

The early learning of English as a foreign language by hearing impaired children in special needs schools

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Abstract

A hearing impairment changes the conditions of early language acquisition and requires curricular adaptations. Curricular modifications undertaken in three German federal states were examined using a comparative method. Guided interviews with experts demonstrate not only how the theoretical principles were developed, but also what practical outcomes were first experienced. The results show that the curriculum modifications provide teachers with support when planning and organising English lessons. The unique conditions of hearing-impaired children are not being taken sufficiently into account as they show close reference to the regular English curriculum with an auditory focus. Alternative learning designs must be considered in future planning of curriculum programmes. Educational standards have to take the different circumstances of hearing-impaired children into account and therefore more flexible standards should be considered.

Introduction

Since the 1960's, early learning of foreign languages became a widely debated topic in Germany. Shortly after introducing English as a subject into the third year of primary schools in several federal states, a variety of projects aimed at fostering foreign language learning with a range of different languages, together with the development of language awareness, were tested throughout Germany.

However, during the past decade English has gained the status of a key subject within the curriculum of German primary schools. English was chosen due to its position in international communication as a lingua franca. In addition to the mainstream students, primary-aged children in hearing impaired support centres are also taught English. Previously, English had only been made available to a limited group of hearing-impaired children who had achieved an average performance in German and were in deaf schools. These children were given the same leaving certificate exams as hearing children (Michels 1981, 143), and obviously, a different perspective needed to be developed.

Foreign language learning for children with a hearing loss might not be as effective if only subject-specific goals are taken into account. Cross-curricular goals, on the other hand, including the development of tolerance and cross-cultural understanding, will elicit interest and promote enjoyment during exposure to the foreign language.

Until recently, researchers have shown a limited interest in this specialised area. Only a few publications have considered both the conditions of hearing-impaired children and the requirements of the early learning of a foreign language. There may be several reasons why the connection between these two areas of research is under-researched. For one, a high degree of knowledge in both fields is necessary albeit rare. In addition, deaf children are often withdrawn from modern language instruction and placed in other subjects.

After an introductory section describing the general schooling of hearing-impaired children in Germany, the author will present aspects of the basic disciplines of language acquisition and instruction research such as linguistic, psychological and methodological. These aspects provide different perspectives on curricular decision-making. Furthermore, the author will briefly discuss Germany's educational standards and its modifications to the curricula of

hearing-impaired children before presenting examples of three federal states' attempts at modifying the aforementioned curricula.

Schooling of hearing-impaired children in Germany

At present, the schooling of hearing-impaired children across different German federal states is organised in four types of environments. As shown in Table 1, about 77% of children with a hearing impairment were taught at hearing impaired support centres in 2007/2008. Additionally, Germany practises three kinds of joint school placement: "integrational" classes, "preventive" integration or open classes and "external" classes. Within integrational classes, individual students are part of a regular school class. A teacher from the regular school delivers the lessons, while a special needs teacher provides the support. However, the extent of the support varies among the federal states and is based on the student's academic year. The preventive integration or open classes target hearing as well as hearing-impaired children who are taught in one group at a hearing impaired support centre. In this situation, the special needs teacher is in charge of the class. The third option is an external class, which is a class from a hearing impaired support centre located within an ordinary school's premises. In this class, hearing and hearing-impaired children are taught either by a special needs teacher or partly by a team consisting of regular and special needs teacher. (Hänel-Faulhaber 2008, 126)

Pupils joining either the preventive integration or the external classes show a comparably similar degree of psychologically felt integration. Hänel-Faulhaber define psychologically felt integration as successful inclusion. (Hänel-Faulhaber 2008, 126 f.) The pupils feel included in social networks as well as in cooperative actions. Hänel-Faulhaber concludes that this result is possibly due to both group identification and a consideration of individual communication needs. Hänel-Faulhaber maintains that there remains a necessity to provide motivation for the pupils to achieve.

The sixteen German federal states have only recently started keeping statistics on the types of environments. The author has chosen comparison statistics of the three largest of the German federal states; North-Rhine-Westfalia ("NRW"), Bavaria ("B"), and Baden-Württemberg ("BW"). These three federal states represent approximately 50% of the entire German population of 82 million people. A statistical review shows a slight increase in integrative learning by hearing-impaired children between the year of the first statistical coverage of integrated schooling in 1999 and the last school year of 2007/2008 ("2008"), with a general increase in the total number at the same time. While in 1999 there was a total number of 12,620 children with a hearing impairment, 9,997 were taught in support centers with 2,623 children in a form of integration in general schools. In 2008 there were 14,382 children with a hearing impairment at schools in Germany, 11,131 were taught in a special support school, with 3,251 taught in a form of integration in general schools. (Sekretariat der Ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (KMK) 2003; KMK 2009)

A comparison of the statistical tables about hearing-impaired students and their schooling in special and in mainstream schools in three individual federal states of Germany (see Table 1) offers a detailed view of the differences in special needs education within Germany.

Differences can also be observed in the different kinds of mainstream schools which offer integrational classes, with primary schools showing a slight increase in joint school placements from 1,529 students in 1999 to 1,722 students in 2008. Comprehensive schools show an initial figure of 129 in 1999 which rises to 196 in 2008. The figures indicate that options for hearing-impaired children taught at a mainstream school decrease as the academic years increase. (KMK 2003; KMK 2009)

Table 1: Number of students in types of learning environments

	1999		2001		2006		2007/2008	
	<i>Support Center</i>	<i>Integrational classes</i>	<i>Support Center</i>	<i>Integrational classes</i>	<i>Support Center</i>	<i>Integrational classes</i>	<i>Support Center</i>	<i>Integrational classes</i>
Germany	9,997	2,623	10,475	3,054	11,167	3,269	11,131	3,251
Total	12,620		13,529		14,436		14,382	
BW	1,540	319	1,629	458	1,830	887	1,864	828
Total	1,859		2,087		2,717		2,692	
B	1,421	712	1,687	777	1,789	144	1,819	264
Total	2,133		2,464		1,933		2,083	
NRW	2,395	221	2,480	243	2,788	379	2,802	390
Total	2,616		2,723		3,167		3192	

Sources:

Statistic 2003: <http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/Dok170.pdf>

Statistic 2006: <http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/Dok185.pdf>

Statistic 2009: <http://www.kmk.org/statistik/schule/statistiken/sonderpaedagogische-foerderung-in-schulen.html> und
http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/Statistik/Aus_SoPae_2007_Werte.pdf

Language acquisition and instruction research

A well-grounded plan of language learning needs to be established before planning language teaching. In order to consider all dimensions of learning another language, a variety of disciplines such as educational, sociological and psychological aspects are included in the research process. They provide points of reference for the design of a course of language learning and can be regarded as a support for the scientific study of the learning and teaching of foreign languages. (Edmondson & House 2006, 3ff.)

The linguistic level of a language plays an integral part in the language acquisition process as "...linguistics examine the inner system of a language and the language learning, the cognitive organisation of language and its usage in social formation styled by humans." (Edmonson & House 2006, 69; translation by author). The aspects of a language are of importance regarding the various fields of foreign language learning as they represent content and goal of the learning process. The target language is sensibly used as an instrument both of teaching and of learning. This can also be realised by means of monolingualism. (Edmondson & House 2006, 70)

While the learning of a foreign language is based on a complex composition of regularity, an objective of learning can be a structure of which different thinking processes form the base. The next step is the phrasing of theoretical and emotional concerns. The language can be used as a device and serves as an aid to achieving learning targets.

By means of the chosen topics, phonology, morphology, lexicology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics as linguistic fields offer different options to comprehend a language according to a priority. A commencement is possible at both ends, pragmatic as well as phonology,

though the operating mode of the brain is rather reticular than linear. (Edmondson & House 2006, 72f.)

Within the psychological aspects of language acquisition and language instruction research the learning of a language is differentiated from the acquisition of a language (Edmondson & House 2008, 22f.). The term “acquisition” is used for the process a child applies when learning his mother tongue, which can be described as a natural and unconscious approach. “Learning” in contrast means a controlled and conscious learning process usually realised through the foreign language training in schools. Edmondson & House (2006, 12) question this strict classification due to a lack of empirically proven differences. Krashen (1981, 1f.), however, supports the division of the two terms, acquisition and learning. Referring to the learning of languages Krashen cites the Monitor Theory which claims “...that conscious learning is available to the performer only as a Monitor.” (Krashen 1981, 2) Conscious learners can potentially change the output of the acquired language to make themselves more fluent. This model is suitable for adult second-language performance. It includes three conditions: the required time, the focus on correctness, and the knowledge of rules. In practice, there are seldom situations in which all three conditions are met. (Krashen 1981, 3f.)

Foreign language learning as mentioned in Krashen’s context underlies situations with planned foreign language teaching. The psychology of teaching combines two different approaches to explain the premises of learning. On the one hand, the learners’ attitudes and aptitudes are taken into account. On the other hand, the learning process is stimulated by the outside world. Both views serve as a basis when choosing the method of teaching a foreign language. (Edmondson & House 2006, 99)

The methodology of foreign language learning can originally be viewed as consequence of concrete teaching experiences. This emphasises the necessary interaction of theory and praxis. The decision in favour of a particular method should respect the method’s organisation and planning principles as it corresponds with teaching and learning objectives. (Edmondson & House 2006, 124)

Within a wide range of systematic directions, the author will illustrate three basic structures and mention possible benefits for the special requirements of hearing-impaired children. The first method, Total Physical Response (TPR), is already a part of the English primary school curriculum; the two other methods, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and instructional techniques with a visual emphasis, are used in secondary and university education.

Total Physical Response is currently used in teaching hearing-impaired children. The basic principle of TPR is the connection of word and motion and the emphasis on understanding a language before speaking it. However, the learner should receive enough time for acclimatisation and should not be pushed into producing language too early (AK BW 2007, 12).

Universal Design for Learning exploits diverse ways of learning by applying knowledge of information processing in the brain. Strangman et al. (2008, 164ff.) propose to introduce the UDL in foreign language teaching to create adaptive goals, methods, materials and assessments. In practice, multiple methods for vocabulary training in either a digital or an audio format can be used.

Finally, Ian M. Sutherland, Associate Professor of Latin and Italian at Gallaudet University provides a guideline for teaching deaf and hearing students (2008, 42ff.). Mr. Sutherland presents multiple instructional techniques, two of which have a visual emphasis and are of special interest to foreign language instruction, namely “Color Coding” and “Signs”. “Color Coding” is an aid for students “...to recognize that inflection is the essential syntactic feature of the language.” (Sutherland 2008, 60) It uses an added colour to the text “...that helps the

mind track the words and to organize information in a new way. These differences are easier to recognize than in monochrome versions, and the mind more readily deduces that the color represents a system inherent in the words that are spelled the same.” (Sutherland 2008, 61)

Signs can provide support to structured grammatical aspects. A few basic signs can be used to improve the understanding of all students, independent of a possible hearing loss. Sutherland (2008, 63 ff.) mentions the use of the 5-hand “...to symbolise the Latin case system.” (2008, 64) In this example, each digit represents a case starting with the thumb representing nominative and ending with the little finger representing the ablative. The 4-hand is used to show the four principal parts of a Latin verb and the 3-hand symbolises the persons of a verb. The 5-hand can also be chosen to be associated with declensions. The students “...can learn declensions in the same way, relating each Latin case ending to its appropriate digit.” (Sutherland 2008, 67) The hand shape should be employed at the first introduction of each concept.

Educational Standards

After an international comparative study revealed deficits in essential knowledge areas and basic skills with primary school children in Germany, the Educational Ministry Conference (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK) defined nationwide educational standards for the subjects German and Mathematics at the end of year four in primary schools (KMK 2005, 5f.). A curriculum for English was available only in certain federal states e.g. in Baden-Württemberg (2003) and in Bavaria (2005), whereas North Rhine-Westphalia had an experimental curriculum in 2003 and introduced a formal curriculum only in 2008. At this stage the standardisation was not put into effect and nationwide educational standards for English as a subject were not included.

Discussing the meaning and the realisation of educational standards in special needs education includes addressing the issue of alternative options e.g. open educational standards. Open educational standards are based on a Swiss model of written orientation tests and aim at an orientation instead of a withdrawal from classes. Key points of this draft are goals with several levels of difficulty. Orientating works can also be useful as guidelines to forming a curriculum and planning support lessons. The constant collection of data provides the teachers with a faster operational competence if necessary. (Wolff 2007, 16)

In North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) competence expectations are defined at the end of the school entry phase (usually the end of year two) and at the end of year four. Baden-Württemberg (BW) also bases its curriculum on competence levels monitored at year two and four. Bavaria chooses the concretion at year four in the areas of communicative notions and lexicon. In respect of English in primary schools, NRW and BW consider the standard grade A 1 of the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” (CEFL) to be the basis for the development of target-language curricula and aim at standardising language certifications within Europe (European Centre for Modern Languages 2004). In the subsequent section, the author will present expert interviews which will include educational standards and possible forms of collaboration as chosen topics.

Methodology

The author uses experts’ guided interviews as a method of qualitative standardised research. Experts can be defined as persons who possess a special knowledge of technical, process and interpretation issues, which correspond to specific professional or work-related fields of action (Bogner & Menz 2005, 46). The experts’ knowledge includes mostly practical and action-oriented areas of knowledge of which there is little published information available (Bogner & Menz 2005, 46f.).

The author reviewed curriculum modifications undertaken in three German federal states with experts experienced in the field. Additionally, the author addresses whether collaboration is a real possibility and whether country- or Europe-wide educational standards should be adopted. Table 2 introduces guidelines for the interview and offers an overview and details of the central questions.

Conduct of the Interviews

The material presented in this research paper is considered qualitative material. The aim of the qualitative material presented herein is to be used as an illustration and not to make any sort of empirical claim. (Helfferich 2005,152) The author uses a sampling of three individuals for the research and uses a guideline developed by the CCSS principle: Collecting of questions, checking the list of questions according to different aspects, sorting the questions with regard to content, and subsuming the individual aspects. This model helps to assure the basic principles of openness and at the same time provides a necessary structure. (Helfferich 2005,161ff.; translation of the CCSS principle by author)

In each example, the author picked experts who worked on the curriculum modifications. The author's choice of expert was dependent upon different circumstances in different federal states. For example, in North Rhine-Westphalia, one expert handled the modification for hearing-impaired pupils as part of a joint working group. This working group consisted of experts for all special needs categories. In Baden-Württemberg, one expert was chosen on the basis of her cooperation in the state-wide working group and because she had published an article on the subject. The third expert was one of a two-person Bavarian work team.

Through an introductory letter explaining the framework and the content of the thesis, the author asked the experts to participate in an interview. The author made subsequent contacts with the experts either via telephone, e-mail or in person. The author transcribed the average one-hour long interviews afterwards. The transcriptions are part of the original thesis in German (Royle 2008).

Table 2: Guidelines for the interview

Part	Central question	Check list	Question of detail
I	Theory	Organising and planning aspects	Have goals for the modification been defined explicitly?
	Which focus points were defined for the modification?	Consideration of language learning groups	Were all language learning groups included in theory and in practice?
		Research results Work experience	Which research results and work experiences were considered?
		Other modifications	Were other modifications e.g. any from other federal states or countries incorporated?
		Result	Were the focus points included in the modification?
II	Practice	Difficulties with the implementation Positive feedback	Which difficulties or positive feedback occurred during the process of implementation?
	What experiences emerged during the implementation?	Documentation	In what way or form were they recorded?
		Evaluation	What form of evaluation has taken place? Is an evaluation intended?
		Changes and amendments	In what form were the changes included?
III	Collaboration	Possibility of exchange or collaboration	Would it be feasible for a common German or European team to collaborate?
	Has an exchange or any collaboration with another project group from a different federal state or a European country taken place?	Advantages, disadvantages or difficulties	What were the possible advantages or disadvantages?
		Educational standards (according to the standards in Mathematics, German) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFL)	Would the implementation of nationwide educational standards for English at schools for hearing impaired be feasible, e.g. on the basis of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages?

Results

The following comments refer to Table 3 which constitutes an appendix to this report. Table 3 compares modifications in North Rhine-Westphalia, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria.

Curriculum modification contents

The three curriculum modifications were targeted on the adaptation of the regular English primary school curriculum specifically to the needs of hearing-impaired children. All three revealed a number of similarities in lesson planning and organisation.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the focus lies on planning and teaching hearing-impaired students. However, the methods could be used for teaching students with learning disabilities as well. The children's experience in understanding the English language is first and foremost, and thus the daily English lessons are tailored to a shorter time frame, 15 to 25 minutes, to match the reduced concentration span of hearing-impaired children. (Landesamt für Schule Nordrhein-Westfalen (LfS NRW) 2003, 4)

In Baden-Württemberg, the student's acquisition of the mother tongue is a leading thought. This includes, "...an active and communicative process with competent communication partners...in a situative context..." (Arbeitskreis Baden-Württemberg (AK BW) 2007, 5, translation by author). The process aims at building up a phonological awareness while using features from the auditory language acquisition. In order to avoid a mixture of mother tongue and English, the teachers in Baden-Württemberg specifically emphasise a separation of the English lesson from the rest of the classes.

The English curriculum in Bavaria starts with a particular focus on the basic principles of teaching hearing-impaired children and specifies that the students practise "... speaking face-to-face as well as techniques to increase auditory attention, composition of anticipatory models, emphasizing prosodic features of the language, action-oriented contact with language, and the experience of the communication value of the language." (Kultusministerium Bayern (KM Bayern) 2006, 5, translation by author) Additionally, the teachers introduce and train using characteristic learning techniques such as, "...the use of mime and gestures as an aid to understanding or the development of associated complements which the student should acquire while under instruction." (KM Bayern 2006, 5, translation by author)

Besides the modification in North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria, which included auditory-guided language groups and excluded children who were signing from the curriculum, the modification in Baden-Württemberg considered all language-learning groups in early English learning. No modification committees incorporated research results about foreign language-learning by hearing-impaired children. The committees did consult published literature regarding the acquisition of a foreign language in primary school as well as literature about the acquisition of language by hearing-impaired children. The committees also introduced examples of the committee members' own practical experience.

In North Rhine-Westphalia the interviewee stated that they based their work on the published literature of Professor Piepho (1996) and Werner Bleyhl (2000, 2002) (Royle 2008, p. 77ff.). In Baden-Württemberg, the teachers implemented a similar approach after consulting comparable literature. Bavaria, however, chose to utilise general information on planning and organising English in primary schools. Only North Rhine-Westphalia included curriculum modifications from other federal states (Hamburg and Baden-Württemberg).

Practical experiences

Hearing-impaired students experienced positive as well as negative effects when the federal states incorporated the curriculum modifications. Overall, the hearing-impaired children showed enjoyment and enthusiasm while learning a foreign language. Furthermore, the students' increased English language knowledge had the added benefit of transferring some general knowledge of the world as well as language awareness.

The Baden-Württemberg expert stated furthermore the particular options for hearing-impaired children while learning English as all children start at the same level (Royle 2008, 85). She underlines the major motivation to communicate and learn contents in another language as well as acquiring knowledge of the world as an important feature.

The expert mentioned a boy with severe difficulties in learning the German language. Nevertheless, he was able to demonstrate the different use of plural in the German language, e.g. "ein Auto – zwei Autos", but "ein Kind – zwei Kinder", and compared it with the composition of plural in English. He stated: "English good. Always "s"." (Royle 2008, 86, translation by author) He then displayed the phoneme sign of the /s/. Thus, while reflecting about the German language, he managed a comparison with English at the same time.

The member of the work group explained further: "There are children in the first year of their schooling – and I experienced this many times – who do not know that the English language exists. Once I had a discussion with a small boy while we covered the topic "fruits". I said: "It's an apple." He said: "No, Apfel!" And this discussion continued for weeks. I told him that it is "an apple" in England. At one point he came to me during the English lesson and said: "Apple!" And when we were in the German lesson he said: "Apfel!" He found out that this new language has a totally different language code and that there is more than one language code in the world." (Royle 2008, 86, translation by author)

Hearing-impaired children revealed a particularly slower learning progress. Children encountered sporadic difficulties in developing language awareness. Some children had problems establishing an understanding of language and reflecting about language as well as showing a limited ability of learning new words. (Royle 2008, 86)

Evaluation and amendments

None of the three federal states has undertaken an official evaluation. They incorporated amendments to different extents. Yet, none of the three are planning any further amendments in the near future.

Exchange and collaboration

The experts who were interviewed showed interest in a nation- or Europe-wide exchange of information and experience despite lacking practical experience in this field. North Rhine-Westphalia regularly organises a symposium. The experts do fear that organisational difficulties will prove to be a barrier to national or international collaboration.

Educational standards

North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg have already introduced educational standards for English at primary level. The experts emphasise that educational standards for hearing-impaired children have to be feasible or must be adapted e.g. provide additional time to compensate for disadvantage. The states do not consider that the educational standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFL) are realistic objectives for hearing-impaired children. The expert from North Rhine-Westphalia commented on the CEFL standards: "I consider the level that was chosen as rather high. If the educational standards had to be used as a set target modifications would be necessary. ... Our children have special educational needs in hearing and communication. It is rather obvious that we cannot reach the goals which are quoted there." (Royle 2008, p. 81; translation by author)

Discussion

The results show that the curriculum modifications provide teachers with support when planning and organising English lessons that can foster interest in another culture. Nevertheless, there are hearing-impaired children who cannot benefit from the course, depending on the extent of their hearing loss. The states are not sufficiently taking into account those students' unique conditions.

This situation applies to both forms of schooling; the hearing impaired support centres as well as a form of integration schooling. As hearing-impaired students usually follow the same curricular programme as their hearing fellow pupils, amendments and modifications for the early learning of English must include integrated settings as well. Achieving successful integration requires a psychologically felt inclusion as well as an integration based on the motivation to achieve. This presumes a provision for communicational needs. The Vienna pilot school "Waldschule" offers tuition in oral and sign language for hearing and hearing-impaired children and takes the communication situation in a regular primary school one step further towards inclusion and therefore towards successful motivation to achieve (Kramreiter 2008, 131ff.).

In North Rhine-Westphalia, deaf children and hearing-impaired children with multiple disabilities whose communication is based on sign language receive lessons in German Sign Language instead of English. In Bavaria children who communicate with sign language are taught the American sign language. The modifications in Baden-Württemberg supply hearing-impaired children who show different communicational needs with the same curriculum. This raises the question of children's rights to an equal education including their chosen means of communication to assure equal future options for personal and employment development. Ultimately, this issue does not only concern the choice of sign language or spoken language. The different learning and hearing needs of individual students have to be considered in the planning and organising of English lessons.

We must explore alternative ways of learning a foreign language for children with an auditory impairment. To base a modification for hearing-impaired children on the regular primary scheme of work, which places the focus on the ability to hear and to speak, is counterproductive.

Positive experiences with alternative learning designs have been developed at secondary and university level for students with special educational needs learning a foreign language. This has been illustrated by both, the Universal Design for Learning as well as by Ian M. Sutherland's instructional techniques with a visual emphasis. We should examine and consider these options when planning modifications of the primary curriculum. The federal German states should undertake an evaluation similar to the one that took place in the study of English in German primary schools. Such an examination must combine research in two fields: (a) the education of the hearing-impaired and (b) early foreign language learning.

Conclusion

When it comes to the introduction of Europe-wide educational standards for English at primary school within Germany, a responsible decision needs to be taken about children with a hearing loss taught in hearing impaired support centres as well as in integrated forms of schooling. The relatively small number of hearing-impaired children in German schools cannot excuse the lack of interest in their progress and development. As well as identifying how those aspiring to reach basic educational standards can best be supported, a discussion in this field must take public educational standards with various levels of difficulty into account. Children with a hearing loss must have the opportunity to develop tolerance and self-esteem through the process of learning the English language. At the same time it should

provide them with access to personalised, barrier-free learning, developing their knowledge of the elements of language and communication which they will use in their future school career, employment and personal life.

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