Exploring the Perceptions of Hungarian Sign Language Learners

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The aim of this paper is to summarise the empirical research findings of a small-scale exploratory study on adult learners' experience of learning to use Hungarian Sign Language (HSL) in courses they attended in their free time. First, relevant background information will be presented. After clarifying the research methodology and describing the sample, both quantitative and qualitative findings will be presented and discussed with an emphasis on the rich description of the learning experience of 31 HSL learners. Implications of the study include that learning to use a sign language can have a role in educating and sensitising future generations in terms of both communication and intercultural skills because HSL courses provide an enjoyable opportunity to gain insight into the ways the unique language and culture of a minority function. Learning to use a sign language could also help instil a feeling of solidarity with people living with disabilities.

The motivation for the project stemmed from the fact that the author had attended some HSL courses herself, and the learning experience had a profound impact on her. Those interested in learning to use HSL may join HSL courses organised by Siketek és Nagyothallók Országos Szövetsége (SINOSZ), the Hungarian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, whose mission is "to secure social acceptance of people who are Deaf or hard of hearing and to advocate for the establishment of education, employment and transportation conditions that promote independent living" (Siketek és Nagyothallók Országos Szövetsége, n.d.-a). SINOSZ offers HSL courses at all levels, from beginner to

HSL interpreting. Teachers are sign language users themselves with different levels of hearing loss and education. The methodology applied greatly depends on the individual teacher, but in the author's experience, lessons are playful and interactive with a lot of pair and groupwork despite being quiet and requiring full concentration.

Literature Review

This review first describes how deafness and hearing impairment are defined and classified and then discusses their relevance in the Hungarian context. In order to have some understanding of the role of HSL, the number of hearing-impaired people in Hungary and the contexts in which HSL is used will be explored. After familiarising the reader with sign languages and their attributes, the recognition of and policies affecting HSL are also discussed, and a critical review of studies on sign language learning comprising hearing participants is also included.

Deafness and Hearing Impairment in Hungary

Although there are many different classifications of deafness and hearing impairment and there is no "absolute yardstick" (Clark, 1981, p. 493), someone who has hearing thresholds of 20 dB or better in both ears is considered to have full hearing. However, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), "over 5% of the world's population – or 430 million people – require rehabilitation to address their disabling hearing loss (including 34 million children)" (World Health Organization, 2025). In Hungary, there are contradicting sources concerning the number of citizens who are affected. Kósa and Lovászy (1997) estimated that 1.6% of the population were Deaf or had some level of hearing loss around the turn of the century. According to census data from 2011, 8,571 people described themselves as Deaf, and 63,014 people had hearing impairment (Horváth et al., 2018–2019, p. 4). In 2022, 24,224 people reported having hearing impairment while only 6,392 people reported

being Deaf (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2022). The census figures in both years are under 1% of the total population, which is well below the 5% estimate of the WHO. The reason for this, according to Horváth et al., probably is that the census forms were not entirely clear for respondents and that respondents may not have wanted to stigmatise themselves with the labels which are often seen as discriminatory (Horváth et al., 2018–2019, p. 4). Furthermore, in 2022, the number of people who reported some disability but did not specify their disability was higher than in previous years, and the number of people who did not wish to respond was also exceptionally high at 2.8 million (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2022). Therefore, census data may be misleading.

Hearing loss may range from mild to severe loss. In the Hungarian context, the expression hearing-impaired denotes both those with hearing impairment and those who are Deaf (Horváth et al., 2018–2019). In Hungary, people who have a hearing threshold value between 30 and 90 dB are considered hearing-impaired, while those with a hearing threshold of 90 dB are considered Deaf (Csizér et al., 2008, p. 342). Many children who are hearing-impaired and grow up with hearing parents struggle to learn the spoken language. They may or may not learn to sign, depending on the extent of their disability, the beliefs of their parents, or their time of joining a Deaf or hard of hearing community (in kindergarten, school, or sports clubs) where they may meet HSL users. Children in families where a sign language is used by the parents are likely to acquire the sign language as their first language. Even in these families, Hungarian parents usually teach the articulation and lip-reading of the spoken language to their children, both of which are believed to help communication with society at large (Szabó, 2013). As far as education is concerned, parents in Hungary usually face the dilemma whether to send their child to a special segregated school for the Deaf or to an integrated mainstream school. In a special Hungarian school for the Deaf, it is the oral approach that is used: Deaf children will be taught to speak as well as they can even though

they cannot fully rely on acoustic output. One form of additional help for the Deaf is a 2-year preparation period, during which learners focus on learning to read, write, and speak. It is only after this 2-year preparatory period that children will start following the standard curriculum. The children in special schools for the Deaf are likely to learn from and practise sign language with each other. In a study on sign language, Kontráné Hegybíró et al. (2008) found that in Hungary, "the vast majority (71.2%) of respondents who knew sign language learned to sign from their peers in childhood, 18 percent from a sign language teacher, and only every tenth respondent (10.8%) said they learned to sign from their parents" (p. 11). At school, the children who are living in families where they use a sign language will informally teach their hard of hearing or Deaf peers to do so, too. The majority (77.7%) of the Deaf use sign language with their friends, and only 4.6% uses sign language with their teachers (Kontráné Hegybíró et al., 2008, p. 12). Based on the responses of the Deaf respondents in the study, Kontráné Hegybíró et al. concluded that there would be a need for more teachers to learn to use HSL because more information could be transmitted this way (p. 14).

In contrast, a Deaf or severely hard of hearing child can also attend mainstream schools, where they are to progress with the other children but without practising sign language (Horváth et al., 2018–2019, pp. 29–32). By the time they grow up, many of the hearing-impaired or Deaf children develop a very high competence in lip-reading and learn to communicate in writing so as to better integrate into society (Horváth et al., 2018–2019, pp. 16–17). In a questionnaire study, Kontráné Hegybíró et al. (2008) found that in their subsample of Deaf respondents (n = 131), 91% learnt to sign, but 8% stated they were not competent sign language users (p.11).

What follows from the recognition of HSL by the Hungarian state (2009. évi CXXV. Törvény a magyar jelnyelvről és a magyar jelnyelv használatáról) and the recognition of sign languages in general by the Council of Europe (2020a) as well as the need to assist the

integration of sign language users in society is that there ideally should be sign language users who can act as bridges between first language or proficient sign language users and the rest of society. Equality of opportunity or accessibility for sign language users and many Deaf citizens would mean breaking down communication barriers with the help of competent sign language users and technological solutions. The fact that 90% of Deaf people are born to parents who can hear (National Association of the Deaf, n.d.) or into families where hearing loss has never occurred before (Lancz, 2004; Szabó, 2013) also necessitates the teaching of sign language(s) to both parents and teachers. However, Kontráné Hegybíró et al. (2008) found that not many parents of Deaf children learn how to sign (p. 12). In short, the greater someone's hearing loss is, the more likely it is that they will rely on sign language (Horváth et al., 2018–2019, p. 18). The importance of sign language, however, does not mean that the Deaf do not wish to improve their competence in Hungarian, as Kontráné Hegybíró et al. pointed out (p. 14), so many of them are bilinguals, competent in both Hungarian and HSL. However, the hearing are reluctant to learn to use sign language despite its importance in educational contexts or in the service industry.

For lack of space, the above review cannot cover in depth the issues of cochlear implants and hearing aids. Cochlear implants are small electronic devices with an external part behind the ear and an internal part that is surgically placed under the skin of a Deaf person. They can help to provide a sense of sound to a Deaf or hard-of-hearing person from a young age. It is worth mentioning that according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (2024), approximately 736,900 cochlear devices were implanted worldwide as of December 2019. A hearing aid helps make sounds louder and only has external parts: a microphone, an amplifier, and a speaker.

Hungarian Sign Language

Sign languages are highly developed visual languages. There is no single sign language across the planet; even the fingerspelling alphabets of various communities differ (Start ASL, n.d.) despite the existing similarities. There is an International Sign Language, nevertheless, and if they spend enough time together, many sign language users from different countries could learn to understand each other to some extent.

The Hungarian Sign Language is one of approximately 300 sign languages in the world (Kiprop, 2019). Even though Hungary is a small country, there are seven dialects within HSL, which correspond to the schools of the Deaf in seven larger cities (i.e., Budapest, Debrecen, Eger, Kaposvár, Sopron, Szeged, and Vác). The first school for the Deaf was established in Vác in 1802 by András Cházár based on his experience in Vienna (Cházár András EGYMI, n.d.). These specialised schools have greatly contributed to the establishment of the Deaf community in Hungary (Horváth et al., 2018–2019, p. 9).

HSL is a language in its own right: It has an extensive vocabulary, idioms, and complex grammar. According to SINOSZ, “sign language is different from other minority languages, in that it is a visual language- facial expressions, body language and visual placements are all important components of sign language” (Siketek és Nagyothallók Országos Szövetsége, n.d.-b). Signs are formulated in a number of ways. The most important element is the *handshape*, but its location, orientation, movement, and the expressions of the eyes and the face all contribute to meaning. There are signs that indicate letters of the alphabet, whereas others indicate concrete objects, abstract notions, or even longer expressions or idioms. In HSL, there are two sets of signs for the alphabet (the dactyl and the phonomimic alphabets), which goes against standardisation to some extent but seems to work well. The signs for the letters of the alphabet are rarely used, only to disambiguate proper

nouns, for example. In fluent sign language, it is not letters that are signed but complete words and concepts. The signing space is the *window* in front of the user, a roughly square shaped three-dimensional area from the waist to the top of the head and from one elbow to the other, which is used for positioning signs.

Recognition and Policies

As of 2019, 41 countries recognised sign language as an official language; 26 of these are in Europe, and Hungary is one of them (Kiprop, 2019). The European Parliament (EP) issued two resolutions, in 1988 and 1998, that aimed to ask member states to recognise sign languages (Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012). The first Deaf Member of the EP happened to be a Hungarian, Ádám Kósa, who was a member of the EP from 2009 to 2024 (Magyarország Kormánya, n.d.).

From the point of view of language policy, there are three important milestones in the recent history of HSL. The most locally relevant is the publication of the 2009 act (2009. évi CXXV. Törvény a magyar jelnyelvről és a magyar jelnyelv használatáról) that acknowledges HSL as an independent and natural language of a minority in Hungary. Act CXXV of 2009 guarantees that the hearing-impaired have the right to use sign language interpretation and special communication systems financed by the state. This, for example, allows primary or secondary school pupils to have sign language interpretation for up to 400 hours every school year (2009. évi CXXV. Törvény a magyar jelnyelvről és a magyar jelnyelv használatáról). Another important publication in the field is the Common European Framework (CEFR) Companion Volume, which was first published in 2018 by the Council of Europe. The volume revisits many of the themes of the CEFR, but it also introduces innovative concepts and approaches, one of which is the inclusion of sign languages in many of its descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020a). A third, perhaps less well-known publication is the international

sign language version of the CEFR Companion Volume, which has the potential to contribute to international cooperation between sign language users in the long run (Council of Europe, 2020b).

Studies on Sign Language Learning

There is some literature on sign language instruction in the United States where American Sign Language (ASL) is the third most studied language in higher education following Spanish and French (Goldberg, 2013, p. 2). A study conducted by Reading and Padgett (2011) detailed a programme in which service learning and ASL instruction were combined. Service learning is the combination of formal school-based learning and community work to deal with a problem in society (Honnett & Poulsen, 1989). In the Reading and Padgett study, members of the Deaf community served as communication partners for college-aged hearing students. Together, they did service-learning projects along with students learning ASL. The study showed that hearing students who participated in service-learning experiences with the Deaf community gained insight into the lives of the minority group. The undergraduates did not only develop their ASL proficiency, but through their connections with the Deaf community, they also developed cultural awareness (Reading & Padgett, 2011). Another study that compared the attitudinal changes of two groups in a sample of 98 university students completing ASL courses and Deaf culture courses concluded that it is important for ASL instructors to integrate more cultural information into ASL curricula (Lee & Pott, 2018).

Methods

The terms qualitative, naturalistic, and ethnographic are often used interchangeably (Szabolcs, 2001, p. 17), and, indeed, all these adjectives may be used to describe the main research method of this study. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the way learners see

sign language learning, the qualitative research paradigm was selected. The open-ended statements in the online questionnaire provided an opportunity for sign language learners to verbalise their views concerning the learning process they had experienced during their sign language courses. One objective of the study was to present rich descriptions of the ways the learners perceived their learning to sign. Since HSL and sign language learning are examined via the "eyes of the participants" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 17), this study is also a naturalistic inquiry. Its ethnographic character is demonstrated by its goal of using "insider accounts" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 169) to examine and characterise "the lived experiences" of learners (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). The study may also be considered emic and participatory since the author herself attended a sign language course at the time and thus had an insider's perspective. The responses were also quantified but only to a limited extent.

The research this paper summarises was conducted in July and August 2022. The views on learning to sign are based on the responses collected through an online questionnaire. The research question focused on how sign language learners perceive their studies and HSL itself. The participants comprised a nonrepresentative sample of 31 learners, all studying at SINOSZ in Budapest. Their ages ranged between 15 and 60 ($M = 34$, $SD = 13.02$), and they studied at different levels and in different groups. Only two of the respondents were male. The respondents filled in an anonymous online questionnaire on a voluntary basis. They were all native speakers of Hungarian and all reported being speakers of minimum one additional language, although some spoke as many as four. Thus, the respondents can be seen as experienced language learners, though their competence levels are not known. One teenage respondent attended the HSL course because she was hard of hearing and was told that she was likely to lose her ability to hear. She studied in a mainstream secondary school and had many Deaf friends. Only one other respondent stated that she had frequent contact with the Deaf community. The respondents were enrolled students at

SINOSZ and had completed more than one course at the time of the data collection, but it is not known how many different teachers they had had. However, it is a policy of SINOSZ to expose learners to different sign language teachers.

The questionnaire was devised on the basis of the author's experience and was validated with two potential respondents and an HSL expert from SINOSZ. The final questionnaire was administered in Hungarian and had three sections. In the first section, biographical data were collected. The second section, where respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with 13 Likert-type statements, allowed limited quantitative analysis. These items allowed the examination of means and correlation. In the third section, which was analysed qualitatively, respondents were given the opportunity to freely describe their experiences with the help of 10 sentence beginnings. The textual data collected will be presented in a raw format as well as in a more systematic way with the help of the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Szokolszky, 2004). In order to avoid researcher bias, a second coder was involved in the analysis of the data. As it can be seen in the Appendix, the questionnaire aimed at eliciting views on sign language and sign language learning and not feedback on specific courses or teachers.

Results and Analysis

In this section, the results of the study will be presented starting with the few quantitative findings and continuing with the qualitative ones. Although the sample size was relatively small ($N = 31$), it is worth looking at the responses of the second section in a quantitative manner. The quantitative findings will be followed by an overview of the textual data collected in the third section and a thematic analysis. An attempt was also made to

analyse some of the data with the help of an artificial intelligence (AI) qualitative analysis tool.

Many of the respondents in the study expressed very positive attitudes towards the experience of sign language learning. One called it “fun”, another “marvellous”. Adjectives such as “special”, “extraordinary”, “super”, and “exciting” were often used. Some even found the class activities funny. For two of the respondents, the chance to learn to sign was a “dream” come true. For some, it was an adventure, a challenge, or a transformational experience. One respondent highlighted that the course sensitised her to seeing disabilities differently. Even though the participants saw the learning experience as fascinating, it also proved challenging: Some wrote the classes “required 100% of their attention”, which adequately summarises the intensity of the learning experience.

The respondents rated their success in foreign language learning and their success in sign language learning as quite good or good on average. However, there is next to no correlation between these two self-reported indices of sign language and foreign language learning. The Pearson correlation (measuring the relationship between two variables) indicates that there is a very small nonsignificant negative relationship between success in language learning and success in sign language learning, $r(28) = -.037$, $p = .843$. This means that no clear pattern can be detected in the data. Although the correlation is nonsignificant, the lack of correlation probably indicates that learning to sign is seen as something different from foreign language learning or that it requires different skills from those necessary for spoken languages. A learner who is successful at learning an additional language may not necessarily be equally successful in learning to sign. In the author’s experience, when it comes to learning to sign, the visual, spatial, and tactile nature of sign language makes it necessary for the learner to activate skills that are different from first or second spoken language learning. This finding is not entirely in line with the ratings given to the statements

that sign language is completely like a foreign language and sign language learning is entirely like foreign language learning, which were given average ratings of about 2.83 (see all detailed ratings in Table 1), the ratings being somewhere in the middle of the range. The mean rating (*M*) is the figure that would characterise respondents as a group. Standard deviation (*SD*) in Table 1 indicates how spread out the responses were in the sample.

Table 1

Ratings Given to Statements in Section 2

Statements	*M*	*SD*
Success in foreign language learning (LL)	2.90	1.18
Success in sign LL	3.63	0.85
Sign L is completely like a foreign L	2.80	1.21
Sign LL is completely like foreign LL	2.87	1.35
Easier to learn how to sign than a foreign L	3.80	1.06
I pay more attention to my gestures	3.73	1.36
I pay more attention to my articulation	3.60	1.42
I have been gesticulating more	3.40	1.45
I pay more attention to other people's body language	3.80	1.37
I pay more attention to my own body language	3.63	1.24
I am better at noticing other people’s emotions	3.10	1.53
I am better at expressing my own emotions	2.93	1.57
I have maintained better eye contact with the people I talk to	3.60	1.45

The statement that it is easier to learn how to sign than to learn a foreign language received a high average rating (M = 3.80), and so did the statements about changes in the communication styles of the respondents, which they attribute to attending a HSL course (M = 3.10–3.80). Based on their responses, we can conclude that learners are aware that since they started learning to sign, they have started to pay more attention to their gestures, their articulation, and they have been gesticulating more; they have started to pay more attention to other people's body language as well as their own, and they have become better at noticing other people's emotions. A somewhat lower rating was given to the statement which was about whether or not respondents had become better at expressing their own emotions since they started learning to sign (M = 2.93). In terms of eye-contact, respondents indicated that they had improved their ability to maintain eye-contact with the people they communicate with (M = 3.6).

The analysis of respondents' completions of the unfinished sentences allowed the researcher to gain further insights into the shared learning experience. In what follows, some of the respondents' comments, which were translated into and sometimes paraphrased or summarised in English by the author, are discussed. Altogether 229 comments of varying lengths were collected (1–77 words). When asked about what the greatest experience in sign language learning for them was, sign language learners emphasised the fact that they entered a completely "new world" by starting to learn to sign. One respondent called it a new "culture", whereas others stressed the importance of having access to a different linguistic community. Many learners felt the experience was very special, with involvement they had never experienced. For some "it was like an adventure", a challenge, or an opportunity. For others, learning to sign was like a hobby, involving even relaxation. One respondent noted that it was not at all like learning a foreign language. Another compared it to "learning a

poem", yet another to "learning three half-known foreign languages at the same time". The latter wording clearly emphasises the complexity inherent in learning a visual language.

The question that aimed to elicit in what ways HSL is different from Hungarian was finished in many different ways, with many noting that there is more nonverbal communication, and the focus is on metacommunication. Respondents added that HSL "is concise", or that it "has a special grammar, for example, classifiers". It is quite telling that one respondent added that HSL "is less and more at the same time" than Hungarian. Many stressed that HSL is "more to-the-point" and that it is "much more important for the communicator to focus on the other speaker with their whole being". One respondent remarked that there are more "supplementary sign systems at work", probably meaning that hand signs, their positioning, mouthing, lip-reading, and facial expressions are integral, inseparable, and parallel elements of sign language communication.

The respondents shared some linguistic insights when they were asked in what ways a sign language resembles or differs from Hungarian and in what ways learning a sign language resembles learning a foreign language. As they remarked, learners have to "practise and learn the words", "master the vocabulary", have a "vocabulary notebook", and learners "may forget it" and "have to learn the idioms", which may be true for any language learning situation. All these remarks reinforce the status of HSL as a language in its own right. Another theme that came up was the similarity between HSL and foreign languages or languages in general in terms of competence levels. Respondents pointed out that learners and users are at different competence levels when using sign language. Some remarks touched upon the way the sign language is taught: There are practice exercises and homework similarly to other language learning contexts. One learner commented that it is difficult to develop "above a certain level", a certain ceiling, which many language learners can relate to. Another learner stressed

that through sign language the learner can get to know the habits and the culture of sign language users or the Deaf.

An interesting comment focused on the difficulties of learning to sign: One respondent said it was impossible to learn to sign without a teacher (i.e., on one's own). The presence of the sign language user and the video materials certainly make it a much easier task as this language needs to be seen primarily. Learners' willingness to act was also mentioned by one respondent.

In contrast, others highlighted that learning a sign language is incomparable with learning a foreign language, here probably referring to the visual–spatial nature of HSL. They pointed out that using a sign language requires them to use different parts of their brains. One revealing comment was that we "are not learning the spoken form of a written language" since HSL does not have a written form, although a complicated transcription system does exist. Some respondents identified differences between language learning and sign language learning that were not well-substantiated. In this way some misunderstandings also made their way into the pool of responses. For example, two respondents remarked that "there is no complex grammar or tenses", and the focus needs to be on the vocabulary in sign language learning, which is not the case and sign language users and teachers would strongly disagree.

In terms of what enhances their HSL learning, respondents emphasised the importance of the "the online video dictionary" and error correction in the classroom by the "native sign language teacher". "Practising with friends who are Deaf" also makes it easier to acquire HSL. Contact and interaction with Deaf sign language users and teachers appear to be essential. Being a "visual learner" and having a good "visual memory" greatly enhance sign language learning. Apart from the usual language learner problems such as being too busy to study at home, what makes sign language learning more difficult according to the

respondents is not having enough opportunities to practise with sign language users. One respondent noted that having Deaf teachers sometimes makes it difficult to follow explanations, and it would perhaps be better to have hard-of-hearing teachers, who can better connect these two worlds. The ambiguity of hand signs and shapes and the complexity of the position, orientation, movement, and direction of signs also make the learning process slower.

Practising is very important, respondents say, and so is using the videos for revision. They also watch additional videos on YouTube to further improve their signing skills. Note-taking is considered useful but difficult as there are so many attributes to note down. In the flow of the lesson, there is not sufficient time to take detailed notes, and even when there is, the notes do not always make sense at home later. Even "teaching my friends to sign" was mentioned by respondents as being helpful. Many wrote that immersion in a sign language using community helps or would help. One respondent was a teacher at a school for the hard of hearing, and another respondent had Deaf friends, so for them this immersion was an existing circumstance. Visualising words was mentioned as a way to more effectively memorise words, with the example of the sun and the sun rising. The closed fingers in this hand sign turn and slightly move towards the face as the fingers gradually open. As Figure 1 illustrates, static entries in a dictionary are of not much help; video recordings are far more useful, which was corroborated by respondents many times.

Figure 1

The Starting and Finishing Handshapes for the "Sun" and the "Sun Rising" Signs (Siketek és Nagyothallók Országos Szövetsége, n.d.-c)

As part of additional comments, it was emphasised by one respondent that a better methodology for the teaching of sign languages could and should be worked out. It was also mentioned that the existing HSL dictionary (partially available on the SINOSZ website and fully available for registered course participants) needs to be expanded to assist learners in the future.

Emerging Themes

After reading and rereading respondents' comments several times, the researcher found that there seem to be seven themes that keep occurring: videos, contact with the Deaf community, practice, vocabulary and handshapes, grammar or the lack of it, simplicity, and the world of the Deaf. The seven themes were confirmed by an independent co-coder, who had no experience learning to sign but was an experienced applied linguistics researcher.

The two most frequently occurring themes are the video materials available to learners and the need to practise. The two topics are also interrelated as learners suggested that the video materials provide further practice opportunities, which are not always sufficient during the classes. It is not always clear whether learners referred to the online video dictionaries that are operated by SINOSZ or other organisations or to other video recordings which are available on YouTube, but what seems to be clear is that most learners find these indispensable for learning to sign. There were 14 allusions to videos in general in the textual comments as well as 14 references to practice. The videos are especially useful for learners who only have lessons once a week, but they can supplement any number of weekly classes. Contact or the lack of contact with sign language users or Deaf people was also mentioned 12 times, which suggests that communication with sign language users is seen as a valuable opportunity both for learning and practising as well as building relationships with this special community.

The need to learn and the focus on the learning of handshapes or vocabulary items was brought up 12 times, which indicates that learners were clearly aware of the importance of these units in sign language. The high frequency may indicate that vocabulary items are seen as a prerequisite, or a first step, for learning to sign. The fact that issues concerning vocabulary came up so many times might be due to other factors as well. One of these could be that the instruction and the instructors focused on vocabulary and not grammar in the initial stages of the courses. Another could be learners' preconceptions about the existence of grammar in this context. HSL grammar or the lack of grammar was also cited 10 times. The concept of sign language grammar seems to be a less well-understood or perhaps taught aspect of HSL in the eyes of the respondents.

There were two more issues that were frequently referred to by the respondents. One of these was the respondents' view that HSL is simple and to-the-point. This is seen both as a positive and a negative feature. Some learners appreciate that when we sign we focus on the most important elements of the message, while others believe that there are fewer words to select from. Some respondents worded it like this: "I cannot express shades of meaning", or "there are no synonyms, no hidden meaning". One respondent remarked that class interaction occasionally focused on simple, informal, or sometimes even "obscene issues". Respondents, however, seemed to agree that learning to sign opened up a new world to them, a new culture, enabling them to "peek into the society and the everyday lives of the Deaf". The fact that HSL communication focuses on the essence of the message made HSL an unexpectedly honest way of interaction in the eyes of the respondents.

Out of curiosity, an AI tool was used to analyse the responses to one of the unfinished statements that elicited the most replies. Twenty-seven of the 31 respondents wished to add their views to the unfinished sentence that started in the following way: For me, the most

effective method of learning sign language is to... The free version of the AI tool AILYZE proposed the following themes:

1. Learning environment and attitude: Immersion, playfulness, and focus
2. Communication and interaction: Active practice, teaching, and daily use
3. Learning resources: Multimedia and written support
4. Cognitive techniques: Visualisation and concept clarification
5. Practice methods: Repetition, self-study, and organisation

The AI analysis tool successfully tackled comments in Hungarian. From the above list, it appears that the tool identified five key themes, but both the subthemes and the written analysis showed that the analysis lacked clarity and was sometimes as complex as the raw data. Without going into great detail, the AI-assisted analysis, however, emphasised that according to the respondents, the learning environment plays a crucial role in fostering engagement in sign language learning. Learners believe that immersion, playfulness, and focused attention appear to be essential elements that enhance learning. Immersion, involving interaction with native or fluent signers, promotes active learning. Respondents also suggest that playfulness and watching videos enhance motivation and deepen understanding.

It was interesting to see that similarly to the analysis carried out by the researchers, the AI analysis identified video materials as versatile learning aids, offering exposure, practice, and reference opportunities. According to the AI tool, video materials, sign language dictionaries, and written notes are seen as essential tools for enhancing the comprehension and the retention of vocabulary. Notes and written materials support learning by capturing specific details and guiding practice systematically.

Discussion

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study, we can state that learning to sign was an enriching experience for most of the participants. The study revealed positive attitudes towards sign language learning, which is evidenced by respondents' descriptions of it as an amazing and enjoyable experience. While some participants in this study thought some class activities were humorous, others saw them as a challenge, an adventure, a dream come true, or a life-changing experience. All these detected positive approaches towards sign language learning probably go beyond the actual learning, and as a result of the learning experience, the positive attitudes are felt towards the Deaf community as well—as it was found by Lee and Pott (2018) in the American setting.

Respondents saw sign language instruction as a cultural experience as well: They appreciated the fact that by attending these courses they had an insight into the lives of sign language users and the Deaf. As is frequently the case in language classes, too, sign language instructors often reveal interesting cultural information or "fun" facts about the target language environment(s) and their lives during the classes. For example, it is eye-opening to learn how a Deaf parent can hear their child's crying or the doorbell (technological solutions help transform noise into light). Another example could be the advice on how to attract a deaf or hearing-impaired person's attention if they are not looking at the speaker. Learners are advised to approach and face the person or, if that is more practical in a large room, to quickly switch the lights on and off for this purpose. Respondents enjoyed the combined language and culture lessons and felt as if they had entered a different quiet universe which was similar to theirs but at the same time different in many ways. Thus, the lessons could also be seen as intercultural training sessions as the courses allow participants to establish a link with the world, culture, and context of the Deaf. These findings corroborate the research results of a study conducted in the US with 98 university students, where the researchers

concluded that it is important for ASL instructors to integrate more cultural information into the course programme (Lee & Pott, 2018).

Respondents also pointed out that HSL learning activated different parts of their brains. They noticed that sign language users have a different way of thinking. The literature also emphasised this difference. According to Horváth et al. (2018–2019), HSL users think in images and have visual representations in their minds as opposed to those who can hear and have abstractions in their minds (Horváth et al., 2018–2019, p. 29).

The study also revealed that the sign language learning experience made learners think about their own mother tongue and second language use and prompted comparisons between them. Respondents pointed out that they had to activate similar as well as different cognitive processes and to get accustomed to using the signing space instead of traditional channels of communication. They also had to get used to using a visual and spatial language system instead of their oral mother tongue. In addition to sign language instruction, HSL learning also appears to work as intensive communication training since many of the respondents witnessed a transformation as regards their communication in their mother tongue. Most of these changes concerned the development of their nonverbal communication skills. Respondents reported that since they had begun learning to sign, they became more expressive, more aware of their body language, and more emotionally perceptive during communication with others. Thus, the sign language learning experience enhanced the development of the nonvocal and nonverbal communication skills of the respondents, which could in the long run contribute to the development of their oral language skills in both their first and their second language competence.

Articulation perhaps deserves some elaboration here. In HSL, many handshapes and signs are accompanied by mouthing the Hungarian equivalent of the word (but not all). The

more fluent someone is in signing, the less mouthing is required. However, in the initial stages of sign language learning or with less competent sign language users, sign language users, learners, and teachers need to supplement their communication with mouthing and lip-reading. This means that mouthing and articulation are given a lot of weight in the classroom; learners therefore acutely realise the importance of articulation and may transfer this awareness to other communication contexts, both in their first or additional spoken languages.

One key takeaway from the study is the crucial role that video recordings play in the learning process. It is easy to understand the significance of the availability of video-conferencing platforms for the Deaf community, but the presence of smart devices in the classroom could boost sign language learning. Some recordings accessible on the internet or in a virtual learning environment are used as dictionary entries, others as comprehension tasks, and learners, too, are expected to hand in their homework as video recordings. In sum, these could be used for practice in and out of class as well as recording signs for easier practice and memorisation. Language teachers can easily see the relevance of using recordings in class since listening exercises have long been used in the teaching of languages. Thus, viewing exercises in the sign language classroom can be seen as the equivalents of listening exercises in language classrooms. The importance of video recordings is even greater in sign language learning and classes since—as the learners in this study pointed out—they often had difficulty with traditional note-taking. Many emphasised that there are very many aspects of handshapes that would need to be noted. Perhaps taking video notes, that is, recording either the teacher or the learner(s) themselves would be more time-efficient and would better assist the learning process. Hence, the smartphone may become an indispensable device for learners interested in improving their sign language competence.

Conclusion

In an ideal world, the parents and teachers of Deaf children as well as other stakeholders like service workers or interested language learners would need to be given free or subsidised opportunities to at least familiarise themselves with but perhaps to develop higher competences of Hungarian or other sign languages for several reasons. First and foremost, this would create a society with fewer obstacles for the Deaf and more equality of opportunity and accessibility for this particular disadvantaged group. Not only would more contact between these groups integrate the Deaf better into society, but it would also help the majority society develop solidarity with less advantaged groups, build intercultural sensitivity, and improve nonverbal communication skills. A concomitant could be that sign language learners would better understand their own and others' communication, their first language acquisition, and their second language learning. Through doing a beginner-level sign language course, perhaps foreign language teacher trainees, especially monolingual ones who aim to teach their mother tongue, could perhaps learn to better appreciate the learners' difficulties, efforts, and the stress of learning as well as become more aware of the cultural dimension of language learning. A 1-year-long awareness-raising immersion into sign language learning could also benefit university students majoring in psychology, special needs education, sociology, or the medical sciences.

For the Hungarian education system as a whole, one implication is that HSL, its learning, or some kind of sensitisation could be part of the curriculum on an optional basis. Like the respondents of this study, learners would encounter a completely "new world" with various benefits. Perhaps as part of Hungarian language classes, or as an optional session during extracurricular programmes or project weeks, HSL instruction could be offered in secondary education or in higher education, and thus young people would know more about this disability, this language, communication with members of the Deaf community, and

communication in general. HSL could also be offered as a second or third language option, although it may present organisational difficulties to attract a sufficient number of interested learners in one school. As a result, more learners could end up as HSL users with some signing competence. In addition, through practical introductory or sensitisation sessions, people without disabilities could easily and enjoyably learn to stand in solidarity with those with disabilities. Interacting with the help of HSL, learning to sign, and learning more about sign language and the culture of sign language users could greatly contribute to the development of that solidarity.

Personal Reflections

A study that was largely motivated by the author's personal experience of learning HSL cannot be complete without the personal reflections of the author. The HSL course was like a window into a different universe. The experience allowed the author to gain insight into the world of a minority that has a unique culture and language. In this context, sign language and its use, at least in the first two years of studying, appears to be very direct and honest, sometimes brutally, sometimes embarrassingly honest. Emotions in the world and the communication practices of the Deaf seem to be much more important than in traditional communication. Emotions are more honestly and clearly expressed; what is more, they are much more clearly understood. This might have an effect on the HSL users as well: They seem to express their emotions overtly. They also seem to possess more empathy and have better antennae to attune to and decipher their communication partners' intentions and feelings. This might be partly due to the fact that communication is more intensive as it is carried out using the whole body and that the brain is fully engaged. There may also be other factors at work, which would need to be researched, for example, disadvantaged communicators may reach a higher level of competence in certain areas to compensate for the disabilities they have.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This was a small-scale study conducted in Hungary over a short period of time. No data were collected on how many HSL courses participants had completed, how many teachers they had had, or what sign language competence they had reached. The sample was not representative; the respondents were, however, in the best possible position to illuminate their sign language learning experience since they had fresh memories of learning to sign. A larger sample, a longitudinal approach, and nonparticipating researchers could in the future make the findings better substantiated. The findings in this study are specific to the Hungarian context of 31 self-motivated adult learners in Budapest. They also explicitly focus on the learning of HSL but may with caution be adapted to similar contexts where young adults and adults are willing to learn the language of and establish connections with members of the Deaf minority.

Although the research instrument was specifically aimed at eliciting responses on sign language and sign language learning in general and not eliciting feedback on specific courses or teachers, some responses may have been influenced by the given course, the class atmosphere, the group cohesion, the teacher, or the methodology applied by the teacher, which may distort the findings.

Apart from increasing the sample size and the duration of data collection, perhaps gathering insights from sign language instructors could contribute to refining the tentative conclusions of this exploratory study. Further research could address the quality and features of sign language instruction.

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Appendix

Dear sign language learner,

In my research I aim to explore how learners perceive sign language learning. I would also like to find out to what extent it resembles or differs from foreign language learning. Thank you for your help.

By proceeding you consent to your data being used for research purposes. The data collected do not allow the identification of your identity. Participation in the research is voluntary and anonymous.

You will be asked to give some personal data (e.g., age) and individual impressions. It is important to respond honestly.

Filling in the questionnaire will take about 10 minutes.

Thank you,

Soproni Zsuzsanna

Section 1

Age (Please give a number)

Sex (Male / Female)

Do you speak/are you learning/have you ever learnt any foreign languages? Yes / No

If you selected yes in the previous question, please select the languages (Multiple answers possible):

English German French Italian Spanish Other

If you selected 'other' above, please write the language you speak/are learning/have learnt here:

Section 2

Do you consider yourself successful in learning foreign language(s)? (5=I communicate very well compared to the time invested, 1=I do not communicate well at all compared to the time invested.)

Do you consider yourself successful in sign language learning? (5=I communicate very well compared to the time invested, 1=I do not communicate well at all compared to the time invested.)

For the statements that follow, please indicate the extent to which you agree with them (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree).

Sign language is completely like a foreign language for me.

Sign language learning is completely like foreign language learning for me.

It is easier for me to learn how to sign than to learn a foreign language.

Since I started learning to sign, I have started to pay more attention to my gestures.

Since I started learning to sign, I have started to pay more attention to my articulation.

Since I started learning to sign, I have been gesticulating more.

Since I started learning to sign, I have started to pay more attention to other people's body language.

Since I started learning to sign, I have started to pay more attention to my own body language.

Since I started learning to sign, I have become better at noticing other people's emotions.

Since I started learning to sign, I have become better at expressing my own emotions.

Since I started learning to sign, I have started to maintain better eye contact with the people I talk to.

Section 3

You can finish the following unfinished sentences in any way you want to reflect your sign language learning experiences.

The greatest experience in learning to sign was that...

Learning to sign for me is like...

Sign language differs from Hungarian in that it...

Sign language resembles Hungarian in that it....

Learning sign language resembles learning a foreign language in that it...

Learning sign language differs from learning a foreign language in that...

It helps my learning to sign that...

It makes my learning to sign difficult that...

For me, the most effective method of learning sign language is to...

If you couldn't write down any of your important insights about sign language learning above, but you think it's important, please do it here.