

Sign Language Teaching and Learning

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What Can Learning Diaries Tell us about Sign Language Learning?

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Learning diaries have long been used as a research tool in the study of second language acquisition (SLA). However, since Applied Sign Linguistics is a young field, typical SLA research methods have not yet been fully implemented onto its study. Thus, this paper presents an investigation on sign language learning through sign language learners' diaries. We worked with two different groups of students at a university level: 56 undergraduate learners studying Translation and Interpreting and 42 school teachers taking graduate courses on Education. Both groups participated in the course "Introduction to Spanish Sign Language", and had a hearing teacher for the theoretical aspects of sign languages as well as a deaf instructor for the practical teaching of the *Lengua de Signos Española*. Approximately 80% of the students completed a learning diary. They were asked to write a weekly entry in the diary containing their thoughts and reflections about their learning experience. After the course, we selected the 15 most outstanding diaries from each group for a qualitative analysis. Data revealed valuable information on the process of sign language learning in terms of expectations; misconceptions about deafness and sign languages; and difficulties and learning strategies from two different perspectives: linguistic and educational.

SOME INSIGHTS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF LEARNING DIARIES

HUMANS HAVE ALWAYS SHOWN AN INTEREST IN LEARNING LANGUAGES. HOWEVER, THE development of societies and the changes occurred during the last century have encouraged a spectacular progress in the learning and teaching of second and foreign languages. This has led to a strong increase in the number of studies on methodology, resources, assessment, etc., under the hope that the more we know about this process, the more effective we will turn it into.

In second language acquisition research, experts have usually taken into account both linguistic and sociolinguistic factors. Nevertheless, more recent investigations on the cognitive aspects of language learning have focused on learners' abilities, use of strategies, motivation and affective elements. From that point of view, it is clear that the student is our main source of information concerning how the learning takes place. Therefore, learners' diaries are a valuable observation tool to get insights into what happens in the language classroom from the learner's perspective, providing information about the course of the lesson, the most interesting activities or the focus of his/her attention, as well as the difficulties and questions that arise during the classroom time.

As a result, the study of learning diaries emerges as a qualitative method in the field of second language acquisition research. Most of the work has been carried out in the

United States, by experts analyzing their own learning process in languages such as German, Spanish, French or Portuguese (Schmidt and Frota 1986; Campbell 1996) or following their students in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom (Peck 1996). This is the case of the pioneering studies by Kathleen Bailey (1983) on classroom interaction and learning strategies through a learning journal.

The teaching and learning of sign languages has joined this branch of Applied Linguistics more recently. As a consequence, the implementation of this kind of research methods is scarcer in sign language acquisition investigations. This is the reason why we decided to use this technique in our sign language course, in order to get first-hand information about the learning process from the student's point of view. Thus, in the next pages, we will describe the specific features of our sign language courses at the University of Alicante (Spain) to focus on the learning diaries research and its outcomes.

THE TEACHING OF SPANISH SIGN LANGUAGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALICANTE

There are several universities in Spain offering courses on Spanish Sign Language (*Lengua de Signos Española*, LSE). Among them, the University of Alicante (UA), is one of the most outstanding, because of the amount and quality of the research on Sign Linguistics done. In this sense, the best example is the "Biblioteca de Signos", the first sign library in the world¹ run by a big research group on LSE lead by Dr. Ángel Herrero, Professor of Linguistics at the UA.

Our university students can take the course "Introduction to Spanish Sign Language" in two different degrees: the 'Translation and Interpreting' degree and the 'Education' degree (in Psychopedagogy). Both classes are taught by two teachers: a hearing teacher that explains the theoretical aspects of sign languages and linguistics in relation to the deaf community and culture; and a deaf instructor for the practical teaching of the *Lengua de Signos Española*². On the one hand, the 'Education' students are all in service school teachers, who not only learn LSE, but also how to deal with deaf children in primary school. This class takes one semester (45 hours). On the other hand, the 'Translation and Interpreting' students, experts in Spanish (native language), English, French or German (as a second language) and future interpreters of any of these languages, also learn LSE as well as the specific content related to sign language interpreters. This course lasts 60 hours (another semester). In addition, in this case, the deaf instructor teaches the SEA (*Sistema de Escritura Alfabética*, Herrero Blanco, 2003), a writing system for sign languages, devised by Ángel Herrero with the help of two deaf assistants (Inmaculada Cascales and Juan José Alfaro). One of the deaf assistants was the deaf teacher of the courses, so she taught the students how to write LSE with this alphabetical writing system³.

During the academic years 2007 – 2008, and 2008 – 2009, we were in charge of these two courses (Introduction to LSE for educators and for interpreters too) together

¹ <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/seccion/signos/>

² The fact that these courses are run by a hearing and a deaf teacher and not only by the deaf one is due to administrative requirements of the institution.

³ More information about the SEA available in http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portal/signos/cat_materiales1.shtml

with a deaf colleague, so we decided to carry out a small research using learning diaries in the classroom, as it is explained in the next section.

THE LEARNING DIARY IN THE SPANISH SIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

As we mentioned before, a learning diary is like a mirror that reflects what happens in the language classroom under the eyes of the learners, including their expectations, their difficulties, their thoughts etc. Therefore, it is a perfect tool to go deeply into the individual factors that we cannot observe at first glance in the language classroom, because they happen within the students' minds. These include affective, sociocultural and cognitive elements involved in the acquisition of an additional language (Díaz Martínez 1998; Hernández 2000).

Every language learning journal covers three key points (Galindo Merino 2007):

- The *account of the personal language learning experience*, through systematic and detailed descriptions of events and feelings.
- The *reflection about the learning process*, gone by questions like "What have I learnt today?", "How do I learn?", "What difficulties have I encountered?".
- The *sincerity* when providing information about the learning context and the previous language learning experience.

In general, learning diaries comprise different dimensions of the learning process, such as the physical and social environment of the learner, the classroom group, the relationship with the teacher and the partners, the attitude towards the activities and the content of the lessons, the use of the mother tongue and the target language, the treatment of errors, the student's expectations and motivations, his/her role in class, the use of learning and communication strategies, the development of language skills, and any other side of this phenomenon that the student wishes to record (Jiménez Raya 1994).

All these made us think that a learning diary would fit very well in our sign language classroom: the journal would be the best way to know, control and evaluate the students' progress in the acquisition of the theory and practice of the LSE. Thus, at the beginning of the course, the students were told that they could choose between taking a final exam or writing a learning journal⁴. The learning diary could be a Word document or an Internet blog, as long as it contained at least one page per week (it is, at least, twelve posts). The journal had to include necessarily the student's reflections on theory and practice: thoughts, difficulties, impressions or feelings about what happens in the sign language classroom. Moreover, they had to comment on news, articles or webs about the deaf culture and community and sign languages they found in the Internet. Additionally, we provided the students with a list of resources they could check to get more information for the journals.

From the 56 undergraduate learners studying Translation and Interpreting, and the 42 school teachers taking graduate courses on Education, approximately 80% chose to write the diary in the LSE classroom, with an average of 25 to 30 pages per journal. All the texts were reviewed twice by us before the final submission at the end of the

⁴ Obviously, this only applied for half of the mark, the one correspondent to the hearing teacher, because the other half consisted of a practical exam of LSE with the deaf instructor.

course. Then, we asked permission from the students to use their diaries for a small research, whose results are shown in the next pages.

ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to collect the data for our study, we decided to select the fifteen most outstanding journals from each group (it is, fifteen from the future interpreters and fifteen from the school teachers). The criteria we applied were:

- Completeness: the selected journal had to include the twelve posts.
- Depth of thoughts and reflections, in terms of the ability to relate the contents of the classroom with real world situations and to analyze deafness and its social and linguistic implications.
- Accuracy in the comments, summaries of the classes and information displayed in the journal.
- General interest of the diary (inclusion of personal experiences, for instance).
- Final grade.

After we completed the selection, we made a qualitative analysis of the thirty diaries focusing on five areas:

- Expectations and beliefs expressed in the journal.
- The process of learning a sign language.
- Difficulties encountered.
- General reflections.
- Further thoughts and implications.

We will dwell on each of these five points.

First of all, concerning the students' *expectations and beliefs*, 100% of the diaries start describing the learners' thoughts the first day of class, when the deaf teacher told them she was going to teach them LSE without the help of a sign language interpreter. All students were afraid of not being able to follow a class entirely in sign language and were worried about the way to communicate with the teacher. As the days went by, all of them went back to this thought to tell that it had been easier than they expected.

Another recurrent topic is the total lack of knowledge and familiarity with the deaf community that the learners expressed. They "confess" they "don't have a clue" about the deaf world. They hardly know deaf people and, at the same time, show certain misconceptions about sign languages, especially the idea that sign language is a universal language. Finally, those who have never met a deaf person refer to their personal story and experience; for example, those school teachers who have deaf pupils.

Secondly, all diaries give details about the *sign language process*, which begins with the awareness of the deaf reality from the part of the students. In this sense, a very important step for them is the choice of their personal sign, as they tell in their journals. This makes them feel a little bit more integrated into the deaf community. Regarding this, a very strange and pleasant trend that most students show is that they teach LSE to their family and friends as they learn the language. Several school teachers

narrate how they teach LSE to the kids and the sign language becomes part of their school lessons. Moreover, a considerable number of learners outline the benefits of reviewing and repeating the content of the lesson at the beginning and the end of each practical class.

Thirdly, the diaries clearly reflect the *students' difficulties* when learning LSE. These come, in first place, from dactylology and the problems with the accurate fingerspelling of the LSE. Together with this, another obstacle is arbitrary signs, not as easy to remember as iconic ones. This distinction keeps students thinking about the structure of sign languages and the nature and origin of signs. Furthermore, word order in LSE is a strong point in the journals. Sentences follow a different sign order in comparison with oral Spanish and experience demonstrates that one cannot always trust the oral language to combine signs, according to the students' statements. Last difficulty is maybe the most important: 'how can we write signs?' The deaf instructor usually tells to students not to write anything during class time because they have to focus their attention on her, so that they can learn the signs. Students feel the need to make a note of any sign in their notebooks, so as not to forget them, but find this almost impossible: a picture? A sign description? This frustration appears in nearly every diary, and gets a partial answer through the learning of the SEA⁵.

Fourthly, journals include the *students' reflections* on the different sides of sign languages and the deaf community, especially in terms of social claims about the recognition of the deaf culture and the overcoming of their marginalization and the communication barriers. In this sense, Translation and Interpreting learners emphasize the value of the interpreters and their role in present-day world, as well as all the advantages of the SEA as a writing system for sign languages. On the other hand, Education students often think about the education and resources of deaf children in primary school and the best ways for them to access the lesson content and materials, and their integration with hearing children.

Finally, our qualitative analysis takes into account *further thoughts and implications* of the course in LSE for the students. For example, the value of the new technologies for the deaf community and the teaching of sign languages, especially the sign library "Biblioteca de Signos". Moreover, all journal writers show their will to keep on learning more LSE to become proficient users of the Spanish Sign Language. Specifically, some Translators and Interpreters express their wish to work as sign language interpreters, while school teachers claim that their colleagues should learn LSE to be able to deal with deaf children in primary education.

Our study of the learning journals, thus, has revealed the thoughts and feelings of thirty learners of LSE from the University of Alicante. Although we can predict their difficulties in fingerspelling or in sign language word order, their pages give a glimpse of a deep assimilation process involved when learning a sign language and meeting the deaf world.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF SIGN LANGUAGES

After presenting our qualitative analysis of the thirty journals, it is time to go back to our research question: What can learning diaries tell us about sign language learning?

⁵ Only the Translation and Interpreting students were taught the SEA because their course lasted fifteen more hours than the Education one.

First, regarding the learners' expectations and beliefs, journals show how students change their misconceptions and previous beliefs about sign languages and the deaf culture through their learning of the second language, getting, as a consequence, a more realistic view of the deaf community.

Second, according to students' statements, the process of sign language learning seems to go outside the classroom; they teach the language to family, friends and pupils. The difficulties arising during the acquisition of this language come mainly from the difference between visual and oral languages.

Third, concerning all the reflections and further thoughts found in the learning diaries, students express an increasing social consciousness towards deaf people, in two ways: stressing the role of sign language interpreters in their integration and demanding the need for school teachers to learn sign languages.

In short, sign language learning not only implies learning an additional language; it involves a social dimension of language and culture that students clearly include in their journals. Along with the learning of dactylology and signs, a deep approach into the deaf community and their culture comes, as learners become aware of both a new linguistic and a social perspective of this world.

Willard Madsen wisely said that "you have to be deaf to understand". Our study highlights that learning a sign language is the best way for hearing people to understand the lives and feelings of the deaf community.

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