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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN THE ENVIRONMENT OF PEOPLE WITH HEARING DISABILITIES – A RESEARCH DESIGN

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Abstract

This article presents a project of participatory action research which is carried out with the participation of deaf and hearing sign language teachers. The subject of the study is intercultural learning of the Polish sign language as a foreign language by the hearing. The aim of the research is to find the answer to the question how to teach the Polish sign language as a foreign language taking into consideration the assumptions of intercultural education. The authoress of the study accepts the assumption that the deaf constitute a separate community and at the same time a linguistic and cultural minority which comprises the ’Deaf Culture’ being different from the hearing majority. Therefore, the research will concern intercultural education at foreign (sign) language lessons. It will be carried out in accordance with the action research paradigm with sign language teachers as co-researchers of the educational situation which they are part of.

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a research design of the studies conducted within the frameworks of a doctoral dissertation prepared by me at the Faculty of Education of the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, and bearing the following title: Mutual learning of the deaf and the hearing in an educational project. Selected aspects of research in action. The supervisor of this dissertation is the professor of the University of Lower Silesia, Bogusława Dorota Gołębniak, habilitated Ph.D. This project has been awarded financial means from the grants for supporting activity consisting in conducting scientific research or development work, and also tasks connected with them, serving the purpose of the development of young scientists and participants in doctoral studies at the Faculty of Education of the University of Lower Silesia in the year 2014.

In my research work, I adopt the presumption that the environment of the deaf constitutes a linguistic-cultural minority, and, consequently, that it forms its own separate culture, different than the culture of the majority of the hearing, and, for that very reason, in the process of teaching a sign language to the hearing, it will be indispensable to apply the approach of inter-cultural education.

THE OBJECTIVE OF RESEARCH AND SCIENTIFIC PROBLEM

The results of the conducted research will make it possible to provide the answer to the following question: in what manner ought one to educate within the scope of the Polish sign language as a foreign one, taking under consideration the presumptions of inter-cultural education?

The objective of the research is to develop the cultural model of education in a sign language as a foreign one by means of the building of a didactic micro-system – as the entire scope of the principles, and also contents, methods and training (and learning) aids, forming an internally-coherent structure, and serving the purpose of meeting socially-accepted objectives of education, and also indicating the optimum solutions making it possible to accomplish the presumed results of education. Teaching and learning a sign language as a
foreign one is considered in the cultural context in order to present the natural environment of development and co-existence with the different elements of culture.

THEORETICAL PRESUMPTIONS

The crucial issues in this dissertation are: a sign language as the fundamental factor of cultural-social equipment, cultural identity and the significance of a language in the building of the latter; the idea of education for frontier and cultural frontier in the contents-cultural meaning, teaching a sign language as an invitation to participate in an inter-cultural dialogue. They will be further elaborated upon, and provided with a rationale, in the theory of Lev S. Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Lev S. Vygotsky is the author of the historical-cultural theory of the development of psyche, in which he presents the regularities of the development of human psyche in the process of material mediation (with the application of the tools of the production of tangible goods) and the social one (with the application of means of communication between people, and that means, among others, a language). Mental functions such as perception, attention, memory and thinking, are formed in the course of collaboration with other people by means of ‘an external’ contact with reality (experiences and verbal contact), and subsequently the ‘internalization’ of reality, forming the complicated structure of the awareness of an individual (Gołębniak, Teusz, 1999). An important role in this process is that played by the word [a sign of a sign language in the Polish sign language – A.I.], which is the form of reflecting reality and the experience of humanity, which are assimilated by a human being in the course of social contacts. By its meaning, it mediates the manner of reflecting the world. Mastering the meanings of words [signs – A.I.] provides the possibility of the projection of the qualities of items, but, as well, hidden connections and regularities taking place between them. Thanks to learning and making oneself acquainted with a language, universal experience perpetuated in it is reflected, and, by means of that, the awareness of a child or of an adult individual is shaped. In accordance with the opinion of Vygotsky, this is the form of mental development specific for a human being. Thanks to teaching, taking place in the form of social associations, the development of psyche is possible. This teaching takes place by means of performing tasks of assisting character in the sphere of the nearest development of a child (Vygotsky, 1960).

A human being develops thanks to so-called spontaneous notions formed in the course of the acquisition of experience, and also thanks to so-called non-spontaneous notions, being ready notions taken from other individuals, for instance, from teachers, and, in the further course, included into one’s own experience, and also into their system of knowledge (Gołębniak, Teusz, 1999). The development of thinking and notions progresses under the influence exerted upon them by systematic teaching in school. Those notions are formed in the process of the acquisition of social experience perpetuated in a language (Vygotsky, 1960).

In turn, in the conception developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, a language is an incessant becoming in infinitely numerous individual utterances. His reflection devoted to a language indicates the existence of the continuum between internal contents and the external expression of it, justifying that the internal reality of psyche is the reality of a sign, and that there is no psyche beyond it. Therefore, the equipment of psyche has clearly social origins. A silent speech (an internal one) may be established thanks to the interiorization of a loud speech (being the collection of social signs). Bachtin, similarly to Vygotsky, adheres to the opinion that signs, which initially were the means of communication, in the further course become the means of exerting by an individual influence upon themselves. Therefore, Bachtin indicates the existence relationship between psyche and culture, in which the replacement of
external signs into the internal ones (and vice versa) takes place. Psyche and culture constitute two poles of this same continuum, and the road between them is the road from the language of an individual human being to the language of culture, and vice versa.

In his papers, Mikhail Bakhtin presents his own understanding of the world of culture and contrasts it with the world of life. In accordance with the opinion of the author, the world of culture constitutes the sphere of sense and contents of our deeds, the world of theoretical constructions possessing their own autonomy and being objectively real. This is composed, among others, of science, ethical and aesthetical doctrine, philosophical systems etc. The world of life, in turn, is the one in which we live and die. This world is the fruit of our deeds. Bachtin firmly rejects the possibility of claiming that one of the worlds is tantamount to another, and also that of reducing one world to the other one. Entire culture becomes integrated in the context of the life of each and every single individual human being. Each and every value of culture which remains universal (for instance, truth, good and beauty) becomes significant no sooner than when it is placed in an individual context. All the values of the world of culture, and of life, are relevant to the fundamental moments of building the world of deed, which are: me-for-myself, others-for-me and me-for-others. For research work, it will be of particular significance to present the relationships between me and other. Becoming aware of one’s own ego may take place solely in relation to another, by means of other and with the assistance of other. No other human being has their own sovereign territory inside them. Even looking into oneself, they still see other there. They are always on the border. For each and every human being, other is needed to become able to acquire their own identity (Żyłko, 1994)

The theories quoted above describe the connections between the crucial notions of the planned dissertation such as: language (the Polish sign language), culture (culture of the deaf), interculturality (including inter-cultural education), and they provide foundations for the performance of appropriate theoretical analyses.

THE METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RESEARCH

The strategy of research

The research being designed represents the direction of qualitative research. The rationale for making such a choice is the manner of defining qualitative research proposed by Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln. Qualitative researchers investigate matters in the natural environment of theirs, making attempts to discover their sense, or to interpret phenomena with the application of notions which are applied by studied human beings. They place emphasis upon a close contact between a researcher and a studied matter, upon situational limitations exerting influence upon research, and they emphasize the natural entanglement of the research in the world of values (Denzin and Lincoln, 2010). Qualitative researchers are morally obliged to side with the underprivileged or with minorities (Flick, 2012).

The selected paradigm serving the purpose of describing the applied approaches and methods of collecting and analyzing empirical material is the paradigm of participatory action research (PAR). In the literature, it is referred to as well as participatory, interventional and involved research. The objective of this process of research is to trigger a demanded social change (the practical dimension of them is more significant than the theoretical-cognitive one), and also to create a connection between intellectual knowledge and personal and social actions so as to make this research be directly contributing to the fortune of individuals and communities the part of which they are. A major feature of research is the equality of relationships between a researcher and studied individuals. Studied individuals become equal (in terms of their rights) participants of research, rather than solely the subject-matter of its. That takes place thanks to a stronger connection between a researcher and a
studied community (strong identification), and also including the members of this community in the course of the process of research. The essence of research is to make it possible for studied human beings, being, simultaneously, an underprivileged, or even marginalized, group, to speak. Acquired knowledge serves the purpose of making changes and releasing human activity (Urbaniak-Zając and Kos, 2013). A researcher assumes functions which consist in serving studied individuals, acting in the interest of the latter. In the process of research, discriminated individuals define their problems, indicate the remedial means, and also design research which makes it possible to attain the formulated objectives. Not only does research understood in such a manner generate knowledge, but, as well as that, it mobilizes to take action, educates and develops consciousness. Perceiving themselves in the role of a researcher, studied individuals regain power over knowledge (Babbie, 2013, pp. 337-338). That research is taken advantage of in the analyses of relationships between groups, including, also, majorities and minorities (vide: Lewin 2010).

Activities are conducted in accordance with the second-person strategy of research practice, which means that a researcher, together with studied individuals, forms a group, bound by informal relationship, and looking for the manners of overcoming existing difficulties and barriers. In this manner, there occurs enriching own first-person research of each and every of the members of a study group. All the individuals involved in research are co-researchers and co-subjects participating in a studied activity (Reason and Torbert, 2010, Gołębiak, 2013)

The purpose of this is to make changes not only in the theory and practice of the individuals involved in research, but, as well in the individuals that may be assisted by these changes in shaping the conditions of work and of life (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2012). Consultations relevant to education in a sign language will be undertaken by a group of individuals possessing experience and/or knowledge within this scope, nevertheless, the resulting presumptions will be possible to be applied by other individuals as well (the deaf and the hearing) participating in the education of this type, and they may even make it possible to extend the results of research onto improvement in the quality of the life of the deaf community.

The research has been divided into two stages. At the first stage, upon the basis of the analysis of interviews conducted with organizers, lecturers and participants in the processes of education relevant to their own experiences within this scope of, analyses of the teaching materials taken advantage of by them, and also observations of lessons of teaching a sign language the state of knowledge about the didactic system of education within the scope of a sign language is determined. The knowledge acquired in this manner and relevant to the current situation in the area of education a sign language as a foreign one will make it possible to go on to the second stage of the research – evaluative (assessing) part consisting in sharing the acquired knowledge and experience by means of the initiative of organizing meetings, conferences or seminars. The presence of the deaf teachers of a sign language is very significant in them, because it is a natural and first language of this group, and it constitutes a significant factor of the building of the social identity of individuals suffering from the disability of the organ of hearing, and also the culture of them. The work is conducted by means of discussion in groups on the subject of collected and processed data in the earlier part of research, and also preparing the programme of activities. In the course of conducting the process of education, a ‘dense’ description (presenting the entire gamut of events, and also emphasizing the connections between activities and human intentions and strategies of activities) is drawn up (Gibbs, 2011).
Selection of a sample

In the research, the theoretical selection of a sample is conducted, which means that research categories are determined upon the basis of the significance of them for the theoretical background. This sample – which is significant from the theoretical point of view – provides the possibility of extending the explanations being developed, and testing theories. The selection of cases is made in the aspect of theory taking under consideration the types and instances significant for a broader context. Sampling is commenced with determining the environment being the subject-matter of research, and, in the further course, the elements being the principal subject-matter of the interest of a researcher, which provide the possibility of the creation of further generalizations, are indicated.

In the course of constructing the corpus of materials and documents for analyses in the form of a peculiar archive of documents such as the contents of interviews conducted with the teachers of a sign language are included, and also the materials prepared by them for learning this language in the written, graphical or visual form, among others: programmes, scenarios of classes, registers, training (teaching) aids in the form of texts and graphical materials for students, audiovisual presentations, materials posted in the Internet, video materials in the form of recordings of classes depicting the learning of a sign language. In the course of conducted research, the corpus undergoes insignificant modifications and selections, together with the ongoing analysis of the obtained results.

The selection of individuals for the purpose of research consists in the choice of individual human beings having no fewer than several years of experience in teaching a sign language in different forms of school education and extra-curricular one (the teachers, lecturers, teachers and educators of a sign language). The research is participated both by the hearing and the deaf, females and males, such as have come of age, irrespective of the level of education. A significant criterion will be possessing experience in teaching the Polish sign language, even though those individuals may simultaneously possess experience in teaching the language-sign system. Those are individuals temporarily or permanently employed as, or, alternatively, working as teachers in the different types of educational institutions within the scope of a sign language (higher schools, post-secondary schools, the institutions of life-long education, associations, foundations, private business organizations etc.).

Methods of collecting data

In conducted research, the triangulation of the mutually complementing techniques of collecting data, consisting in combining in the course of work on the area the analysis of documents, interviews and also observations, is applied.

Analysis of documents – as research into registered human messages, for instance, books, websites, letters, speeches etc. (Babbie, 2013). In the research being designed, the objective of it is to explore and describe the current state of the knowledge of the teachers of a sign language relevant to education within the scope of it. For the purpose of the analysis, both formal documents such as the curricula of education of selected institutions, syllabi, registers, school textbooks, training (teaching) aids in the written, graphical and video form, and also informal such as multimedia presentations in use, and the original notes of teachers, are applied.

An ethnographical interview – the major features of which are the knowledge of interlocutors, spontaneity of conducting the interview (in the course of participating observation), concentration upon the determined subject, and repeatability, making it possible to explain doubts (Jemielniak, 2012b).

Interviews with the teachers of a sign language, and also with their students, are conducted a sign language. The interviews are of open character. The objective which they
serve is to develop the typology of experiences connected with teaching and learning a sign language. The interviews are conducted in the language selected by a studied individual (namely, a sign language or the Polish language), and recorded on a video data carrier or audio.

Ethnographic observation – in which all the senses of a researcher are taken advantage of in order to experience a studied reality, simultaneously rejecting all and any initial presumptions and categories (Jemielniak, 2012a). In the initial phase, it helps to achieve the clarity of vision in terms of the issues significant from the point of view of research connected with education within the scope of a sign language and direct work on the original design. It is the task of a researcher is to observe and make notes in the course of the classes conducted by the teachers and university teachers of a sign language, and also the conference being organized (the evaluative part of the project).

The methods of the analysis of data

The contents contained in interviews and video materials are not recorded with the application of transcription. A particular difficulty in the process of transcription results from the fact that it is not only the procedure of transcribing from an audio data carrier (sound) on a text data carrier, but is connected with (in the case of the teacher of the deaf) with the need to translate, or, to be more precise, interpret a text from the Polish sign language into the Polish language. A sign language is a visual-spatial language, and it possesses its written variety in the form of Sign Writing, but this manner of notation is not currently enjoying much popularity in Poland, and it would not meet the needs of the analysis of results and popularizing them. Rendering a message is burdened with the flaw of the biased work of a translator, and is levelled by means of working on source data being analysed with the application of a computer program for the analysis of qualitative data – Nvivo10. The qualitative analysis of contents is to consist in ordering the collected raw research material, coding contents, and, in the further course, in the creation of typologies and models. The result of that is the creation of new recapitulations, specifications and sketches. The objective of it is to reveal objectively the features of a text, and to look for regularity in it.

Ethical matters

Ethical matters in conducted research in the activity are relevant to respecting individual dignity, and human rights resulting from it, maintaining autonomy, privacy and refraining from discriminating the parties to the process of research which are constituted both by the organizers of, and participants in, a research situation. This process requires that all the activists have knowledge and express consent, commencing with a conscious decision relevant to participation in research, exercising control over the course of research and actively using right to speak in the course of designing and assessing the change taking place, until the moment of expressing approval or the lack of it in terms of disseminating them and publishing the results of research. Studied individuals have the right to ask questions, express opinions, doubts and ideas, at each and every stage of the process of research, providing foundation for democratic collaboration in performing planned change. They have, as well, right to confirm their consent to subject their own activities to an intentional change, observing the latter, and also have it described and analysed by a researcher, and, in the phase of the preparation of a report from research to respect privacy and safety in making their own image publicly known with the application of the written word, illustrations, photographs or films, and also the products of own work (which, in the case of registering contents in a sign language, may be found to be indispensable).
As one of the objectives of research in action is making a change and the emancipating of a certain community, and, consistently, the common interest of a researcher and studied individuals, it is significant that a researcher have sound knowledge of the specific character of the culture, traditions, patterns, values and language of the communities being studied (Czerpaniak-Walczak, 2013). In the research being designed the knowledge of the issues connected with the culture of the deaf, and also ability to use the Polish sign language by a researcher is confirmed by numerous certificates, participation in numerous courses, postgraduate studies and scientific conferences, which reduces to minimum the risk of the patronizing treatment of acting individuals.

Research is conducted with making all efforts and exercising due diligence for the ethical side of the research. All studied individuals are informed about participation in the research, and requested to express their consent to it. As well, information about the possibility of refusing to participate in research is provided. In the part of research taking advantage of method of participating observation, studied individuals are informed about the presence and the role of researcher. All individuals (both teachers and students) are guaranteed complete confidentiality and anonymous character of the data provided by them. At the stage of the analysis of the collected data, no conscious omissions and manipulations take place.

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