

right on target

Roberto Wirth Fund newsletter

Dear Readers

Welcome to the fifth edition of our newsletter. Hope you all enjoyed the summer holidays!

I would first like to present our new look website. It has been completely redesigned with accessibility in mind. Visit our site at www.robertowirthfund.net and let us know what you think. We welcome comments to help us improve the site further.

As we approach the end of the year have been working on several projects and events. In October, we started the second part of the Baths of ancient Rome art education project began at the bilingual (Italian and Italian Sign Language) Cossato school in Piemonte. Both Deaf and hearing children, between 3 and 6 years old, discover the ancient Roman world.

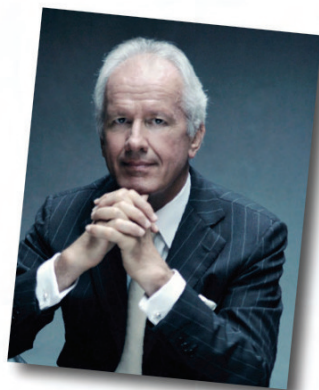
Back in June I was kindly invited to give a key note speech at the third national day for the elderly deaf in the Netherlands. In July we held a fundraising fashion show in Rome, with some stunning designs by Cerfontaine and jewelry by Angeletti and Chantecler.

As you know, our work is funded through donations and events supporting Italian deaf and deafblind children. To learn more about the ways in which you can support our work visit our new website or see the donation box on the last page of this newsletter.

Look forward to seeing you at our next event. Enjoy our newsletter!



Roberto E. Wirth
President



Third National Day for Elderly Deaf in the Netherlands

On 11 June 2009, Mr Wirth was asked to give the opening speech at the third national day for elderly deaf people in the Netherlands. The previous two keynote speakers were, Mr Yerker Anderson, at that time President of the World Federation of the Deaf and Mr Hans Hoogervorst, the Dutch Minister of Health.

The event was hosted by De Gelderhorst, a centre for older deaf and hard of hearing people in the Netherlands. De Gelderhorst was founded in 1972 in Ede and provides a home for over 80 elderly deaf people and also three residential blocks, which offer 81 apartments for elderly deaf people who want to live independently.



Mr Wirth spoke about his early experiences and how being able to study in the States changed his outlook and opportunities. He highlighted the importance to deaf and deafblind children of having the right support and opportunities to achieve what they want in life.

Around 750 older deaf people attended the event. The president of the event presented a retrospective and future vision for older deaf people in Holland. Other speakers included Kader Abdolah, writer and son of a deaf father, and Anja Hiddinga and Jascha Blume, who were involved in the film "Poes, Ball, Dobber", which questions what it is to be deaf in a hearing world.





Activities and projects

English/ASL Language Lab

The Roberto Wirth Fund has been conducting an English/ASL Language Lab with the Scuola dell'Infanzia Primaria 173 Circolo Didattico for two consecutive years – spring 2008 and spring 2009.

A deaf and a hearing tutor, both mother tongue English speakers, conducted the Lab. Grades 1, 2, 3 and 5 were integrated with both deaf and hearing students together in the classroom, while grade 4 was segregated.

Our objective was to provide a natural language learning environment where the students could learn English with mother tongue native speakers.

The comprehension of English was facilitated by the use of sign language and visual materials in the classroom.

The visual strategies we used in the activities were a great benefit to not only the deaf students, but also for the hearing students. The activities we used with the students varied upon skills we wanted to focus on, including fill in the blanks, bingo games, guess who games, a mini treasure hunt and drawing activities. The students were also encouraged to write basic phrases in English and to use English in a natural way.

The children shared their difficulties with English with the tutors, which allowed the tutors to modify the activities and strategies to best meet the needs of the students during the labs.

All in all, it was a pleasure to see the students' motivation for learning and the continuous progress that the students made during this laboratory.

Integrated Athletics Course

The project "Integrated Athletics," one of a few sports courses in Italy geared towards deaf children, was supported by the RWF in collaboration with the Atletica dei Gelsi sports club (www.atleticadeigelsi.it), thanks to the Circolo Giovanile del Corpo della Nobiltà Italiana donation.

The courses were taught by qualified instructors supported by a communication assistant from RWF, Marzia Caravelli, an Italian athlete who is in second position nationally in the 100m hurdles and also works in the field of deafness.

Two deaf athletes – Alessandro Natale, holder of the European record in the 100m and Giacomo Susco, triathlon champion – held special lessons over the course of a year. The lessons, specifically suited for deaf children, also responded to the children's curiosity towards athletics.

The activities allowed the participants to compete with each other in a cooperative environment and a team effort between the deaf and hearing children helped facilitate effective integration.



The objectives set by RWF at the beginning of the project were fulfilled: the introduction of deaf children to sport; socialization between deaf and hearing children; and the pairing of trained instructors with deaf athletic role models.

Summer Adventures in the City

"Summer Adventures in the City," a summer camp (CRE) for deaf and hearing children ranging in age from 4 to 13, was organized by Il Treno, a social cooperative, in conjunction with the Rome branch of the National Association of the Deaf and the City of Rome. The CRE



2009 was held at the Fulvio Bernardini Community Athletics Center on Via dell'Acqua Marcia 51, in Rome, from June 29 to July 10.

The children had fun taking part in sports and hands-on activities in a bilingual environment (Italian and LIS) and spent enjoyable days outdoors.

RWF Director Stefania Fadda helped contribute to a successful project by providing psychological counselling to the staff with regard to the relational dynamics of the deaf and hearing children involved in the summer camp.

Lessons on deafness at the University of Roma 3

The RWF director, Dr Stefania Fadda, and one of our deaf collaborators, Dr Kate Groves, were invited by Professor Carla de Petris of the University of Rome 3 to give two lessons: "Childhood Deafness: psychological and socio-relational aspects" and "How to teach English to Deaf Children."

The lessons were a part of the English Language Laboratory 1: "Challenges of English Language Instruction" organized by Professor de Petris and hosted by the Course of Studies in Primary Education. The series of lessons were held at the University of Rome 3 from 12-21 May. Dr Fadda illustrated the psychological and socio-relational aspects of childhood deafness on 19 May, while Miss Groves explained the methods for the instruction of English to deaf children on 21 May.

The 35 students who attended the two lessons dedicated to deafness were given certificates of participation by the RWF and the Course of Studies in Primary Education at Roma 3 University.

Deafblindness and communication

The RWF provided its knowledge and expertise for a training course for professionals working in the field of deafblindness. In the month of April two of our collaborators taught a series of lessons about deafblindness within the Advanced Training Course for LIS Communication Assistants, organized by the Region of Lazio in collaboration with the National Association of the Deaf (ENS). The course was held at the Rome Pascal Institute.

Riccardo Copat and Thomas Buhling, guided the participants into the world of deafblindness, focusing on the various modes of communication of deafblind people, including Italian Tactile Sign Language (LIST).

The lessons also provided an overview of the broad area of deafblindness, highlighting its impact on daily life and the necessity of initiating and providing special services that improve the quality of life for deafblind people.

The presenters also explained the laws currently in place regarding deafblindness in Europe and Italy, and demonstrated, in particular, how Italian law does not yet recognize deafblindness as a specific disability.



Scientific projects

Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Deaf Students

Many people agree that a working knowledge of English is necessary in order to take advantage of more personal and professional opportunities. How does being deaf affect one's ability to learn English as a foreign language (EFL)? How can teachers effectively teach EFL to deaf students in Italy?

The importance of English

English is the main language of not only travel and international business and academics, but also technology and the Internet (over 80% of its content is in English), sports and even pop music and advertising. Because a working knowledge of English is required in many fields and occupations, education ministries around the world make English instruction to a basic level of competence a mandatory requirement in schools.

English as a Foreign Language

Many young deaf Europeans are coming together in international social settings such as theater, workshops, and sports and youth organizations. Anecdotal evidence shows that many use English as a common language when keeping in contact via email and online chat rooms.

Educational opportunities are becoming increasingly available for deaf students to study abroad, and often the language used in these educational settings is English.

Indeed, a certain level of English competence is often a necessary requirement for graduating from high school and university for all students, deaf and hearing.

Challenges facing the EFL teacher

One of the most important challenges facing the teacher of English with Italian deaf students is the lack of training and awareness of issues facing deaf learners because teacher-training programs in Italy often address the issue of deafness only as one of many topics under the umbrella of disability.

Most often deaf students are integrated in the classroom with their hearing peers, making effective communication and teaching pace difficult to maintain, especially when teachers have little or no knowledge of strategies for successfully integrating hearing and deaf students.

EFL programs focus on the development of listening, writing, reading and speaking skills. Most materials combine all four areas in exercises, making it very difficult for learners who are unable to access auditory information without some kind of assistance. The lack of suitable materials available to deaf learners limits their ability to learn English on the same level as their hearing peers.

Common oversights made by EFL teachers

Teachers who lack training and awareness may focus on rote learning because it can be easier for them to say, "memorize this" when encountering deaf or hard of hearing students. Teachers may also gloss over grammar instruction when they deem it a topic "too difficult" to teach deaf students.

Teachers who struggle with integrating deaf and hearing students in the classroom may progress through the lessons too fast because they follow the pace of the hearing students, who do not need



extra time to absorb and process the information being presented.

Without sufficient linguistic knowledge of LIS (Italian Sign Language), teachers are often unable to help the signing deaf students build connections with English. With various challenges facing the teacher, another common issue is establishing lower learning and classroom expectations for the students because of their “disability.”

Challenges facing deaf students in the EFL classroom

When a student arrives to school with academic readiness, they come to school better prepared to learn additional languages. They also carry a “bag of tricks” – learning strategies for encountering and adapting to different classroom situations, including those of communication difficulties with the teacher, their hearing peers and difficulties accessing classroom materials.

Deaf students who often have to learn, not only how to form these new sounds correctly, but also how to hear (for those with residual hearing) and lipread English will struggle with EFL materials that devote 50% of their activities to the development of listening and speaking skills. In the foreign language classroom, the teacher serves as a communication bridge between one language and the other. If the student is unable to understand the teacher, he or she is unable to gain comprehension and skills in the new language.

Common learning errors made by deaf EFL learners

There are three main categories of problems that deaf students face in the foreign language-learning environment: making connections to content, having low self-confidence in the learning process, and struggling with grammatical rules. Some students usually focus more on absorbing the information taught to them and less on processing the information and making connections to meaning.

Other students, frustrated at the lack of complete access to the course content lose confidence in themselves as language learners. This also results when teachers set low expectations for the students or exempt them from learning English “because they are deaf.”

Common grammar mistakes deaf students make are very similar to the common mistakes other foreign language learners make when learning

English. The range of errors the students make also depend on the level of their abilities in Italian and LIS – some errors will be “LIS-related,” with mistakes following sign language grammar while others will be “Italian-related,” following Italian grammar.

Strategies for overcoming teaching/ learning challenges

Attending as many deafness-related teacher training workshops as possible and seeking out organizations in Italy that strive to meet the needs of deaf students will help teachers increase their awareness of the needs of deaf learners and how to adapt their teaching techniques. Some of these organizations have extensive libraries and resources and materials accessible to the public.

Learning LIS and developing linguistic knowledge of LIS will allow teachers to help students compare the grammar of LIS and English. Interpreters and LIS instructors can provide more resources and information on this as well.

Teachers need to encourage the development of learning skills in students (for individual learning strategies). Having discussions with the students about which learning strategies do and do not work allow them to become more proactive about their learning process.

These discussions also allow students to become more aware of various learning strategies and thus adding to their “bag of tricks” without which they cannot succeed in the academic environment.

Realistic expectations set by EFL teachers for their deaf students include the acknowledgement of student and teacher limitations and how to exceed them. By providing natural language situations using a variety of communication strategies – including writing notes, emails, text messages and viewing closed captioning of films - teachers enable students to focus on meaning and to make connections to the language.

The teachers themselves need more support to be able to better meet the needs of deaf learners in the foreign language classroom. When these learners have access to the same educational opportunities available to their hearing peers, the door to a better future, rich with opportunities, opens for deaf students.



Here's how you can support us

Donate online at www.robortowirthfund.net

Make a bank transfer made out to the Roberto Wirth Fund ONLUS, Piazza Trinità dei Monti 6 – 00187 Roma.

Banca Popolare di Novara

IBAN: IT 57 W 05608 03200 000000020246

Bic/Swift: NVRBIT2N060

Unicredit Banca di Roma

IBAN: IT 28 S 03002 05201 000010928466

Bic/Swift: BROMITR1701

Please remember to write your name, address and telephone number on the transfer.

Postal checking account N° 88221536, made out to the Roberto Wirth Fund ONLUS, Via Nomentana 56 – 00161 Roma.

Non-transferable cheque made out to the Roberto Wirth Fund ONLUS and sent to the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus, Via Nomentana 56 – 00161 Roma along with your full name, address, phone number and email.

Your donation is tax deductible!

RWF merchandise

Choose a nice t-shirt or colourful RWF Christmas cards, original gift ideas for you and your friends, created by children involved in our projects!



Fundraising

Charity Fashion Show

A magical evening of fashion by Cerfontaine, jewelry by Angeletti and Chantecler, live performances by singer Melanie Gerren and deaf poet Valentina Bani, accessible for all, was held on Monday July 20th in the Hotel Hassler gardens. This summer night, enjoyed by 500 participants, deaf and hearing, gathered funds intended for RWF's activities.

On the catwalk in long caftans and accompanied by deaf and hearing children were 22 exceptional models: Vipsania Andreicich, Allegra Ardemagni, Elena Baudi di Selve, Guglielmina Carabba Tettamanti, Olimpia Colonna, Barbara Ebhardt,

Francesca Felicani, Eleonora Galasso, Melanie Gerren, Elisabetta Imperiali di Francavilla, Chiara Leonetti di Santojanni, Ludovica Mancini, Alessia Montani, Giulia Pasca di Magliano, Elisabetta Notarbartolo di Villarosa, Flaminia Patrizi Montoro, Micaela Bruno Rosnati, Pilar Saavedra, Olimpia Schiavone Panni, Beatrice Tamburi, Margherita Tamraz Federici e Elena Valentino. The Roman salon Rossano Ferretti Hairdressing did the hairstyling.

A special thanks goes to Rudhra Kapur, creator of the Cerfontaine label, Roberto Angeletti and Maria Teresa Aprea of Angeletti and Chantecler, Rossano Ferretti Hairdressing, Massimo Bisceglia of Luxury Technologies for the light direction and Stefano Pierozzi for the sound. A special thanks also goes to lo?lon, which donated 150 colorful watches, Starmedia Company for the printing of promotional materials, the wineries Castello di Roncade, Castello del Terriccio and Murgo and also to all of the friendly businesses who donated more than 97 prizes for the raffle, including Ferragamo, René Caovilla, Gallo and L'Oréal.

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DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS FACE-TO-FACE WITH OSCAR WILDE: AN INNOVATIVE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

During the 2007-2008 academic year, I taught a small Language and Translation of the English Language course including students with varying degrees of deafness within the Faculty of Education at the University of Rome 3. The class included three deaf and hard of hearing students supported by an Italian Sign Language (LIS) interpreter who provided simultaneous translation of the lectures.

Up until this point, despite having taught a few years, I'd never found myself afraid of communication breakdowns - where I was unable to make myself understood and at the same time misunderstanding student requests and comments. The first issue facing me was the course program: on the one hand, I didn't want to present topics and linguistic concepts out of reach of the deaf students; on the other hand, I didn't feel right to offer an "easy" or "short" program compared to those offered to the other hearing students. Then there was the main issue: how to confront a theatrical text, meant solely for the stage, focusing on verbal irony and paradoxes - already evident in the title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde.

During the lessons, I started with an introduction to the text and the reason why I had chosen this material for the course; I introduced the concepts of "authentic materials" and "intercultural approach," affirming the fact that language "by the book" can be different from language in authentic texts.

Proceeding with the reading, we experimented with various strategies for acquiring words on the whole: the visual reading was supported by an oral reading and by LIS interpretation. In the case of new or really important words, they were repeated with the hands placed on the throat of the speaker, allowing the students visual-tactile access to sounds. These words included those critical to text comprehension and those with pronunciation that varied from the spelling or similar graphemes. We often relied on techniques of phoneme-based word composition, based on their use in words already known, in particular repeatedly signing more complex groups of letters.

As a teacher, a huge effort was placed on finding ways to explain phonetic similes in words without the same graphemic roots, in order to help make it easier for the students to comprehend and memorize words. An effort was also placed on understanding which logical connections the students used to find similarities between some words rather than others and to encourage them to think about language in a more abstract way. The deaf students were more concrete in their comparisons than their hearing colleagues, as well as in their pursuit of

learning goals (linguistic and non) and understanding the focus of class discussions.

Over the course of a couple of lessons, I decided to introduce a phonetic alphabet - albeit in reduced format, functional solely for the purpose of understanding the text. The students responded pretty well even though it was a bit more difficult for them to distinguish between the phonetic signs and the regular manual alphabet used in LIS without much confusion. This aspect of the phonetic alphabet was controversial - the LIS interpreter was limited to using signs associated with the Italian language, and therefore had to translate the spoken language twice - once to convey the concept in LIS, and again to compare the LIS and English concepts. This process took more time; however, we were unable to find another alternative. On one hand, the deaf students knew only LIS; on the other hand, the interpreter was not able to effectively use British Sign Language (BSL), which the students wouldn't have been able to understand anyway. We hypothesized that it would be ideal to translate the LIS into BSL and thereafter translate the text directly using BSL, but the effort to simultaneously memorize the new BSL signs while learning English would be too much and less productive given the time available to us for the course.

Regarding the phonetic aspects of the text, the students were deeply curious by the use of irony and paradoxes. They discovered that it was possible to play on the similarities of some words to express duplicate concepts and they were faced with a much more abstract reality, albeit as real and current as the one they were used to, adding another "flavor" to expressing the same things in everyday life.

The students willingly watched two cinematic versions of the text, along with subtitles in the original language. The visual support showed itself to be useful for making clear many details that the mere reading could not fully explicate.

I believe that one of the aspects that motivated them the most during this course was having the perception of working on a real language and facing the same issues faced by the hearing students - not because it was being compared with a program not adapted for deaf people, but because the students were able to do so and they understood, acquiring step by step, the sufficient and necessary tools for confronting different types of texts and topics.

All the students who had taken part in this course passed the exams with good results. They diligently and energetically participated in every activity with willingness, cooperation, a desire to learn and to take a risk, thus reinforcing my conviction that students - all students, regardless of their condition from the start - if conveniently motivated and pushed to work can achieve great results.