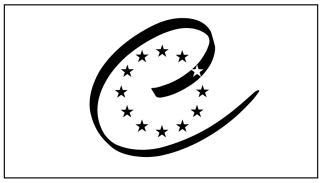

Signed Languages in Education in Europe – a preliminary exploration

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" No hearing community would tolerate their children being educated by those who cannot communicate with or understand their children. Yet deaf children with normal cognitive ability are expected to function in just this environment" (Kyle and Allsop 1997: 7)

Abstract

This paper briefly describes some issues concerning education in signed languages insofar as the availability of data permits at this time. In order to contextualise the discussion, we briefly outline the diversity of approaches that are applied in a European context (oralism/auralism, 'Total-communication', bilingualism) and make reference to the specific issues that arise for deaf/ hard of hearing children who do not attend a special school/ unit for the deaf in terms of accessing a signed language. We will briefly discuss the implications for school learning by deaf and hearing impaired students of whatever approaches are adopted to signed language and to the national language(s).

We then turn to discuss the teaching of signed languages as a subject in the curriculum (LS), and will also highlight where non-indigenous signed languages are taught as 'foreign languages'. We will refer to the teaching of foreign languages to Deaf[1] / hard of hearing children (where data is available). We will also outline the issue of how signed languages are taught across the curriculum (LAC) – as a medium of instruction for other school subjects.

[1] In the field of Deaf Studies, the use of an upper case 'D' in the word 'Deaf' denotes membership of a Deaf community and use of an indigenous signed language as a primary or preferred language. Use of the lower case 'd' in the word 'deaf' refers to people who have a medically determined hearing loss, but who may not consider themselves to be a member of the Deaf community, and who may not use an indigenous signed language. A typical example of a 'deaf' person is an adult with an acquired hearing loss. A typical example of a 'Deaf' person is a prelingually deaf child who, through use of an indigenous signed language, shared linguistic and cultural values with other signed language users.

1. Introduction

The debate about how best to educate deaf children is centuries old and tends to focus on methodologies applied in education (the 'oral-manual' debate) and notions of 'normalcy'. The situation of Deaf people, unlike that of other linguistic minorities is complicated by the fact that deaf and hard of hearing people are often seen as 'disabled'' and this is the driving force in the provision of support services and special education, while for Deaf people, the use of a signed language marks them as a linguistic minority, with cultural and group rights commensurate with those of other minority language communities (see for example, Kyle and Allsop 1997, Matthews 1996, etc.).

Pre-1880, often considered the 'enlightened era' for deaf education, the use of signed languages in the education of deaf people in Europe was dominant. France was the leading light, with Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée's (1712-1789) approach to deaf education studied by educationalists across the world. In 1880, however, the tide turned and a congress of hearing educators of the deaf gathered in Milan, where they voted to deliberately exclude the use of signed languages and signed modes in deaf education. An oral approach, focusing on the teaching of speech (and, post World War II, the use of residual hearing), which had originally been developed by the German, Samuel Heinicke (1728-1790) was foregrounded, and had as its aim the "demutement" of deaf people by the use and adaptation of the oral language of the hearing majority (Heinicke, reprinted 1912, cited in List, Wloka and List, 1999: 114).

As a result of the Congress of Milan, deaf teachers at schools for the deaf were dismissed, signed languages were banned from the classroom and the social sphere of life in the schools and those who could not progress with a speech-based approach were labeled "oral failures", segregated from the "oral successes", and frequently stigmatized (for example, see McDonnell and Saunders 1993, Griffey 1994, for discussion of the Irish situation and Knoors 1999 for the Netherlands). Children who use signed languages were seen as 'mentally retarded' in many cases, and in many countries were punished for using a signed language. This often had religious overtones (e.g. confessing use of signed language as a 'sin', giving up signing for Lent (Leeson and Grehan 2004). Side effects of this approach have been the lowered literacy attainments amongst deaf children: the averagely intelligent profoundly deaf child across the western world educated orally leaves school with a reading age similar to that of an eight and a half year old hearing child (Conrad 1979, James, O'Neill, and Smyth 1990, Brelje (ed.) 1999 for examples of literacy attainment in several countries). Unfortunately, these practices and outcomes continue in many countries to date.

The tensions, which continue to exist between the medical versus socio-cultural perspectives on deafness, are compounded by the fact that the vast majority of deaf and hard of hearing children are born to hearing parents (90-95%). Thus the natural transmission of language - spoken or signed - is complicated, (and in this respect unlike speakers of minority languages), which feeds into notions of 'language deficit and language disability' as inherent to the experience of deafness (for example, see Eckert 1999). This is a false notion: while it can be difficult to ensure appropriate language access to deaf and hard of hearing children (more on this below), it is not impossible, and deaf children's cognitive potential is equal to that of their hearing peers (MacSweeney 1998), though this potential has not been achieved in many countries due to educational policies and practices.

2. The Linguistic Status of Signed Languages

As a result of the fact that in many countries, signed languages are not languages of instruction in schools, the state language(s) are considered the deaf/ hard of hearing child's L1. This goes some way to explaining why in some countries, signed languages are considered as 'tools' for special education, often used only with those considered to be "mentally retarded" rather than as languages in their own rights. While the inclusion of signed languages in education differs across the Council of Europe Member States, at European level, signed languages are considered fully fledged indigenous languages: the European Parliament has passed two resolutions on the status of signed languages (1988, 1998) while the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly has passed a resolution calling for the protection of signed languages in member states (2003) (Leeson 2004). Further, the role of signed languages in education has been enshrined in UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (par. 21). Similarly, the UN's Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities makes a clear statement about access to information and communication as well as referring to the role of signed languages in education (Rule 5) (Stevens 2005).

Following from such pan-national recognitions, several states have implemented some form of legal recognition for signed languages in their territories: some have constitutional recognition (Austria (2005), Czech Republic (1988), Finland (1995), Portugal (1997), Slovak Republic (1995)), while others have recognized signed languages through some other legal measure (Belgium – both Flanders (2006) and Wallonia (2003), Czech Republic (1998), Denmark (1991), Germany (2002), Greece (2000), Iceland (1999), Ireland (1998), Latvia (2000), Sweden (1981), Norway (1997/8), Slovenia (2002), United Kingdom – recognized British Sign Language (BSL) and, in Northern Ireland, both BSL and Irish Sign Language (2003) (after Stevens 2005). The reader is referred to Timmerman (2005) for an excellent overview of the status of signed languages in several Council of Europe countries.

It must be recognized that the legal recognition of signed languages in and of itself is not enough to protect signed language users, nor to ensure an appropriate educational experience via a signed language. As we shall see, the exclusion of signed languages from deaf education in many countries seems to be one of the most restrictive moves in limiting educational access for children for whom access to spoken language is very limited or completely inaccessible.

3. Language Acquisition: Which Language is the Deaf Child's First Language?

Regardless of educational approach invoked, one thing is clear: early access to language skill development (be that spoken or signed) is essential in order to develop robust language skills, which will allow for further cognitive development and mastery of higher cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy (MacSweeney 1998). The difficulty is that access to spoken language input is limited for many due to their degree of deafness, but this fact is not an acceptable reason for denying children an accessible language or an appropriate education that is equal to that available to non-deaf children.

MacSweeney (ibid.) notes that "An early concern regarding deaf children's early exposure to sign language was that this would limit their spoken language development and therefore subsequent literacy development. This is not the case" (ibid: 26-27). Studies have shown the importance of language ability, irrespective of modality, in relation to reading ability. For example, MacSeeeney cites Strong and Prinz (1997), who assessed 160 deaf children and found that better American Sign

Language (ASL) skills were related to better literacy. MacSweeney goes on to note that deaf children with equivalent ASL skills, who had hearing parents, also developed equivalent literacy skills, indicating clearly that competence in a signed language can be achieved when parents are not themselves native signed language users. Therefore the issue of baseline language skill, regardless of modality, is the essential pre-requisite for higher-level cognitive skill development.

In contrast, many oral educators continue to refute the idea that signed languages have any place at all in the education of deaf children. They argue that "within an oral/aural approach, the emphasis is placed on the exchange of meaning and the rules and structures of [spoken] language are assumed to be gradually learnt by the child through experimentation in use, in much the same way that a young hearing child gradually learns the rules of [spoken] language" (Watson 1999: 70). However, this contrasts with the fact that language acquisition researchers find that deaf children acquiring English do not follow normal development patterns for acquisition, especially if language acquisition is delayed (Woll 1998).

One of the reasons why these entrenched views remain seems to be the debate about how one decides on what is the 'mother tongue' for deaf children: for oralists, the dominant spoken language is mother tongue, and a naturalistic path to fluency is assumed, pending audiological support or medical intervention (e.g. Cochlear Implantation) while those who propose bilingual approaches see the spoken language (or indeed, the written form of the dominant language) as L2 acquisition, and approach the process of teaching and learning that language from a foreign language teaching perspective (for example, see Heiling 1999 regarding the bilingual education of deaf children in Sweden).

While parental choice is often cited as the reason for embracing an oral approach to education, often excluding signed language use, parents in many countries are not provided with clear information about what it means to be deaf, and perhaps, most importantly, what it means to deprive a child of an accessible language (e.g. lack of a robust L1 (Woll 1998), cognitive consequences (MacSweeney 1998), literacy problems (Conrad 1979), as well as the positive aspects of membership of a Deaf community (e.g. Ridgeway 1998).

Other reasons cited for opting for oral approaches to education include increasing educational outcomes for deaf people (Griffey 1994): the research across the European Union shows that Deaf people are underemployed and this is often as a direct result of having poor literacy skills (Kyle and Allsop 1997, Matthews 1996, Conway 2006).

Finally, the desire to normalize Deaf people – to make them "seem … closer to the normally hearing" (Griffey 1994: 38) is cited by those who believe that the use of a signed language restricts prospects for integration. This contrasts with the experience of Deaf people who report on their educational experience: in many countries, many Deaf people who were mainstreamed seek out the Deaf community and choose to identify with Deaf communities. Indeed, in Sweden, where Swedish Sign Language/Swedish bilingualism is established as the national policy in deaf education (Heiling 1999), hard of hearing people wishing to access tertiary education often learn Swedish Sign Language so that they can fully participate at this level (Nilsson 2006, personal communication).

4. Signed Languages as subjects – Approaches and implications for signed language use

While the traditional approach to education for deaf and hard of hearing students has been one of segregated schooling in special schools for the deaf, today, there is a move in many countries towards “mainstream” education, that is, education in ‘normal’ schools, which frequently entails the support of visiting teachers of the deaf or speech therapists (Watson and Parsons 1998).

Knoors (1999) reports that in the Netherlands, more and more hard of hearing students are educated in the mainstream, while deaf children, “defined functionally as those who have to perceive the spoken language visually, even with the best amplification equipment” (1999: 251) attend schools for the deaf.

A middle way is the education of children who are deaf or hard of hearing in ‘partially hearing units’ (PHUs), which are typically small units attached to a mainstream school where children who are deaf or hard of hearing are educated. Depending on hearing loss, ‘oral ability’, etc., they may spend some or all of their class time in a mainstream class, gaining additional support in the PHU. The decision to opt for mainstream versus special education is typically grounded in the wider view of deafness as disability, and in such settings, the role of indigenous signed languages is typically reduced and signed systems, if used at all, are manually coded versions of the spoken language of the territory (e.g. in one particular country, a manual code representing the morphemes of the dominant language may be used by teachers of the deaf while they simultaneously speak the message they are signing (Baker and Knight 1998).

This approach, which became widely used across Europe in the 1980s and was hailed as a means of re-introducing a signed component into the classroom, without losing the oral element, is known as Total Communication (or Simultaneous Communication, ‘Sim-Com’). Total Communication has been severely criticized as the rate of speech and signing is not the same: teachers typically simplify the spoken component of their message or leave out aspects of manual communication (Baker and Knight 1998) and since aspects of the grammar of signed languages are expressed on the face (adverbs, questions, negation, etc.), the co-occurrence of speech with signed elements blocks out these signals, leading to incomplete messages in both modalities. Despite these serious problems, Total Communication is still widely used in schools for the deaf too.

Many countries see the integration of deaf and hard of hearing children in mainstream classes as a major policy objective. In contrast, in most of Scandinavia, signed languages are seen as languages which have a place in educating deaf children, and as Heiling (1999) notes, in Sweden, mainstreaming is not considered a viable option for deaf children. Instead, bilingual education policy for deaf children is advocated, where Swedish Signed Language is the L1 and Swedish (initially in written form, later with some spoken input) is the L2. Foreign languages are also added (English, British Sign Language or American Sign Language) (ibid.).

In Denmark, Vestberg (1999) notes that as the poor educational results that were the legacy of the oral/aural approach became known, Denmark responded by establishing a centre for Total Communication and instigating research on Danish Sign Language. In 1989, the Danish Secretary of Education established a committee to explore the role of signed language in the curricula for schools for the deaf, noting that signed language must be more than just a means of communication. An outcome is the requirement that all teachers of the deaf in Denmark must complete a qualifying course in Danish Sign Language.

Vestberg also notes how hearing parents choices regarding their approach to education for their deaf children are influenced by their opportunity to observe the fluent communication that Deaf mothers had with their deaf babies. As a result of choosing to introduce Danish Sign Language at an early age, many Danish parents are able to communicate with their deaf youngsters on age appropriate matters during their early years of language development. Further, literacy skills for those with Danish Sign Language as a first language are better than their counterparts who were educated orally some 15 years earlier. Vestberg (1999: 67) notes that "One of the consequences of the bilingual approach is that schools will consider sign language not only as an alternative for students who are oral/aural failures, but as the primary language vehicle for deaf children and an integral part of the curriculum in its own right". He also notes that acceptance of a signed language as a deaf child's primary language will result in the use of signed language as a major medium for subject matter instruction.

Bilingual education is on the increase in other European countries too: Knoors (1999) notes that as research indicated that Sign Language of the Netherlands was a fully fledged language, moves towards a bilingual approach were made. He writes:

> *In the bilingual method, Sign Language of the Netherlands is considered the first language of deaf children. … [it] is an excellent means by which information about subjects like mathematics, history, biology and geography can be transmitted effectively. Dutch would then be taught as a 2nd language. Mastery of the written form of Dutch would have highest priority for deaf children in the Netherlands*". (1999: 253).

However, we should note that while children may develop some bilingual competency in both the spoken/written language of their country and their indigenous signed language, very frequently both are significantly under-developed. This is reflected in the low literacy achievements that are described for Deaf communities in the western world where oralism has been the preferred method of instruction.

One of the major barriers to increasing the use of signed languages as languages of instruction is the fact that in many countries, "sign language has not yet become an obligatory part of the curriculum of institutions preparing teachers of the deaf" (List, Wloka and List 1999: 125). Coupled with this is the low status of signed languages in many countries.

We can say that in countries where signed languages have been acknowledged as languages that have value for Deaf people, and which can be used to offer access to education, indigenous signed languages function as languages for instruction. In some other countries, where the heritage of oralism is still strong, signed languages are typically used as languages of instruction for deaf children who may be labelled as being 'mentally retarded', but are not seen as having an intrinsic value as languages for all deaf children. This demands re-examination as in countries where signed languages have been recognized and used in education, these stigmatized signed language users (i.e. those frequently labelled as 'mentally retarded' or 'deaf and dumb') have proven to be as capable intellectually as their peers who have been labelled as 'oral successes'.

Given the prevalence of oral approaches to education, for many (probably most) Deaf people in Europe, at present there is a significant under-representation of signed languages as subjects on the curriculum. Exceptions include countries where signed languages have been formally recognized (Sweden, Denmark, Finland).

5. Signed Languages Across the Curriculum (LAC)

In contrast to the situation of signed languages as subjects, in some schools for the deaf, signed languages are established as the language of instruction in schools with bilingual policies, where the indigenous signed language is considered the L1 for children entering school. Here, signed languages are seen as full languages which bring 'added value' (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and in bilingual programmes in France, UK, Netherlands, etc.). In contrast, where signed language users are considered 'failures' or 'retarded', signed languages are stigmatized and seen as a last resort in the instruction of such children. In such instances, given that signed languages are (falsely) viewed as 'concrete' or 'limited', reduced versions of national curricula are often taught to children using signed languages in these circumstances.

Further, the atypical path to language acquisition that some 90% of deaf children face, given that their parents are not native signed language users, creates additional challenges for schools, to offer support in the children's homes, particularly at pre-school and early primary school levels (Mahshie 1995).

In most countries, the introduction of bilingual education has co-occurred with a societal change in attitude towards the status of signed languages as real languages. For example, Wickham (1989) notes that in the 1980s, in the UK, there was a negative evaluation of deaf children who chose to or who could only communicate using British Sign Language (BSL). She writes that teachers needed to be given more information about BSL, as understanding of the nature of BSL had to precede commitment to signed bilingual education. She also notes that many teachers, at that time, accepted a need to learn BSL but had no opportunity to do so – a phenomenon still common to many countries.

Another factor that has impacted significantly on shifts towards bilingual education has been awareness of the low literacy skills attained by deaf children. One of the cornerstone studies of literacy and deaf education in Europe (Conrad 1979) found that the averagely intelligent deaf child leaves school with literacy skills comparable to an 8-9 year old hearing child. Strategies for teaching literacy within a signed bilingual programme have been developed in the UK (e.g. Swanwick 1998), and, as noted earlier, where bilingual programmes have been evaluated, literacy outcomes are more in line with age-appropriate skill development than for children in oral programmes (Vestberg 1999).

The introduction of bilingual programmes which place signed languages at the centre of a curriculum and use these languages as languages of instruction demands several conditions to be met:

(1) a view of deaf children as successful learners, given the right learning conditions;

(2) an acceptance of an indigenous signed language as an appropriate language for use in education, with a value in the wider world;

(3) an acceptance of bilingualism as a positive educational outcome (rather than seeing the use of signed language as a stepping stone to monolingual oralism in the majority language of the territory);

(4) state support for hearing parents of deaf children in their learning of the indigenous signed language;

(5) trained Deaf teachers (entails lifting barriers to entry to training);

(6) support from the Ministry of Education: policy is needed and must be visibly assessed;

(7) a curriculum in the signed language of the territory;

(8) resources given to the development of materials in the signed language of the territory;

(9) existing teachers required to learn and be supported in their learning of the indigenous signed language, with awareness of Deaf culture;

(10) a pre-requisite level of signed language skill for 'new' teachers of the deaf, with awareness of Deaf culture.

These are starting points. Relationships with Deaf communities need to be established on equal partnership basis and their experiences of pre-existing approaches must be taken very seriously: Deaf people across Europe speak of 'surviving' their education. Stevens, a Deaf parliamentarian (Flanders, Belgium) and lawyer, writes:

> *Without sign language/s Deaf people cannot function and participate fully in society. Because it is through sign language/s that Deaf people communicate with the outside world. Take sign language away from a Deaf person and s/he is 'disabled' because s/he does not have a language to communicate. Without sign language/s Deaf people cannot 'survive' in society, cannot get an education, cannot communicate, etc*. (2005: 4).

6. Signed Languages as Foreign languages

A small number of initiatives have taken place that introduce foreign spoken languages to deaf students in schools (Sweden, for example, where English is taught) and foreign signed languages are offered as options in secondary school (e.g. American Sign Language or British Sign Language in Sweden). In other countries, Deaf and hearing people may learn a second signed language as a foreign language (e.g. both British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language can be taken as evening classes in Northern Ireland). In yet other countries, there is no strongly established national signed language or no services offered in that signed language and so, in order to access services, deaf and hearing people travel to neighbouring countries in order to learn a neighbouring signed language (e.g. Luxemburgers travel to Trier in Germany to learn German Sign Language, or try to locate appropriate classes in French Sign Language in the province of Lorraine, or in Belgian-French Sign Language in the Belgian province of Luxembourg (EUD Update 2001).

7. Foreign Languages and Deaf Students

In many countries, Deaf schools are exempted from teaching certain languages, and in the mainstream, deaf and hard of hearing children may apply for exemption from learning languages (Leeson 2005). Leeson (ibid.) notes that often such exemptions are based on the false assumption that deafness is a 'language disability', which impedes language learning. The experience of countries where foreign languages – spoken and signed – are introduced to deaf children (e.g. Sweden) demonstrates that this approach is grounded in false beliefs about the nature of deafness.

Other language projects include a European Community funded Lingua programme, called "Signs of the Future", which was developed to enable Deaf people to learn a foreign language either partially or fully via a visual medium, and to provide a curriculum that includes both signed and spoken foreign languages to encourage both Deaf and hearing people to learn another foreign language, be that signed or spoken

and to develop communicative competence in that target language. The Signs of the Future Project was developed by The Scottish Office Education Department and Moray House School of Education (Herriot Watt University), CÉPLUS (University of Liege) and CaPSAS INJS (Gradignan, France). It offers resources in four languages: British Sign Language (BSL), La Langue des Signes Française (LSF), English and French (The Scottish Office 1998). Other developments include moves towards developing Council of Europe European Language Portfolios for signed languages (A portfolio for LSF exists, while the Centre for Deaf Studies in Dublin is working on a portfolio for Irish Sign Language).

It is also important to remember that many Deaf people experience the dominant spoken language of their country as a second or foreign language to which they have very limited access: literacy skills are typically low due to educational experience making the reading of newspapers and subtitles on TV difficult for many and access to incidental conversation and radio is not possible. Thus, “For many deaf persons, the spoken language of their country or region will always remain a foreign or second language” (Stevens 2005: 4).

8. Summary

In this paper we have briefly introduced the historical basis for the oral-manual debate in deaf education. We outlined the major methodological strands that continue to be used in deaf education, namely oralism/auralism, Total Communication (‘Sim-Com’) and bilingualism. We compared and contrasted mainstream education, education in a ‘Partially Hearing Unit’ and in a deaf school.

Drawing on the international literature, we explored how signed languages are used as languages across the curriculum, a situation that is increasing in some countries due to an acknowledgement that bilingualism is key in ensuring access to an appropriate education for a great many deaf children. We noted also that Total Communication is typically a stepping stone between oralism and bilingualism, but the outcomes of this approach as an effective means of transmitting either a complete spoken or signed language are limited.

We then turned to consider signed languages as subjects. Here, the evidence was less positive: in countries where signed languages are seen as subjects, they are typically available to a small cohort of deaf students and are not promoted as subjects to the wider population. We should note that this contrasts with the fact that signed languages feature as evening classes in most of the “old” European Union Member States (EUD Update 2001), and many other European countries.

Finally, we briefly noted that in some countries, foreign spoken and signed languages are introduced to deaf students, but data pertaining to this is scarce, and it is clear that a comprehensive overview of the status of signed languages in education, both as subjects (as indigenous languages and as foreign languages), and as languages used across the curriculum in the Council of Europe Member States is necessary.

The central role of signed languages in the education of Deaf people in the 21st century must be beyond question if we accept that in order to fully participate in a society, one must be able to access it. We have noted that pan-European and global institutions have recognized this fact, and several countries have moved to recognize signed languages in some formal manner. However, the distance between policy objectives as stated in legislation and the day-to-day delivery of education through signed languages is often great. Bridging this gap may help bring to an end a *de-facto* marginalization of what is, from an educational perspective, a highly vulnerable linguistic group and may

demonstrate that the Europe which claims to value linguistic diversity, truly lives by the motto “unity in diversity”, regardless of whether the language you “speak” is spoken or signed.

9. Conclusion

Given the prevalence of oral approaches to education, for many (probably most) Deaf people in countries, at present there is a significant under-representation of signed languages as subjects on the curriculum. Exceptions are countries where signed languages have been formally recognized (e.g. Sweden, Denmark, Finland). The exclusion of signed languages in education runs counter to the acceptance of signed languages as the primary languages accessible by Deaf people, and counter to the data showing that access to a primary language paves the way for cognitive development, bilingualism (or indeed plurilingualism). Fundamentally, the stigmatization of signed languages in education for the deaf in many countries ignores the experiences of Deaf adults whose experiences must help shape future policy. Legislation recognizing signed languages is not enough: access via signed languages in education is the real key for full participation, for educational attainment and for later economic independence for signed language users.

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