Internet



and provide useful learning materials and teaching methods created for deaf students. Finally, the main body of the thesis will be followed by a discussion and a brief conclusion, aiming to summarize the most important points and findings in order to make foreign language learning and teaching more effective for deaf people.

## **2 Deafness and language learning**

### 2.1 Basic information about deaf and hard of hearing persons

Two large groups can be distinguished among people with hearing loss: hard of hearing persons and deaf people (Vasák, 2005). Vasák (2005) states that hard of hearing persons have a partial hearing loss from 30 to 80 dB, whereas deaf people's hearing loss is greater than 80 dB. According to the WHO (World Health Organization), 360 million people worldwide have disabling hearing loss (hearing loss greater than 40 dB), and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) reports that approximately 70 million people suffer from deafness. There is no reliable data on the number of deaf people in Europe, but according to non-official statistics, approximately 900,000 deaf people live in Europe. In Hungary approximately 1 million people suffer from some kind of hearing loss, and the deaf constitute the third largest linguistic and cultural minority group, with 60,000 deaf people (Vasák, 2005).

According to Bartha, Hattyár, and Szabó (2006), it is difficult to comprehensively define deafness, as several definitions exist which approach deafness from different views. Deafness can be observed from two contrasting views: the pathological and the sociocultural view. From a pathological point of view, deafness is defined as a medical problem and the degree of hearing loss is measured on a decibel scale (Bartha et al., 2006). Vasák (2005) highlights that the pathological perspective supports the view that deafness must be corrected in order for deaf people to become similar to hearing persons. Moreover, the pathological view supports the belief, that the mother tongue of the deaf is the spoken language of the country they live in. On the other hand, from a sociocultural point of view, deafness is regarded as a cultural difference (Vogel & Keating, 2005), which shares a

common culture and language (Bartha et al., 2006). The sociocultural perspective views sign language as the mother tongue of the deaf, suggesting that the oral language of the country is a second or foreign language to deaf people (Bajkó & Kontra, 2008). The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities of 2007 recognizes the deaf minority and their sign languages (United Nations, 2007). The Convention facilitates sign language learning and aims to ensure the right of deaf people to get an education in sign language.

Deaf and hard of hearing individuals use several communication channels to express themselves. The chosen communication channel depends on many factors, for instance, the type and degree of deafness, the age of hearing loss, lip-reading skills, schooling and so on (Bajkó & Kontra, 2008). The main channel of communication between deaf people is the local sign language. Vasák (2005) describes sign language as a visual-gesticular and non-vocal language, which is used primarily by deaf people and it is not based on the local spoken language. Bajkó and Kontra (2008) add that sign language uses hand and body movements, and body language, such as, gestures and face expressions. In spite of false beliefs, sign language is not an international language, but varies from country to country and has several varieties just like spoken languages (Bartha et al., 2006). According to Bartha et al. (2006), sign language fulfills all the criteria for a natural language, it has an independent vocabulary, structure and grammar; and evolves and develops independently from spoken languages, fulfilling the same expressive and cognitive functions. Sign language is recognized as an independent natural language in many European countries and the deaf community constitutes a linguistic and cultural minority. Besides sign language, signed speech and fingerspelling are also tools of communication used by deaf people. Signed speech is used mainly to support lip-reading and lip-movement, and follows the structure and syntax of spoken languages, using signs to visualize them (Bajkó & Kontra, 2008). Fingerspelling

represents letters of the alphabet using hand shapes. It is mainly used to help communication between deaf and hearing people and to spell out words or names which do not have a sign.

When analyzing deaf language learning, it is also important to take into consideration the time when the hearing loss occurred. According to Bartha et al. (2006), two types of hearing loss can be distinguished according to the age when the person lost his or her hearing: pre-lingual deafness and post-lingual deafness. Pre-lingual deafness occurs when a person becomes deaf before speech development, regardless of whether the hearing loss is congenital or acquired. On the other hand, we speak about post-lingual deafness when the hearing loss occurs after a person acquires a spoken language. Bartha et al. (2006) highlight that prelingually deaf people are the most vulnerable group among the hearing impaired, because in case of pre-lingual deafness learning a spoken language is very difficult as deaf people learn the spoken language as a foreign language. Kárpáti's (2004) study indicates that deaf people learn the language of the country they live in with the help of a speech therapist which is time consuming and requires a great effort. Moreover, their speech is often monotonous with inappropriate speech volume and insufficient vocabulary. In contrast, those who lost their hearing ability after developing normal speech are usually able to communicate in the given spoken language because this language is the deaf person's mother tongue, however, their pronunciation often differs from that of hearing persons. In this case the age when the hearing loss occurred is very important in terms of the effect of post-lingual deafness on speech, reading, writing and lip-reading (Bajkó & Kontra, 2008).

It is also important to distinguish deaf children who are born to deaf parents from those who have hearing parents. Approximately 90% of prelingually and congenitally deaf and hard of hearing children are born to hearing parents (Bartha et al., 2006). This means that these children grow up in a hearing environment and they only meet their natural language, the sign language when they go to kindergarten or school. Therefore, according to Kontra

and Csizér (2013), these deaf children start school with a severe handicap. In those families where the parents are deaf, children grow up in an environment where the sign language is the natural language and their "cognitive, social and emotional development can take place at a rate on a par with the development of hearing infants " (Kontra & Csizér, 2013, p. 2).

## 2.2 The importance of learning English as a foreign language for deaf persons

English is considered nowadays a lingua franca, and it has become the main tool of communication between people with different first languages. Besides its role as lingua franca, English is a language of education, politics, technology, media and business (Domagala-Zysk, 2013). In order to become successful, speaking English is essential in our global world. Those people who do not acquire at least one foreign language are likely to face disadvantages in many fields of life, for instance, education and career opportunities (Hilzensauer & Skant, 2008). Therefore, it is essential for deaf people to learn a foreign language in order to have better learning opportunities, and become well-educated and competitive on the job market. The question is not whether deaf and hard of hearing persons should or should not learn foreign languages, but how to teach hearing impaired individuals a foreign language effectively (Csizér, Kontráné Hegybíró, & Sáfár, 2008). The European Union (EU) promotes multilingualism and language learning, and encourages citizens to learn at least two foreign languages. To support this aim, several learning programmes (Lifelong Learning Programme, Gruntvig, Comenius etc.) have been created. This goal applies to all European citizens, including deaf people, therefore, the EU supports deaf foreign language learning by funding several language learning projects. The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities of 2007 also addresses the importance of foreign language learning of deaf and hard of hearing persons stating that they should be

guaranteed the same rights and opportunities of education as hearing students (United Nations, 2007).

### 2.3 Problems in foreign language education of deaf people

Foreign language learning and foreign language education of deaf people is not a central issue in most European countries and there is still little information available about deaf foreign language learning (Csizér et al., 2008). Deaf and hard of hearing persons encounter many difficulties when learning a foreign language, as foreign language teaching to the deaf is still problematic. According to Vasák (2005), in deaf education two main methods can be distinguished: the oralist and bilingual method. The oralist method supports the view that the mother tongue of deaf people is the spoken language of the country, and education is provided through this language. This teaching method is based on lip-reading and supports body language, but rejects the use of sign language in order to integrate deaf people into the hearing society (Bartha et al., 2006). The application of the oralist method in foreign language teaching causes many difficulties for teachers and deaf learners. Vasák (2005) highlights that the main problem is that the language of instruction is the spoken language of the country, and most of deaf learners do not have sufficient language knowledge in terms of grammar, vocabulary and reading skills. For successful foreign language learning a basic first language is needed, which is missing in this case (Kontráné Hegybíró, Csizér, & Sáfár, 2009). On the other hand, the bilingual method advocates the use of the local sign language as a first language and the country's spoken language as a second language in the classroom (Bartha et al., 2006). Vasák (2005) states that for deaf children the most effective language stimulation is visual communication, namely the local sign language. The bilingual teaching method requires skilled teachers who are able to use sign language fluently, but the number

of skilled teachers is still very limited. Kárpáti (2004) highlights in her study that besides the limited number of signing teachers, the lack of appropriate textbooks also causes many difficulties in foreign language teaching. Most of the textbooks are created for hearing people, ignoring the special needs of deaf people. Moreover, without the necessary acoustic input it is nearly impossible to develop deaf people's pronunciation and speaking skills. In order to overcome these difficulties it is crucial to support foreign language learning of deaf and hard of hearing people, by providing and creating appropriate learning opportunities and effective teaching methods.

### **3 Language learning projects in Europe for deaf people**

#### **3.1 Deaf written English skills**

Hilzensauer, Dotter, and Grilz (2009) emphasize the fact that learning English is indispensable for our modern world, as English knowledge is required for travel, communication, computers, working and so on. As already mentioned in Chapter Two, English skills are necessary for deaf people to enhance their educational and carrier opportunities, but English also serves as a common communication channel between deaf people from different countries. Due to inadequate and old-fashioned teaching methods, deaf people's English skills are very poor as they learn the language as a third language with methods which are mainly suited for hearing persons (Hilzensauer & Skant, 2008). Hilzensauer and Dotter (2012) highlight that “deaf people are visually oriented, therefore they need to receive information via the visual channel” (p.69). Therefore, is essential to develop deaf people's written English skills. Written English is still problematic for deaf foreign language learners, as language courses focus mainly on spoken skills. In the past few years several EU-projects addressed this problem by creating web-based learning sites in order to help deaf foreign language learners to develop their written English skills with the help of the local sign language used as a language of instruction. This chapter aims to give an insight into these e-learning programmes, to present the reader the main projects in Europe which are still accessible for deaf foreign language learners, and to highlight the importance of ICT in deaf education.



### 3.2 Information and communication technology (ICT) in deaf education

The projects presented in this thesis are web-based, therefore information and communication technology and the use of ICT tools are key elements to reach the goals of education for deaf people (Dotter, 2008). In the era of Internet everything is accessible and communication has never been easier. Besides these advantages, the Internet acts as a platform for education via e-learning as well, which enables deaf people to use the Internet not just as a communication tool but also for educational purposes. Dotter (2008) states that “ICT is the ideal instrument for creating, presenting and using multimedia materials including sign language videos” (p. 110). He adds that ICT can also serve as an educational tool of distance education for minority groups. ICT tools also help to enhance deaf education, by adopting new technologies which develop and improve learning and teaching opportunities. Besides its educational benefits, information and communication technology allows deaf people to communicate freely, learn their rights, and facilitates their social and emotional development, therefore making ICT available for deaf people is essential. Dotter (2008) emphasizes that the number of web-based educational materials for people with special needs is still very limited. The main reason behind the lack of sufficient programmes is that e-learning based programmes often intend to save money by using a software instead of paying teachers. However, Dotter (2008) states that ICT provision for deaf people is not cheap, as written language cannot be transformed into a sign language without a skilled interpreter. Moreover, sign language communities are so small that there is no economic interest in creating expensive programmes for deaf people. According to Dotter (2008), in the case of European projects, experiences show that ICT experts and funding organizations often are “constantly driven by social responsibility or by some new scientific challenge to design and develop a new software” (p. 111). He adds, that after the pilot project is over,

many long-term programmes do not get any further financial support and in short time the learning site is not available anymore. Therefore, it is crucial to fund projects which create accessible and sustainable learning sites in order to support and develop deaf foreign language learning.

### 3.3 European foreign language learning projects for deaf people

#### 3.3.1 The SOCRATES Programme and the Lifelong Learning Programme: an overview

The SOCRATES Programme and the Lifelong Learning Programme are both educational initiatives created by the European Commission with the aim to develop education and training within the European Union. According to the europa.eu website, the first phase of the SOCRATES Programme ran from 1994 to 1999, and was replaced by SOCRATES II between the period of 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2006. SOCRATES II was followed by the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2007, which was replaced by the Erasmus+ Programme from 2014. Both SOCRATES and the Lifelong Learning Programme promoted foreign language education and funded several language learning projects for deaf people. The EU-project SMILE (A Sign Language and Multimedia Based Interactive Language Course for Deaf for the Training of European Written Languages) ran from 1998 to 2001 as the first interactive multimedia language course for teaching written European languages for deaf people. Within the framework of the SOCRATES II Programme (Lingua Action 2), the project “SignOn!: English for Deaf Sign Language Users on the Internet” (<http://www.acm5.com/signon3/Netscape/index.html>) aimed to develop deaf people's written English skills in order to enable them to use English for international communication via the Internet. In the following years the Lifelong Learning Programme supported several English learning projects, such as DEAL, DEAL TOI, DEDALOS, ENFORA, BASE,

SignOnOne and SignMedia. The DEAL Project's (Deaf people in Europe Acquiring Languages through E-Learning) objective was to create an e-learning foreign language teaching model for deaf individuals in professional education (Nuccetelli, Penge, Terraschi, & Villarini, 2010). The project offered a language course in Italian, Spanish and German languages. The DEAL Project was followed by DEAL TOI (Deaf People in Europe Acquiring Languages through E-Learning – Transfer Of Innovation) in 2009, aiming to transfer the educational model used in the DEAL Project and to create a course in written English for business (Nuccetelli et al., 2010). The Greek DEDALOS (<http://imm.demokritos.gr/dedalos/>) project aimed at teaching English as a second language to deaf people, whose first language is the Sign Language, via e-learning tools. The ENFORA project was introduced in 2008 as the Innovation Transfer of DEDALOS project. The main objective of ENFORA was to develop ICT based learning tools for deaf foreign language learners. The BASE Project (Basic Skills in English for Deaf Adults: <http://www.base.gva.es/>) was a Gruntvig project created in 2008 with the purpose to develop English literacy skills of hearing impaired persons. SignOnOne (2008-2010: <http://acm5.com/signonone>) was created as a further development of the SignOn! project, targeting beginner deaf English language learners. The SignMedia project (2010-2012: <http://www.signmedia.tv>) aimed to develop an interactive learning tool that teaches English for Specific Purposes (ESP) through British, Austrian and Italian Sign Language. Unfortunately many projects listed above are no longer available for the users as their funding ceased after the end of the pilot period. SignOn!, SignOnOne, SignMedia, however, are still accessible for deaf English learners, therefore in the following sub-sections these projects will be discussed in detail.

### 3.3.2 SignOn! and SignOnOne

#### 3.3.2.1 The project

SignOn! was a three-year EU-project started on 1 October 2004. Austria (University of Klagenfurt, Center for Sign Language and Deaf Communication) served as a coordinator of the project, other partners were Finland (The Finnish Association of the Deaf), Iceland (Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing), Norway (Møller Resource Centre), Spain (University of Barcelona, Faculty of Developmental and Educational Psychology), the Netherlands (Pragma – Equal Access) and the United Kingdom (University of Central Lancashire). Hilzensauer et al. (2009) state that SignOnOne started in 2008 as a follow-up project to SignOn!. Austria remained the coordinator of the project, and Norway, Spain and Iceland decided to join the second project as well. Additionally two new partners joined the consortium, namely the Czech Republic (Masaryk University, Support Centre for Students with Special Needs) and Hungary (University of West Hungary, Pedagogical Faculty). Both projects were carried out with the help of deaf participants, as among the partners there were several universities and research centers with deaf students and deaf collaborators. SignOn! addresses the problem that deaf people have difficulties understanding written texts and hesitate to write in English, therefore this project aims to solve this problem by teaching the necessary vocabulary and grammar in order to enable deaf people to use English for international communication (Hilzensauer & Skant, 2008). Hilzensauer et al. (2009) highlight that SignOnOne follows this concept, except that the second project was designed to accommodate the needs of complete beginners. The target group of both projects are deaf people who use their national sign language as they first language. In terms of English language skills, SignOn! is created for those deaf people who have intermediate English knowledge, whereas SignOnOne targets deaf learners with no

English skills at all. Besides the aim to teach English to deaf people, the projects were created with the objective to conduct research in the fields of deaf education, bilingualism and English as a foreign language intending to find new solutions in these areas (Hilzensauer & Skant, 2008).

### 3.3.2.2 The method

According to Hilzensauer and Skant (2008), the SignOn! method promotes the bilingual model of deaf education. The projects simplify the learning situation as only two languages are involved during the course, namely English as a target language and the national sign language as a language of instruction. The national written language is excluded from the learning process and with the use of sign language students are less dependent on a teacher (Hilzensauer & Skant, 2008). Hilzensauer and Dotter (2012) state that the SignOn! method uses a cognitive approach, which enables and encourages the users to explore the language on their own as learners can choose from different options according to their individual preferences, without being forced to work in a specific sequence. SignOnOne follows this method, although it has to have a more strict structure to conform the needs of beginner learners (Hilzensauer et al., 2009). Hilzensauer and Dotter (2012) add that the cognitive approach “wants to reproduce in some way the language learning of children or foreign language learning of adults by immersion” (p. 69). This language learning concept supports the idea that people perceive the world via “scenes” and “scripts”, and language learning reflects this perception as sentences relate to simple scenes. As an innovation, in SignOnOne every English sentence is animated, and these animations represent the “scene” which is described through the language (Hilzensauer & Dotter, 2012). Moreover, the learners can first watch the animations or they may first watch the translation of the text into sign language, which gives the content but not an exact word for word translation. The SignOn!

method aims to ensure that the user stays within the target language as much as possible. Both projects contain video exercises to work and train within the target language. To continue with, the projects promote anonymity in order to avoid the so-called school situation where students are continuously confronted with their mistakes. The exercises are not graded and users are not obliged to write tests, which allow them to explore the lessons freely without being stressed. According to Hilzensauer and Dotter (2012), the projects are designed to be used as self-learning courses, but it is recommended to use them within a learning group or integrate the materials and lessons into the classroom as well.

### 3.3.2.3 The structure

SignOn! consists of ten unconnected lessons on different topics related to deafness and the Internet. These topics are the following: Deaf Art, Deaf Politics, Deaflympics, Travel, Web Search, On-line Shopping, Instant Messaging, Weblog, Netiquette, and On-line Translations. Hilzensauer and Dotter (2012) highlight that the texts are available in different modes of translations in Austrian, British, Catalan, Dutch, Finnish, Icelandic and Norwegian Sign Language. Moreover, the introduction and the translation of the whole texts and the individual sentences are also translated into International Sign Language, to enable deaf people from other countries to join the course. When entering the website, the learner first has to choose a sign language and a topic, by clicking on the flag icons and on the list placed on the right hand side. The main texts of each lesson introduce new words and phrases. Hilzensauer et al. (2009) describe that each main text contains four modes of translation into sign language. These modes or tabs are “All”, “Sentence”, “Word/Phrase” and “Grammar”. By clicking on the “All” tab, the whole translation of the main text is available in sign language, which allows the users to take a look at the full text. In the “Sentence” mode the text is divided into sentences so learners can read each sentence separately and watch the

translations. In “Word/Phrase” the difficult and important phrases and words are selected from the main text, and finally the “Grammar” tab summarizes the essential grammar information. Hilzensauer et al. (2009) state that the program also includes interactive exercises which are linked to the lessons. There are three types of exercises, namely “multiple choice”, “drag and drop” and “right order, which focus mainly on vocabulary and grammar practice.

SignOnOne follows the structure of SignOn!, only a few modifications were made to conform to beginners’ needs. The lessons are connected to each other, therefore the learners can build on what they have already learned, although the navigation is free, so the user is not obliged to go through every lesson (Hilzensauer & Dotter, 2012). The lesson topics are the following: Introduction, Family, Seasons, Home, School, Work, Education, Free time, Transport, Shopping, Restaurant, and Health. Hilzensauer and Dotter (2012) add that the lessons also have a loose connection by using the same family in all lessons: a family including deaf and hearing members. The tabs in SignOnOne are the same, except that the “All” tab is removed. Instead there is an “Animation” mode added, in which the sentences are visually represented by a short language-independent animation. According to Hilzensauer and Dotter (2012), the function of these animations is to give the learners some idea of what the text is about. Another small change compared to SignOn! is that the “Words/Phrases” tab is separated, and every word and phrase is clickable. To provide deaf users with a lip-reading option, in SignOnOne there is a new feature added, the so-called “Talking Head” mode, where a native British speaker pronounces the sentences, words and phrases. SignOnOne uses the same types of exercises, but compared to SignOn! the exercises include new materials as well in the tasks.

### 3.3.3 SignMedia

#### 3.3.3.1 The project

SignMedia (2010-2012) is a two-year project funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme (Leonardo Da Vinci). The coordinator of the project was the University of Wolverhampton (UK), and other partners were the University of Turin (IT), the University of Klagenfurt (AT) and the deaf led media production company Mutt&Jeff Pictures Ltd. (UK). SignMedia is an interactive learning tool aiming to teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to deaf people. Gansinger and Dotter (2012) state that the media industry offers more and more career opportunities for deaf professionals, however communication through written English is still a problem for deaf people. SignMedia addresses this problem by creating an innovative language course with the objective to improve deaf graduates' and professionals' English skills and to promote their career development (Sign Media, 2011). The project primarily targets media students and media professionals with intermediate language knowledge, but it is also useful for other deaf English language learners as well.

#### 3.3.3.2. The method

SignMedia similarly to SignOn! and SignOnOne promotes the bilingual teaching method, as written English is taught through national sign languages. These sign languages are the Austrian, British and Italian Sign Language. All the characters in the program use the available national sign language. SignMedia allows the learners to use the program according to their individual preferences. The program is flexible as the learning environment enables deaf users to explore the materials in an order that is suitable for them, which increases the learners' motivation and engagement (Sign Media, 2011). According to Gansinger and Dotter (2012), SignMedia combines video, animation and game-play



elements, and involves the students in the story itself. The story is based on a production company which is responsible for creating a TV soap opera. This learning environment helps students to connect and transfer their new language skills to their work in the media industry (Gansinger & Dotter, 2012). SignMedia uses a game-based approach to make the course more interesting and more interactive. In contrast with other courses, SignMedia gives the user responsibilities and roles instead of being referred as “learner” or “beginner” (Sign Media, 2010). Moreover, learners do not just read a text and fill-in an exercise, but are interactively involved in the tasks. This type of learning method helps users to develop their language skills effectively. The program also uses recognizable communication technologies that are widely used in our modern world, such as smart phones, laptops and social networking (Sign Media, 2011).

#### 3.3.3.3 The structure

On entering the website, the learner can choose from three different sign languages, and an introductory video is provided. The user has to register, which is necessary in order to store individual scores. The course is centered on seven film production activities, which are the working steps of a TV soap production, namely Risk Assessment, Treatment, Casting Call, Call Sheet and Script, Storyboard and Compliance. The virtual company the user works for is “Sunrise Media Productions”, which produces the “Beautiful days” soap opera. Three main characters help the learners to go through the exercises: Carlos, the executive producer, Mark, the producer and Crissy, the assistant. Crissy welcomes the learner and introduces the learning tool. The user becomes an active member of the film-production team and several tasks are assigned to him or her. To begin the work, the learner can choose from seven scenario documents, which deal with different stages of film production. Every document is linked to a certain grammar topic, for instance, present simple tense, passive voice and so

on. The role of the documents is to provide the necessary grammar that the deaf learner would need in the workplace (Sign Media, 2011). If the users struggle with the grammar tasks, they can call Mark, the producer who offers some explanation via sign language. Several different tasks are available within the documents. Among the various exercises, the user has to match word pairs, edit texts, choose the right answer from multiple choices or select the right words. Some tasks are locked, and they will be accessible only if the previous exercises are completed. After completing a task, the user gets feedback from Crissy or from Carla, the executive producer. Every document includes the written version of the exercises and tutorials, therefore the students can also print them out. All the words and phrases are accessible in the “Glossary”, where every word and phrase is translated into the three sign languages of the project.

#### 3.3.4 The Vibelle Project (AILB III)

AILB (Aachener Internet-Lernsoftware zur Berufsqualifizierung von Gehörlosen) was a project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Health and Social Security between 2003 and 2012. The project was created in the cooperation of the Aachen University, the Fraunhofer Institute for Applied Information Technology (FIT) and bureau42. The aim of the AILB project was to create a bilingual Internet-based learning software designed for deaf people who want to maintain their mathematical, reading and writing skills (Straetz et al., 2004). According to Straetz et al. (2004), the project assigned the special needs of deaf people and created an e-learning environment which contains bilingual information, a high level of visualization, interactive learning tools and the possibility to learn in groups via video conferencing. This e-learning environment is the Vibelle (<http://www.vibelle.de/>), which functions successfully from 2007 as an educational portal for deaf people. Straetz et al. (2004) state that the AILB promotes self-directed and explorative learning methods, and

the learners are given strategies which support these learning methods. Besides e-learning materials, Vibelle also offers a wide range of other useful information for deaf people such as basic hiring and job information or financial information and so on. The e-learning material comprises several fields, courses are offered, for example, in mathematics, spoken and written German language, and business administration. The Vibelle project also addresses the necessity of English knowledge, therefore among the materials, a written English course is accessible for the users. The AILB project promotes the bilingual teaching method, therefore Vibelle uses the German Sign Language as a language of instruction. The Vibelle website conforms to the needs of deaf people, as the user interface was created to meet the requirements of deaf learners, using visual elements and as many videos as possible. The English learning course is designed for independent learning, just as the previously introduced EU-projects, but can also be used in a school environment. The English learning tool targets mainly beginners who have little English knowledge and desire to develop their written skills for everyday communication purposes. In the English course, German Sign Language is used for explanations, but the signed videos contain subtitles in written German, to improve learners' German literacy skills as well. When entering the website, users can access the learning materials by clicking on the icons at the top of the page. The English lessons are located within the e-learning materials. All materials are free to access, web-based, registration-free, and anonymous, therefore deaf learners can freely explore the educational tools. There are two units containing seven English lessons dealing with different topics. The topics are the following: "Transport", "About me", "About my job", "What do they have?", "At home", "About family", and "My daily routine". The lesson "Transport" is an introductory lesson, emphasizing the importance of English learning. The introductory video explains to the learner why it is useful to learn English as a foreign language, highlighting that English can be used for international communication, is essential

for surfing the Internet, and is necessary for travelling and so on. Every lesson consists of four videos, namely an introduction to the topic, a video dealing with the topic itself, vocabulary and grammar explanation. Every topic is linked to several activities and exercises, for instance, fill-in, drag and drop, and multiple choice tasks. The exercises are also downloadable in pdf format. Beyond these materials, an English-German dictionary is attached to every lesson collecting the useful words and phrases from the lesson and the activities. Compared to the previously mentioned learning projects, the Vibelle English e-learning course is unique, because every lesson provides a British Sign Language (BSL) learning tool as well. Besides developing their English skills, deaf learners are offered a chance to learn basic British Sign Language through a selected English vocabulary which is translated into BSL. There is no doubt that the AILB project resulted in designing an effective and helpful learning tool, which could be an example for many European countries where deaf education is still lagging behind.

## 4 Discussion

As we saw in the previous Chapters, providing easily accessible foreign language learning opportunities for deaf people is of great importance nowadays. In order to create learning materials which are suitable for deaf users it must be taken into consideration that teaching foreign languages to deaf learners require different teaching methods and techniques, as deaf people perceive the world visually. The projects SignOn!, SignOnOne, SignMedia and Vibelle address this problem by offering an e-learning platform created to conform to the special needs of deaf students. Bartha et al. (2006) state that deaf people are visually-oriented, therefore courses and materials which focus on auditory learning are inadequate for deaf foreign language development. Deaf people need to receive information via the visual channel, written language is not enough to provide the deaf with necessary information (Hilzensauer & Dotter, 2012). SignOn!, SignOnOne, SignMedia and Vibelle promote visually-oriented teaching methods, and intend to convert the audio elements and information into a visual representation. The material is presented through videos, animations, images and subtitles (in Vibelle), in order to enhance visual learning. Besides the videos and pictures, the user environment also supports a high level of visualization, and the navigation is easy and understandable for deaf people.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, deaf people's natural language is their national sign language, therefore providing foreign language education through sign language is essential for successful language skill development. According to Vasák (2005), deaf people's spoken language skills are incomplete, therefore the use of the spoken language of the country as a language of instruction is an inadequate method for teaching foreign languages to deaf people. The projects introduced in my thesis aim to conform to this special need by providing a bilingual learning environment for deaf users. These e-learning courses use the sign languages of the participating countries (Austrian, British, Catalan, Czech, Dutch, Finnish,

German, Hungarian, Italian, Icelandic and Norwegian Sign Language) to help deaf learners who intend to develop their English skills to successfully understand the materials and the tasks. Moreover, the materials offered by these projects are also useful for foreign language teachers who adopted the bilingual teaching method.

The projects SignOn!, SignOnOne, SignMedia and Vibelle intended to design e-learning platforms which offer a multisensory language learning tool for deaf users. Multisensory language teaching methods help people to enhance their learning skills and to achieve better results, through stimulating more than one sense. The projects provide visual-verbal as well as visual-non-verbal stimulation which is combined with body movement, and role playing activities (in SignMedia). The e-learning courses aim to encourage the deaf users' activity by offering interactive, task- and game-based materials, in order to enhance deaf people's motivation and promote effective learning. The learning tools also promote self-learning techniques, providing deaf users an opportunity to explore the materials individually and to develop their autonomous learning skills.

It is of great importance to create learning materials for deaf people which are easily accessible and free, because deaf language learners have very limited foreign language learning opportunities. Language learning courses for deaf people are expensive and available only in a few European countries. SignOn!, SignOnOne, SignMedia and Vibelle address this problem by providing learning materials for deaf learners which can be easily accessed on the Internet, without any registration fee. Therefore, these European learning tools are available for deaf English learners from all over the world. With the help of ICT, deaf learners are provided with information via an e-learning platform, allowing them to use the programs according to their individual preferences and enabling deaf learners to effectively develop their written English skills.

## **5 Conclusion and implications**

There is no doubt that learning English as a foreign language is essential for deaf people in order to have better prospects on the job market, and to enhance their international communication opportunities. However, deaf foreign language teaching is still problematic due to the limited number of skilled teachers and the lack of learning materials designed for deaf learners. The use of inadequate teaching methods affect deaf learners negatively, and as a result, deaf students lag behind hearing students in terms of reading and writing skills.

The oralist method is still widely used in many European countries as an accepted teaching method for deaf students. According to Bartha et al. (2006), the development of prelingually and congenitally deaf learners who received education through the oralist method is slower and less effective, compared to those students who received education through bilingual methods. In order to ensure deaf people's basic human rights, and to provide deaf learners equal foreign language learning opportunities it is indispensable to recognize that sign language is the natural language of deaf people, and for successful language development it is essential to create learning materials which promote the use of sign languages as languages of instruction.

The European learning tools presented in this thesis promote good practice in deaf foreign language education through adopting the bilingual teaching method. With the help of the bilingual teaching method, deaf English learners can access materials through their own language, which results in effective and successful language development. Therefore, promoting and building interactive and accessible e-learning platforms which provide foreign language materials created to conform to the needs of deaf language learners is essential, in order to help deaf people to achieve better results and to enable them to access the same learning opportunities as hearing people.

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