

Contribution of Deaf Researchers of Ukraine to the Development of the National Sign Language

The beginning of the 21st century was marked in Ukraine by positive changes in the Ukrainian state policy regarding the language of the deaf community. For a long time till the 1980s, sign language (SL) did not function as the language of teaching and communication in all academic facilities for deaf children.

At the end of the past century, the leaders of the Deaf Community, namely the heads of regional organizations of the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf (UTOG), sharply raised a question of the use of SL in education. This position was also supported by teachers who had devoted all their life to the education of deaf children and came to the same conclusion – i. e. the need to use the language of the deaf in teaching.

Aiming to draw the attention of researchers, teachers, education authorities of Ukraine, deaf children's parents and representatives of different public organizations to the expectations of the deaf in the field of education, the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf conducted the following nation-wide conferences:

- History of teaching the deaf in Ukraine (2000),
- Problems of rehabilitation of the hearing disabled in Ukraine (2002),
- The present stage of education and upbringing of the deaf (2005).

This latter conference promoted the aspiration of the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf to establish a research center for studying the national SL, as no serious attempts of studying SL in Ukraine had been made previously. The only and legitimate research work known so far is the practical manual of the Ukrainian scholar Mr. Kraievsky R. G. (1964), intended for “employees of deaf schools, employees of enterprises of the All-Ukrainian Society of Deaf-and-Dumbs and the students of deaf-and-dumb pedagogical departments at pedagogical institutes”. As the author points out, the manual is his attempt to systematize gestures and signs of “mime-and-gesture language” [7].

Aiming to implement tasks set in the resolution of the pedagogical conference held by UTOG, in February, 2006, the Institute of the Special Pedagogy of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine (NAPSU) organized an all-Ukrainian workshop on *Sign Language in the system of education of children with hearing disabilities*, whose participants were teachers and directors of special kindergartens (about 20) and secondary schools (58 in all) for deaf and hard of hearing children.

In Article 23 of the Ukrainian Law *On social protection of invalids in Ukraine* of 2004 [3], a sign language is seen as “a mean of teaching the deaf”. However, this “mean” was interpreted (and, unfortunately, not used) by all teachers and researchers as an auxiliary one. The main language of teaching remained the spoken language.

On the other hand, March, 2006 became a meaningful date for the Deaf Community and the national deaf pedagogy – it is the date when the laboratory of sign language was founded within of the afore-mentioned Institute, as its eighth structural unit. It was set up upon the initiative of UTOG.

The Laboratory of Sign Language is a research center of the Institute of Special Pedagogy dealing with the basic theoretical and practical issues of the national SL from the perspective of bilingualism, pedagogy and linguistics.

The establishment of the Laboratory, whose work previously was unfamiliar to Ukraine, is to be associated with the name of Mrs. Svetlana Kul'bida – professor, doctor of pedagogical sciences, chief researcher, a lady who has never spared efforts to draw the attention of the academic community to the importance of SL in the life of the Deaf. She carefully thought out the composition of the Laboratory team, recruiting 8 members – hearing as well as deaf researchers. The latter are sign language users Mrs. Adamyuk Natalia, Mrs. Zborovskaya Natalia and Mrs. Chepchina Iryna. Among the hearing members are those who belong to deaf families: Mrs. Drobot Olena and Zamsha Ann. The Laboratory team also includes Mrs. Ivanyusheva Natalia, a highly qualified SL interpreter with 50 years of working experience, who was born to a deaf family. In the last three years the functions of Senior Laboratory Assistant have been performed by a young representative of the Society of the Deaf – Miss Kyrychenko Viktoriya.

In compliance with the UN policy on the protection of minority languages, including the linguistic rights of the Deaf set forth in the UN Convention *On the rights of the disabled persons* (2006) and ratified by Ukraine in 2009, the deaf researchers, together with their peers from the Laboratory and in liaison with their unchanging partner, UTOG, develop high-quality suggestions and

propose amendments to the afore-mentioned Law *On social defense of the disabled persons* [3], with regard to the role, place and function of the national SL.

According to Article 23 of the latest revision of the Law [4], a sign language is the “mean of communication and teaching and is protected by the state”. The Law now clearly prescribes that the national and local authorities are obliged to “help distribute SL and encourage linguistic originality of persons with hearing impairment; guarantee the safety, study and comprehensive development of SL, as well as its usage as a mean of upbringing, education, teaching, communication and creativity; provide individuals with hearing disabilities with a possibility to communicate in social protection agencies, establishments and institutions, law enforcement bodies, fire and rescue services, emergency, healthcare and academic services and establishments; facilitate provision of services of SL interpreters to the citizens of Ukraine with hearing disabilities who use SL; create favorable conditions for the scientific study of SL; support the usage of SL in official relations; provide subtitling or SL translation for official news reports, film screening and videos, TV and radio shows and programs (regardless of the type of ownership and institutional subordination)” [4].

In compliance with legislative documents and the tendency towards humanization in the field of education, the kernel team of the SL Laboratory – the deaf researchers – under the direction of Mrs. Svetlana Kul’bida have created a number of research and methodological works aimed at the protection, development and introduction of the Ukrainian Sign Language (USL) in special secondary educational establishments for deaf and hard of hearing children.

Basic documents, which come forward as semaphores are, “The Concept of Sign Language in Ukraine” (2009) [4] and “The Concept of bilingual education of persons with hearing disabilities” (2011) [5]. The first concept deals with the legal basics of solving the linguistic challenge at the state and inter-governmental levels; international practices and experiences concerning the recognition of SL; the situation in Ukraine regarding the SL issue; principles of the linguistic policy. The second concept incorporates works on “The historical aspects of the bilingual teaching of the deaf”, “Modern insights into the bilingual method of teaching”, “Specifics and features of bilingual teaching” and “The content of bilingual education”.

These documents promoted a further development of educational programs related to the Ukrainian Sign Language (USL) study in different academic establishments, namely: the tutorial program “Ethics” for the 5th to 12th grades of special secondary schools for children with hearing impairments (2008), the programs and the methodical manual “Ukrainian Sign Lan-

guage” for the preparatory and the 1st to 12 grades of secondary special schools for children with hearing impairments (2009), the bilingual program “A Sign Language” for children with hearing impairments of special preschool establishments, and also tutorials for specialists developed jointly with the UTOG: it is a collection of programs on studying USL by teachers and educators of primary classes, teachers of Ukrainian language, interpreters of SL at courses of primary preparation and/or qualification improvement.

Research finding in linguistics and pedagogy accumulated in the last decades in different countries worldwide (Byelorussia, Germany, Norway, Russia, USA, Finland, Sweden and others) have become the methodological basis for the USL curriculum at preparatory and the 1st to 12th grades of schools for deaf and hard of hearing children [2]. The SL programs of the USA (E. Lenc, K.Mikos, Sh.Smit), Canada (of a team of Edmonton Public School, Alberta), Belarus (L.Dimskis) and Russia (G. Zaytseva) still serve as desk manuals.

The modern scientific approach favors the inclusion of SL, along with the spoken language, in main academic facilities. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the Program is to ensure comprehensive personality development of deaf individuals and their becoming proficient bilingual users.

Thanks to the programs and the lobbying by the Institute of Special Pedagogy of NAPS of Ukraine, a new academic subject, *The Ukrainian Sign Language*, was introduced into the curriculum of the general educational (secondary) special schools for deaf and hard of hearing children at the Decree of 11.09.2009 of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine of 11.09.2009. In compliance with the new typical programs of the above-mentioned schools, USL is taught as an academic subject 2 hours a week in schools for deaf children, and 1 hour a week in schools for hard of hearing children. It is a rather small but important victory of the SL Laboratory researchers.

However, until now the situation with USL remains difficult: in all special secondary schools for children with hearing disabilities the basic language for teaching academic subjects remains the spoken language, as the teachers do have sufficient command of either USL or a contact sign language. This is confirmed by the research conducted in schools [1] in 2007-2009. Questionnaires reveal that the overwhelming majority of teachers acknowledge the need of introducing SL in education and upbringing. The research also proved that proficiency in the mother tongue of the deaf (SL) is not age-dependent and negatively correlates with age, and thus does not facilitate the study of the spoken language. However, it is well-known that linguistic competence in the first language facilitates second-language acquisition [9]. Other important chal-

lenges are the lack of special staff to teach USL and SL teachers' low awareness of advanced SL teaching methods and recent sociolinguistic findings.

The Laboratory continues to work in the following basic directions:

- the linguistic study of USL (sign language data collection);
- development of the theoretical and methodological grounding for the application of USL in an academic setting;
- analysis of current trends in sign language application;
- development of teaching resources and methodological literature for teachers and students of special preschools and general education facilities for children with hearing impairments;
- practical implementation of research findings in the teaching and upbringing of deaf and hard of hearing children; publication of an annual journal in sign language studies;
- development of new approaches, methods and training courses for SL teachers at different academic levels and SL interpreters; active involvement of the Laboratory staff whose first language is SL in teaching USL.

The SL Laboratory has greatly benefited from research activities of its deaf members throughout the nine years of its existence. The Laboratory's achievements include:

1. An annual journal of selected papers on "Sign Language and the Contemporaneity";
2. Resources and advice for parents of deaf children: a guide book "Ukrainian Sign Alphabet", methodical recommendations "For the Parents of a Deaf Preschool Child", research updates called "A Child from the world of Silence"; a practical manual "Ukrainian Sign Language Guide for Parents" (2011);
3. For different categories of users: a methodological manual "Ukrainian dactylogy", a monograph by Mrs. Svetlana Kul'bida "Theoretical and Methodical Basis for the Use of Sign Language in Teaching the Deaf" [8], "A Basic Sign Language Guide" for public servants and utility company employees to communicate with persons with hearing impairments (at the request of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in accordance with the "Action Plan for Information Accessibility, Subtitling and Sign Language Interpretation for TV, Cinema and Video Production for Persons with Hearing disabilities", "Sign Language Reference Guide for Euro-2012" (2008).

The Laboratory enjoys cooperation and friendly relations with a number of international and regional organizations such as the Western-Canadian

Center of Deafness Studies at the University of Alberta, the Ukrainian Resource Center of Grant McEwan College (Canada, Edmonton), Social Pedagogy Research and Methodology Center for Deaf Education and SL Teaching (Russia, Moscow), the National Sign Language Laboratory at the Minsk State Pedagogical University (Byelorussia, Minsk), and the Ukrainian-Canadian Alliance for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Ukraine, Kiev).

The Laboratory's local partners are the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf (UTOG), the Central Institute of Post-Academic Pedagogical Education, the Association of Deaf Teachers, the Council of Sign Language Interpreters of Ukraine, and special general educational boarding schools and special pre-school establishments for children with hearing disabilities.

Along with research and practical activities, the deaf researchers of the Laboratory organize and participate in publicity events and campaigns aimed at disseminating the national sign language and raising public awareness of SL issues. A series of workshops have been organized for teachers of special secondary schools: "Sign Language in the Education System of the Deaf" (2006), "The Theoretical and Methodological Basis for the Introduction of the Ukrainian Sign Language in Education" (2010), "Bilingual Education of Deaf Children under the Child-Centered Approach" (2011) and "Bilingual Education of Non-Hearing Persons: Local and International Experience" (2012). Two-week teacher training courses on the basics of USL Education are held annually to boost the efficiency of the *deaf teacher – hearing teacher* academic format). For qualification enhancement purposes, the researchers are also engaged in UTOG annual primary training program for SL interpreters (a 4.5 month course) and an in-service training program for SL interpreters (a 1.5 month course).

Summer schools for parents and deaf children have been held in the last decade with the assistance of different foreign organizations. Thus, for example, Ukrainian-Canadian alliance for the deaf and hard of hearing conducts training sessions for promoting SL communication in the "hearing teacher – deaf child – parent" format. In 2014, the Polish Society of the Deaf hosted for the first time at Przemysl a camp for Polish and Ukrainian families based on a "hearing non-SL-user parent – deaf SL-user child" model. The deaf researchers of the Institute of Special Pedagogy directly participate in the work of all training sessions, as their close communication with the families of deaf children contributes to their research interests.

An important novelty beyond national significance is the annual all-Ukrainian competition "Erudite" organized by UTOG since 2008, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Its participants

are undergraduate students with hearing impairments from special general education facilities. The competition panel is represented by the Laboratory researchers who have an opportunity to help gifted students in their aspirations for higher education.

In 2013, the Ukrainian Government ratified Standards for special primary education. In the section for “Languages and Literature”, the Ukrainian Sign Language (USL) is presented as a language of teaching (first language) as well as a second language to be learned by students. It should be noted that terms “first language” and “second language” are not applied in the National State Standards for teaching a second spoken language; their use was recommended and justified by the Laboratory researchers. Thus SL language users were assigned to two different categories: SL as the first language users and SL as a second language users: To the first group belong:

- preschoolers or school students with hearing disabilities – deaf and hard of hearing children with hearing loss present at or acquired soon after birth.
- deaf or hard of hearing preschoolers or school students with complex impairments.
- To the second category, belong:
- late-deafened adults;
- hard of hearing children with partial loss of hearing who able to distinguished the flow of sounds and have spoken language skills.

Thus, in accordance with the National Standards for special primary education, USL was introduced as a subject in the academic curriculum. The novelty is the launch of different aspects of USL – vocal, linguistic, sociocultural, operational and interpretational – in the curriculum for younger students.

As a result, we hope that USL will be acknowledged to have the same functions as other languages, and the spoken language in particular.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that in the course of 10 years, nine members of the SL Laboratory, including six deaf members, have become doctoral students supervised by professors of the Institute of Special Pedagogy of APS of Ukraine as well as the M. P. Dragomanov National Pedagogical University. Despite the diversity of their research areas, their interests are focused on SL. During the mentioned period, three members of the Laboratory, two of them being representatives of the deaf community, have become Candidates of Pedagogical Sciences (Ph.D. equivalent).

In 2010, an internship program started for Ukrainian deaf PhD students in the University of Alberta, Canada, under the supervision of Dr Debra Russel (now the President of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters).

The specific feature of the program was the students' deep immersion into the Canadian Deaf Community through the use of the American Sign Language (ASL). The internship program aimed at the study of ASL as the main language of teaching in academic facilities for deaf students. The outcome of the program is the launch of a new direction in the Laboratory's work: the training of deaf SL teachers for kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities.

I would like to finish this overview by pointing out the current objective of the Laboratory: the linguistic study of SL aimed at the development of the national academic sign language – the native language of the Deaf.

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**უკრაინელ ყრუ და სმენადაქვეითებულ
მეცნიერთა წვლილი უკრაინის
ნაციონალური ჟესტური ენის შექმნაში**

(რეზიუმე)

სტატიაში შეჯამებულია უკრაინის ნაციონალური ჟესტური ენის შექმნასა და დანერგვასთან დაკავშირებული პრობლემები და წარმოდგენილია უკრაინის ყრუთა კავშირისა და სპეციალური პედაგოგიკის ინსტიტუტთან არსებული ჟესტური ენის ლაბორატორიის განსაკუთრებული ძალისხმევა რამდენიმე მიმართულებით: ჟესტურ ენასთან დაკავშირებული ლინგვისტური საკითხების კვლევა, ადგილობრივი და საერთაშორისო კონფერენციების ორგანიზება, უკრაინული ჟესტური ენის პრაქტიკული სწავლება და მასწავლებელთა მომზადება სხვადასხვა საფეხურის საგანმანათლებლო პროგრამებისთვის.