

Chapter 7

RESEARCHING DEAFNESS IN SCHOOLS The SMILE Project

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Introduction

The project SMILE – *Sign, Meaning & Identification: (deaf) Learners in Europe* – was a Comenius Multilateral Project that intended to improve the initial and in-service training of teachers and other personnel working in the school education sector through the exchange of experiences regarding the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. The project was centred in the education of deaf students and the construction of a cultural identity as a part of European citizenship, building on the idea that to understand our role as European citizens we must discuss the relationships between hearing and deaf cultures and the role of national sign languages. We assume that empowering learners and teachers to understand the visible signs, attached meanings and personal identification processes of the deaf towards what Europe is or should be, is very

important in the training of sign language teachers, interpreters and special needs educators.

The project's partnership involved three teacher-training institutions from Portugal, Spain and Turkey and also three schools from the same countries. The participating students from each university participated in a research implemented in the schools – both at home and abroad. The teacher trainers assisted the students with their expertise, preparing and guiding them through the research project while the school teachers guided them during their field work. The goal was to identify the main features of deaf culture in relation to hearing culture (both national and European), based on the perceptions of deaf and hearing pupils and students, paying a special attention to the role of sign language within these cultural identification processes.

This chapter will describe the project, including the rationale, goals and objectives and its implementation during the project's lifetime of two years. The work produced by the students will be used to illustrate the achievements of the project.

The SMILE proposal

The SMILE project intended to address two emerging needs. The first one reflected the challenges within a Europe of equal opportunities for all, in which inclusion of all people, how different they might be, is a matter of human rights. The second need stresses new educational challenges for Europe conceived as a knowledge-based society.

The debate of Europe continues to determine, especially after the formulated “Lisbon Strategy”, the agenda's of governments, parliaments and political parties, but also of teacher training institutes and schools. Europe has become a condition of life, in which we all have to play a role as European citizens. This goes also for the deaf Europeans who, according to the different representative organisations (European Union for the Deaf, World Federation of the Deaf and the national associations) have the same equal

rights. Europe in this respect is also the discussion about the relationship between hearing and deaf culture, bicultural identity and the role of national sign languages. Bringing deaf and hearing pupils in schools together with student teachers and sign language trainee interpreters stimulates and empowers all to understand the visible signs, attached meanings and personal identification processes which constitute their perception of what Europe is or should be. This helps them to cope with the growing diversity and to communicate across diversity in Europe.

In this multicultural or diverse Europe, the discussion about Lifelong Learning and teacher's competences show that good teaching needs good teachers who are able to research the educational contexts in which they work and in which increasingly pupils become involved as independent and critical learners. The project worked on solutions for the inclusion of research methodologies and intercultural practices at home and abroad within the curricula of teacher training with the goal of knowing what it means to research educational contexts and especially schools in which deaf pupils are included.

Aims and objectives of the project

The project was based on a training program aimed to identify the main features of deaf culture in relation to hearing culture (national and European) based on perceptions of deaf and hearing pupils and students, and also the role of sign language within cultural identification processes.

To implement this training, we developed a framework for a study program for students researching deaf culture in schools at home including an intercultural dialogue about the research abroad in schools and universities. In addition, a manual for researching deaf culture inside schools and digital workspaces for the communities of research students, i.e. communities of learning and practice (CLP's) were developed as well.

Partnership and Participants

The partnership includes six partners from Portugal, Spain and Turkey: three higher education institutions in the area of education, such as teacher training in special needs education and training in the field of sign languages; and three schools with diverse characteristics but having in common the education of deaf students.

Portugal

The School of Education at the Porto Polytechnic¹ and the Nasoni Middle School are the two Portuguese institutions involved in the SMILE project. The School of Education develops training activities for teachers and education technicians in the areas of education through initial, continuous, in- service, specialised and post-graduate courses, research and projects. The school is divided in several departments, among them Arts and Human Kinetics, Education Sciences, Human and Social Sciences, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Special Education, Supervision, Educative Technologies. In total 1400 students are following training within these departments, mentored and tutored by around 100 teachers and other staff. The special education department offers a three-year sign language interpreter program for approximately 150 students.

The Nasoni Middle School provides education in the 2nd and 3rd cycle of basic education, also called lower secondary education for children in the age of 9/10 till 15. Approximately 500 children are enrolled in this school, mentored by 73 teachers and 18 sign language interpreters and counsellors.

¹ The original names of all the participating institutions are listed at the copyright page.

Spain

The two Spanish institutions are the School of Education at the University of Cordoba and the Colón School. The University of Cordoba is a mid-sized university with 21,000 students, more than 1200 teaching faculty and 700 employees. The fields of study offered at the University of Cordoba range from the Humanities, Legal and Social Sciences to the Health Sciences and Science and Technology. The department of education entails specialists in the field of special needs education and the education of the hearing impaired. They train students to become counsellors and SEN teachers in primary and secondary schools.

In the Colón school 416 students are educated of which 122 in the pre-primary department and 294 in the primary department. The number of teachers and staff working at the Colón School is 31. The school has been a reference point in Córdoba (in the South of Spain) for many years in terms of educating deaf children. Over the last years, up to 23 deaf students have attended the school. Furthermore, the school is an open community school, which not only means that activities are organised such as extra courses of English, ICT and sport, but it also offers facilities which enable parents to leave their children at school throughout the whole working day.

Turkey

The Selçuk University and the Konevi School have been taken part in the project as well. The Selçuk University has many faculties and colleges with approximately 85,000 students. From these, 12,000 students are studying in the Faculty of Education and 225 at the department of special educational needs. These students receive a training which includes how to support children with SEN (and thus also deaf and hearing impaired children) to get the best education possible.

The Konevi School is both a residential and a daily school for the hearing impaired students. It consists of 161 students and 26

teaching staff and 10 clerical staff; 4 deaf sign language interpreters are working at the school. The total communication method is used which includes both oral and sign language. The school has preschool, primary and secondary classrooms for the students between the age of 5 and 18, some of them with mild hearing impairments and others profoundly deaf.

Participating Students

In total 45 students (see table 1.) took part in the SMILE project. The Portuguese students were studying in the 2nd year of Bachelor of Portuguese Sign Language Translation and Interpretation, except one student from the second year group that studied in the 3rd year of the Bachelor of Basic Education. The Spanish students were studying in the 2nd and 3rd year of the Special Education Bachelor and the Psychopedagogy Bachelor program. Most of them had some knowledge of Spanish Sign Language. The Turkish students were a rather mixed group; not only did they study in different year groups (2-5) but their subjects of study were different as well, including, Special Education, English Language, Mathematics and Sciences.

Participating students per year/country						
Year	Portugal		Spain		Turkey	
	Individual	CLP	Individual	CLP	Individual	CLP
1 st	8	2	8	2	8	2
2 nd	7	2	6	2	8	2

Table 1: Participating Students per year/ country

The geographical and cultural origin of the partners was a very important factor in this project because one of its aims was to help the students widen their perspectives about Europe and about deafness, deaf culture and the role of national sign languages. Therefore, the students had the opportunity to visit schools, other than the official partners.

The training program

The training program was implemented according to a sandwich model (see table 2.). The participating students were assigned to set up, implement and evaluate a small qualitative research in the schools participating in the project. Through this they would get a deeper understanding of the basis of doing qualitative research with all its pitfalls and opportunities. The students also had to communicate and to discuss, in writing as well as orally, their findings in (international) communities of learning and practice and with other interested parties. In this way, they would be challenged to grasp the meaning of being a researcher and being researched.

The program was developed in three moments: (1) preparation of research at home; (2) an intercultural dialogue about research planning at home and abroad; and (3) implementation and evaluation of research at home within a European perspective.

Sandwich Model for Doing Student Research in Europe

(1) Preparation at home	(2) Intercultural dialogue at home and abroad	(3) Implementation and evaluation at home within a European perspective
Preparing research on deaf vs. hearing culture at local schools and preparing research question for stay abroad.	Comparing research plans with foreign and local students and visits to foreign research fields.	Sharing experiences with fellow home students, reviewing research plan, finding answers to adapted questions and finalising reports and papers.

Table 2: Sandwich Model for Doing Student Research in Europe

The first stage of the program intended to assist the student in the preparation of a research plan about the subject of the project. This would be the basis for the work to be developed abroad. In the second stage, students went for two weeks either to Portugal, Spain or Turkey, where they exchanged the ideas and views with the foreign fellow students. This means that each student was both host for

the incoming students and guest when going abroad. Finally, in the last stage, they had to finalise their research at home taking into account new perspectives gained during their stay abroad.

Methods and instruments

The study program included a diversity of teaching and learning methods and instruments.

- Introduction meetings headed by the tutor of each education department explaining the background and objectives of the study program within the SMILE project.
- Workshop about doing research in which students had the opportunity to brainstorm about qualitative research and deaf culture.
- Working in groups, i.e. the Communities of Learning and Practice (CLP's).
- Web-based learning on the website of the project. The students had access to a closed area, containing workspaces for every group, a library and message boards. The library content included the manual, compulsory reading and additional literature, country-specific information and formats for to be written documents like reflective journals, reports etc. The workspace was divided in two main folders, one for each group and one for each student; individual and group work could be uploaded to these folders. One message board was meant for discussing issues with the other national group of students and another for discussing issues with foreign students working in the SMILE project. The tutors had access to the folders of the national groups and to the message boards.
- Self-study for reading the provided information at the website, making notes, and writing individual reflective journals.
- Visits to the field (i.e. schools) for doing research.
- Research in groups using different methods like observations, individual or group interviews, or handing out questionnaires. It included as well an analysis of documents to research the

perceptions of deaf and hearing students on deaf culture and Europe.

- Tutorials in the field (school) and at the faculty discussing the progress of the research and the individual learning process.

Student products

Students had to produce a set of outcomes, individual and group products.

Individual products

As mentioned before, it was expected that students reflect on their own learning process, including what they have learned from the readings and the tutorials, but also from their experiences at home and abroad. These reflections including expectations, new ideas, problems encountered, learning outcomes, conclusions and evaluative remarks were part of the three *Reflective Journals* they had to write at the end of stages.

Group products

Each Community of Learning and Practice (CLP) had to present five outcomes during the duration of the program: a research plan, an interim report, a final report, a paper or article presenting the research findings and a presentation at their own education department.

These were the products that allowed us to understand the impact this project had on the participants; what they have learned, which problems they had and how they solved them, in what way they communicated their research findings, and what they consider important for being an educator in settings where deaf students are present. In the next section, an overview of this outcome will be presented.

Impact of the project

As debated before (*cf.* also Chapter 6), higher education in Europe is facing multiple challenges to turn Europe into a knowledge-society

where European citizenship is becoming a reality for all its citizens. One of these challenges, addressed in the multiple declarations produced during the meetings of the ministers responsible for higher education, is the promotion of lifelong learning in Europe. With regard to lifelong learning, we consider the following elements fundamental: the ability of the students to understand the impact of research on learning; their comprehension of the importance of intercultural dialogue; and their willingness to use and legitimate research for the construction of European citizenship for all. These three aspects will guide our analysis of the students' products with the goal, as presented before, of illustrating the achievements of the students.

Research as learning

The materials produced by the students reflect a clear instrumental perspective on the SMILE project, as a way of improving their future professional role. Plenty of remarks are made by students in the three different countries with respect to what they hope to learn and to get from this project in order to be better equipped as future teacher and professional in dealing with deaf children.

I will be a pre-school teacher. In the future, if I have deaf students, I will teach them a lot of things. That is why I joined this project (TS1, RJ)².

I decided to take part on this programme because it's an important opportunity to my professional future and I think I'll get experiences that otherwise I wouldn't be able to (PS2, RJ).

I wanted to know how to work with deaf pupils, which will be of great importance for my future (SS2, RJ).

In the future I want to work with the deaf students, so that I can provide them an education with better quality, and that will enrich me as a professional in that area (PS1, RJ).

² For a clarification of used abbreviations see the end of this chapter.

In addition, it is important to note that many students are not only able to identify their lack of knowledge, but also know how to complement it through self-conducted study and research in this area. For instance:

If I take information from (...) books and (...) Internet and at the same time I practice, I can improve myself. So this programme is very important to me... (TS1, RJ).

When I decided to participate in the project I established as a goal to increase my knowledge in the area of deafness, and to understand how it “works” in other countries (PS1, RJ).

Students’ knowledge about the different ways of perceiving the world and thus the different types of knowledge the researched may have is reflected in some statements in the research plans about the importance of having direct contact.

We would like to know if deaf people feel discriminated by other people. We think it’s extremely important to observe them in their natural environment and interacting with other students (PS1, RP).

We think the best way to get answers to our questions is the direct observation in schools, because this will give us first hand information and allow us a more objective opinion about the reality of these children (SS2, RP).

Learning through research is also discovering the power of raising questions, although they may not lead to an answer. Raising questions reflects a deeper learning which will steer follow-up activities in due time. The following remarks made by students in their final papers are rather enlightening.

If, at first, our look rests on the increase in the number of enrolments and places today, handicapped students are already inside the schools and other questions arise: How do students learn? How to teach them? How to prepare the different school professionals? What are the special education resources needed, and how to articulate the relationship? What are the special education

resources needed, and how to articulate the relationship between regular class teachers and those of specialized educational services? (TS2, PA).

While doing this research, we had as a goal to reach a deeper meaning of the fundamental concepts: deaf culture and identity, asking whether there is a deaf culture and the reasons to use this concept (PS2, PA).

As a brief conclusion we might say that the students, in general, understood that doing research is a very important part of their future professions and that in doing so, it very important that they are aware of their limitations and of what it takes to find applicable knowledge to improve education. In this sense, they recognise that comparing different research contexts provides a fine opportunity to value its merits.

Intercultural dialogue

The SMILE project demanded that the students were able to work with others: colleagues from the same university, partners from other universities, tutors and teachers from different countries, deaf and hearing pupils in schools at home and abroad. This project also demanded them to present to the others their own questions and conclusions.

This project thus requires from them proficiency in foreign languages (English was the working language of the project and, therefore, a requirement for participation) and, if possible, sign languages. This was a problem for some, although they all seemed to overcome it somehow.

Another obstacle to reach my goals was the language, because many people, including the pupils, don't understand and don't speak English, what makes it difficult to communicate. (PS1, RJ).

I learned sign language enough to communicate with deaf students. But it isn't enough; I must learn sign language entirely to communicate with deaf pupils well. (TS1, RJ).

Another dimension important to account is working together in a group and what it requires from the students: coordination, division of tasks, ability to solve problems and to overcome the lack of time or the distance.

Working in a group has some disadvantages, especially because it's difficult to gather all the members, but it also has great benefits: sharing ideas and perceptions improves our knowledge and the result of that contribution/discussion will enrich any kind of work or plan (PS1, RJ).

As a conclusion, we may say that we worked in a cooperative way, specially putting in common our ideas, because each of us had an opinion and was able to complete it with the ideas of the others, even if they didn't match in all the aspects (SS2, IR).

Working in a team is difficult and requires some responsibilities. Team teaching can be unpredictable to tell who can work together comfortably. On the other hand, it has some advantages. By working in a team we had the advantage of using problem-solving and program implementation. So, to collaborate with others is a great way to develop learning and teaching (TS2, RJ).

As we see, educational research is not an independent activity, but it is always done within a certain context in which cooperation with the researched (pupils) and fellow researchers (colleagues) is an important factor. Furthermore, how to implement the outcome in schools and classrooms is an important aspect of doing research in a multicultural context, as we will see next.

The European dimension

The third aspect that demands our attention is the ability to work within a multicultural context, which is a fundamental asset when conducting research from a European perspective.

I got aware of the similarities and differences (...) about deaf culture, education and educating styles. I thought about the advantages and disadvantages about

the difference and I shared my opinions with my teachers and my friends from the university (TS2, RJ).

This exchange produced very gratifying experiences that now allow me to look differently to education. We only grow by looking at the difference (PS2, RJ).

It has been an enriching experience in every way, has made me improve as a person and as a teacher. It has allowed me to meet many people from a different culture (...) assessing different ways of being ... (SS2, RJ).

One aspect that appears frequently in the products presented by the students is the necessity to compare everything to their own reality. It is important to notice that researching others within a certain context forces the researcher to think about his or her responsibility not only with respect to the researcher but also towards the society (parents and other stakeholders). Below you will find statements which show how the students interpret this responsibility.

I would like to improve the educational system for deaf children in Turkey. I wish everybody could be aware of the deaf culture (TS1, RJ).

In the end of this project I hope to have an enhanced vision about deaf culture, and to transmit that way of thinking to all the people that are interested in the subject, to learn and identify the main features (PS1, RJ).

The greatest beneficiary from this study will be the deaf child because we will try to verify which the best method is to educate them and which means and resources should be available to their learning (PS1, RP).

I learnt that with an adequate organization and coordination of the professionals working in the school, we can make a great work with the deaf pupils that are able to participate in all classes like the rest of their colleagues (SS1, RJ).

This aspect of social responsibility towards society and Europe, together with an open attitude towards differences inside and outside their own country are important for becoming part of the community of educators in Europe; in addition to this, collaborative

competences developed in an intercultural dialogue as well as the willingness to contextualise and to question knowledge, or in other words to see it as learning, constitute a road towards lifelong learning.

Final remarks

Through these research experiences described in journals, plans, reports and papers, students not only got a deeper understanding of the concept of deaf culture and the position of deaf people in the European community, but also they learned some competences researching multicultural contexts, discussing and negotiating opinions and beliefs through cooperation in national and international communities of learning and practice and envisaging future educational, but also personal challenges for bringing education in whatever country within Europe to a higher platform.

Abbreviations:

PS1 or PS2= Portuguese student(s) in the 1st or 2nd year of the project.

SS1 or SS2= Spanish student(s) in the 1st or 2nd year of the project.

TS1 or TS2= Turkish student(s) in the 1st or 2nd year of the project.

RJ = Reflective Journal.

RP= Research Plan.

IR= Interim Report.

FR= Final Report.

PA= Paper.