Assessing D/deaf students as visual L2 learners: from theory to practice.

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It is an international phenomenon that D/deaf people approach language acquisition and learning differently from their non-deaf peers and that a large majority of them experience literacy problems regardless of the language modality they use (speech with residual hearing or sign language). A variety of independent factors play a role in affecting the quality of language acquisition, including the level of hearing loss, age of first language acquisition, local educational policies, quality of access to education and of education itself.

Given these factors, each D/deaf person will have different language competences and learning needs than others. Despite the differing competencies and learning needs, two things remain constant among Deaf signers and oral deaf people (henceforth, D/deaf):

1. Language learning is strongly influenced by the way in which language is conveyed through the visual channel and the amount of access made possible to the learner.

2. Most D/deaf learners function similarly to hearing second language (L2) learners in both the process of learning the new language and the limited target language input. While efforts have been made to adapt L2 teaching methodologies for D/deaf learners, defining D/deaf people as L1 or L2 learners remains a controversial issue within Deaf Education regarding the best approach towards their language education as well as the establishment of a common educational policy.

The adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for the language education and evaluation of the D/deaf could resolve the existing conflict by providing both a guideline for the scales of development of the writing skills of D/deaf learners and a strong foundation from which to develop more comprehensive and adequate language evaluation tools based on the language usages and learning needs of the D/deaf. Despite the existing limitations of the CEFR as a comprehensive evaluation tool, work within the Italian-funded FIRB-VISEL project (2009-2012) has proven the worth of an adaptation of its descriptors for D/deaf students, such as conveying auditory contents (spoken language competences) into written text (written language competence). However, questions regarding the preservation of the linguistic aspects of each modality (written vs. spoken) quickly emerged.

The main goals of this paper are to examine existing language evaluation tools for D/deaf learners and to outline the challenge of creating an accurate assessment tool that looks at learner competence rather than physiological abilities. In this direction, we will provide an examination of L2 research as it pertains to all D/deaf language learners focusing on existing theories and approaches including the Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1999), error analysis (Corder et al., 1967) and interlanguage (as presented by Berent, 1988). We will present adaptation efforts for a CEFR for D/deaf language users and ways in which linguistic aspects of the spoken language can be preserved when represented by the written language. An outline of effective practices for carrying out the adaptation of existing evaluation tools will conclude our dissertation, aiming for a better understanding of written language development in D/deaf people.