

Reflections on the recent FEAPDA congress

By Raili Loit, Klops, Estonia

Last year, on September 30th and October 1st, the 26th FEAPDA congress *Innovation, Opportunities and Challenges in the 21st Century Deaf Education: Technology in and Outside the Classroom* was held in Tallinn, Estonia, bringing together participants and presenters from 11 different countries all over Europe. The congress was organised by the Estonian Association of Teachers of Deaf and Hearing Impaired Children (Kuulmispuudega Laste Õpetajate Selts, <http://klops.edu.ee/>), a small NGO that has been a member of FEAPDA since 2018.

The focus of this year`s congress was technology and its possibilities in deaf education and everyday life. This topic was chosen due to the fact that during the last decades technology has become an inseparable part of our life, including education. The rapid improvement and development of technological devices is providing more and more opportunities to support deaf students and their teachers in their educational settings, at the same time as offering alternatives to make learning more fun and enjoyable, encouraging a more active engagement in the learning process and making learning more effective. In addition to this, the situation with the Covid-19 pandemic showed us that the need for distant learning has become inevitable, so a good knowledge and support of technical solutions in these cases is crucial.

The presentations of the congress were wide-ranging, giving an overview about a wide variety of topics delivered by 23 presenters from 8 different countries.



The congress opening presentation by Leo De Raeve from Belgium

The opening and closing presentations of the congress were given by Leo De Rave from Belgium, who spoke about incidental learning and the development of the theory of mind in children with hearing loss. He also facilitated a workshop, sharing the experiences of using speech-to-text support in mainstream and special education settings in the Netherlands and Belgium.

The second keynote speaker, Peep Küngas from Estonia, spoke about personalising education through technology, to unleash the full potential of each individual learner. He introduced the Estonian personalised learning path initiative, which aims at making smart use of educational technology to leverage education according to learners' needs and preferences. His introduced technology is at the moment tested and used on mainstream students, but it could be adjusted for deaf learners or others with special needs learners as well.

The last keynote speaker, Claudia Becker from Germany, gave a presentation and facilitated a workshop about the theory of mind (ToM) development of children with hearing loss and more specifically about the ToM training programme 'ProToM', which she and her team has developed. This training programme contains numerous exercises and stimulating materials within 9 modules and can be downloaded for free from their website: https://protom-education.com/en/home_en/. The materials are available in English, German, French, Italian and Greek.

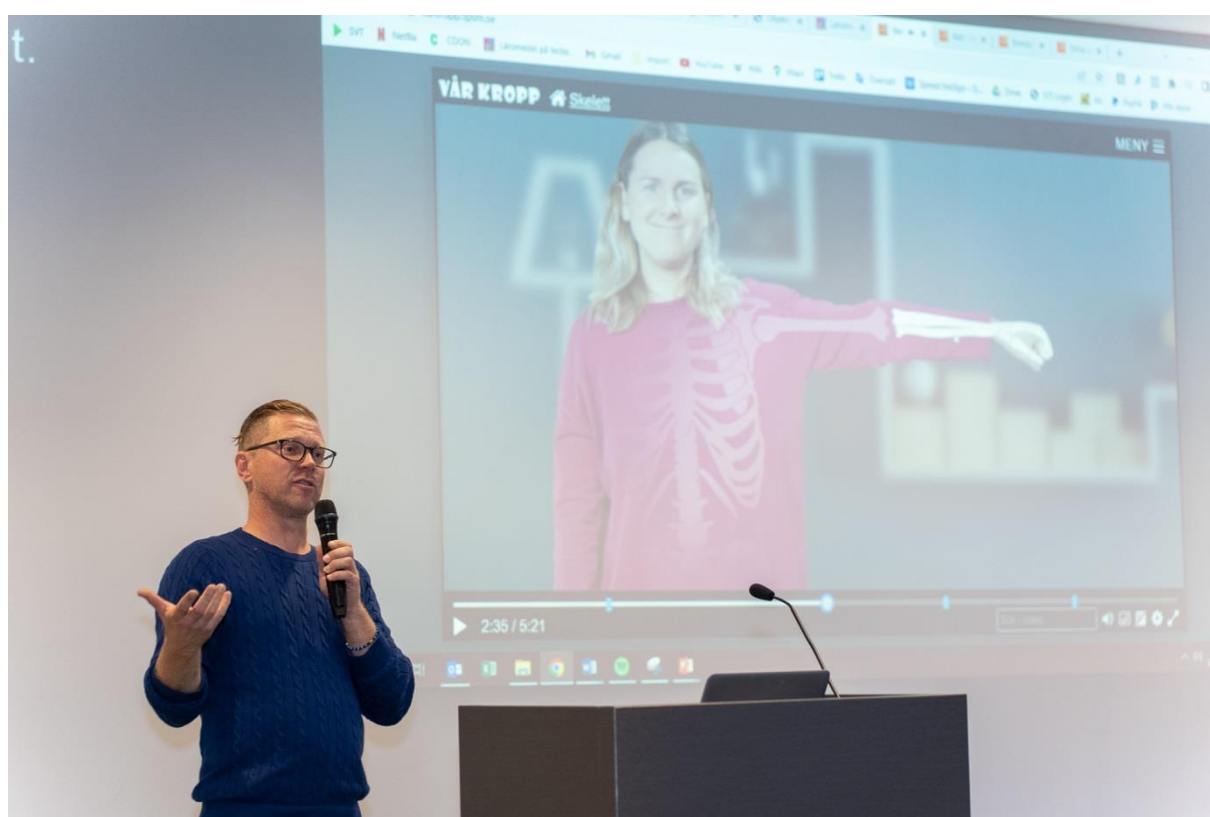


Laura Avemarie and Katarina Urbann presenting their work on the prevention of sexual abuse among Deaf children

Several presentations during this conference focused on the well-being and/or psychosocial development of the Deaf children. For example, there was an interesting presentation by Jaz

Mann and Elizabeth Thomas (UK) from the organisation DeafKidz International, who have developed a digital game that encourages Deaf youngsters to stand up for themselves and, above all, tries to prevent (sexual) abuse. The game revolves around 7 themes (say stop, trust others, secrets, bullying, privacy, challenging photos, online challenges) and was developed in 6 languages (English, Urdu, French, Spanish, Arabic and Hindi). More information about this project can be found on the website <https://www.deafkidzvscovid19.com/> .

Laura Avemarie and Katarina Urbann from Germany gave a presentation on the use of technology to protect Deaf children from sexual abuse as this group tends to run a greater risk of being sexually abused. Digital prevention tips were therefore compiled from their project group, a digital programme was developed for students and a programme for teachers. The information package focuses mainly on the age group of 13-16 years. More information about this project can be found at www.projekt-diggah.de



Thomas Lydell introducing the educational materials made for Swedish Deaf students

The Estonian presenters focused more on the aspects related to technical hearing support: Sandra Vill gave an overview of cochlear implantations in Estonia; Elisabet Rivis spoke about the challenges and benefits of using assistive listening devices in inclusive educational settings and Mari Reilson reflected on the results of a study that was carried out among Estonian kindergarten teachers about their knowledge of supporting the development of children with hearing loss.

The Swedish presenters, Maria Rudin from a deaf-owned production company Dramaski and Thomas Lydell from the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools

(SPSM), introduced their work and digital teaching/learning materials that their organisations have produced for the Swedish Deaf students on different subjects. The amount and variety of the SPSM production was impressive – some of their work can be seen here: <https://teckensprak.spsm.se/>.

Interesting presentations were also given about the experiences of using technology for coping with the Covid-crisis in Slovenia and Spain and about possibilities to improve sign language and/or bimodal bilingual foreign language skills.



The former president of FEAPDA, Alison Weaver from the UK closing the congress

All the topics and materials demonstrated at the congress provoked a lot of questions, lively discussion and active exchange of ideas among the participants during and after the presentations and this, in fact, is what FEAPDA is all about – to meet colleagues from other countries and share information, experience and expertise with each other. Personal contacts, possibilities for direct interaction and learning from each other are especially valuable due to the fact that the number of specialists working in the field is relatively small in all countries and possibilities for this are quite limited on a daily basis.

The closing remarks were made by Alison Weaver from the UK, who has been the president of FEAPDA for 6 years. During this congress she also announced her retirement as president and handed over to the newly elected president, Leo De Raeve.

The feedback to the event was overwhelmingly positive, which among other things proves the value of FEAPDA and encourages us to continue to support colleagues across Europe.

Thank you to all the participants and supporters for making the congress a success and see see you at the next, 27th FEAPDA congress in 2024.



The participants of the congress