

**A PESSOA SURDA : ASPECTOS DE DESENVOLVIMENTO /
APRENDIZAGEM E CONTEXTOS DE EDUCAÇÃO BILINGÜE¹**

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ABSTRACT: Deaf people form one of the most misunderstood minority groups in the world. They exist in every country, have developed their own language, community and culture but have had great difficulty in gaining recognition and appropriate provision. In this paper, the goals for deaf people are set out in terms of the understanding of their language and community and data is drawn from an international study of 17 countries in Europe in order to provide insight into the views of deaf people. The conclusions are stark: deaf people learn their language too late in education (and not at home) have few situations in which to use it and are limited in their attempts to contribute to society by the lack of professional understanding and language competence. This is likely to have a major impact on community life. It has become clear that our social model of deaf service needs to listen much more to deaf people and respond more effectively.

KEY-WORDS: Deaf community; Sign language

RESUMO: As pessoas surdas formam um dos mais mal compreendidos grupos no mundo. Eles existem em todos os países, desenvolveram sua própria língua, comunidade e cultura mas têm tido grandes dificuldades em obter reconhecimento e provimento sociais. Neste artigo, as metas para as pessoas surdas são consideradas a partir da compreensão de sua linguagem e comunidade; os dados foram obtidos de um estudo internacional realizado em 17 países europeus com o objetivo de possibilitar uma melhor compreensão no que se refere às pessoas surdas. As conclusões são desoladoras: as pessoas surdas aprendem sua língua tarde demais na escola (e não em casa), encontram poucas situações nas quais podem usá-la e são limitadas em suas tentativas de oferecer contribuições à sociedade por conta de falhas na compreensão e na competência de linguagem do profissional. Este fato é, provavelmente, o maior impacto sobre a vida da comunidade surda. Torna-se claro que nosso modelo social de serviço à pessoa surda necessita ouvir muito mais à pessoa surda para podermos responder a ela mais efetivamente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunidade surda; Língua de sinais

¹ 1ª CONFERÊNCIA Desenvolvimento e educação da pessoa surda uma perspectiva europeia (o texto foi mantido em inglês).

THE STARTING POINT

It is perhaps indicative of the nature of the way we construct our society that we locate the “*problem of Deafness*” in the Deaf child, in the education, in the services and so on. It is not surprising that the title of these papers is the development of the Deaf child or the education of Deaf child. It seems reasonable that we look for the correct method to teach Deaf children and the systems which are most appropriate. Yet the reality is that we should be considering the education of hearing people, of parents, of service providers and the development of professionals, psychologists and medical personnel. It is only when *they* grow and mature in their ideas and knowledge that Deaf people can hope to enter an environment where Deaf potential can be realised.

There is now quite extensive evidence from USA and Europe that Deaf children’s cognitive potential is not different from hearing children – intelligence tests indicate near normal performance in most non-verbal tests and in tests which have visual spatial awareness, Deaf children do better than hearing. Deaf people are just as intelligent as hearing children.

However, we need to have an image of what Deaf potential might be and what this might require to reach that point of development. This is indicated by the presentation of a senior member of the Centre for Deaf Studies at a recent conference. She completed a project which gave an opportunity for Deaf women in the UK to take courses to prepare them for entering the world of

work. The courses involved self awareness and language as well as content on information technology and education. The courses were organised over a two year period and were integrated into a large scale European programme of training. She was the UK coordinator. She is Deaf, bilingual in written English and British Sign Language. At the end of the project, she organised a conference for Deaf and hearing people to explain the results of the work.

In this presentation, she addressed the audience of about 80 people, to summarise what had been presented, to indicate what she felt were the important points of the meeting and to give a perspective and view of the future. Participants came from long distances; the Member of Parliament was present and representatives of Deaf organisations and Local Government). What she presented in BSL is simultaneously translated to English by trained and qualified interpreters. The whole session was filmed by a Deaf video specialist.

The content of the presentation is not surprising – it provides a summary of the main points and indicates what she hopes for the future. What is different is that it is directly accessible to Deaf people (because they can understand her signing) and to hearing people, because they can watch (more and more people have taken courses in BSL) or listen to the translation. In fact, what we find is that Deaf people begin to participate for the first time. The majority of questions and comments after the presentations were from Deaf people – they had a sense of ownership of the proceedings and of the project itself. What is

significant for all participating is that the Deaf perspective and interpretation is accessible. Deaf people's views can be received and become part of the planning and development of the community as a whole. Deaf people have become included in society.

An obvious and significant part of this, is the language used – British Sign Language. It is probably well accepted now that sign languages are true languages, exhibiting all the features which spoken languages do, except that they are not spoken. They are just as complex, varied, difficult to learn, as all languages. They are just as rewarding to study. They require the same extent of curriculum planning and teaching as all languages and most interesting, they are just as worthy of study for Deaf children in school as for the hearing teachers who will work with them. That is, if hearing children study Portuguese in schools in Brazil, Deaf children can study Brazilian Sign Language at all levels of education.

However, we are only in the beginning stages of understanding the language structure of sign language and it will take a national project on sign linguistics in Brazil, as it has in other countries, to produce a detailed description of the language here. To have an understanding of what this might mean, we need to examine the signing in more detail:

“Like the media, it is really powerful. We asked the BBC, HTV [tv companies] to come here, also the newspapers, but they were really {literally “sniffy” – aloof, dismissive, unconcerned} not interested until

V.D. (Member of Parliament), was coming, and then they all arrived at the last minute to set up their filming. So you see, that was how to make good publicity. It shows the power of the media.”

In presenting this she uses the structures of BSL. She uses the face, the hands, the body, the spatial locations. She creates complex clause structures, by locating parts of the sentence in different areas of signing space. The media/TV are on her right hand side, the Member of Parliament on her left. The comments to the audience are in the centre. The glosses (literal translations) of the signs confirm the difference in structure:

LIKE m.e.d.i.a. REALLY POWERFUL,
ASK-THEM (right) b.b.c, h.t.v
COME-TO-CENTRAL-LOCATION-
FROM-DIFFERENT-DIRECTIONS
PRESS[*tv,papers*],. SNIFFY. {shift left}
v.d. m.p IMPORTANT COME-TO-
LOCATION-RIGHT {shift right}
COME [repeat – all come]

But this gives only a limited view of the complexity of the signing. She uses four areas of signing space to indicate different components of what she wants to say – first addressing the audience, referring to the TV companies, taking their role, and finally, indicating the space allocated to the MP. This is a very incomplete analysis. However, it becomes obvious that there is much to do to study the rules of the language and to provide enough information for courses for Deaf and hearing people.

It should also be clear that without this language, the contribution of Deaf people to our society will be negligible.

It has been negligible. We are now in a period of our social development, where can make a difference and where the elements of education, understanding and technology are coming together to offer a framework for progress. This framework will bring Deaf people into the main body of society. It will give Deaf people the tools to develop their own community and to participate in society as a whole. This latter point is a key one – it is Deaf people themselves who will take forward the initiatives. Hearing people have had 200 years of trying without success. It is now time to create the conditions for Deaf people themselves to realise their own potential. Hearing people will need to learn to “listen” to Deaf people. One aspect of this has been the work of interviewing Deaf people in Europe in the project “Sign on Europe” (Kyle and Allsop, 1997).

A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Although the 370 million people of Europe, live very closely together in distance, the differences in culture are enormous and the languages are very different. Not surprisingly, the systems of education are different in each country and the educational experiences of Deaf children are different.

In a large scale study on behalf of the European Union of the Deaf, we interviewed Deaf (and hearing people) people in **17 countries in Europe**. By using some of the data collected, we can develop a picture of the life and aspirations of Deaf people in Europe.

We started with a simple basic question – *what is the status of sign language in Europe?*

The status can be measured in a range of ways, such as:

- they can be officially recognised in the laws of the country;
- they can be used in education, officially or unofficially
- they can be recommended by professionals - educators, doctors, social workers
- they can appear on television and be discussed in other mass media
- they can be actively promoted by significant Deaf people
- they can be researched by groups of high status individuals, eg Universities, or there can be governmental support for research and development
- they can be available in the public domain as a dictionary or set of materials

All of these are features of language acceptance by society and by Deaf society. There were three components to the study:

- Interviews with Deaf people
- Questionnaire responses from institutions with an involvement in Deafness
- Questionnaire returns from individuals, some of whom have no involvement in Deafness

This paper deals mainly with the Deaf views. The whole report can be read in

Kyle JG and Allsop L (1997). The work began in October 1996 and data collection and principal analysis was completed by July 1997. The survey was planned in Bristol with a fixed frame for sampling the population, linked to age, gender, hearing status, location and nationality. Larger countries had more representatives. Research partners in each country of the European Union, Norway and Iceland, were contracted to carry out the research. Questionnaires and interview materials were translated into the language of the country. A total of 1030 returns have been analysed of which 325 were from the Deaf community.

GENERAL ISSUES

Deaf people were aged between 16 and 75 years old. The overall average was 45 years with slight variation from country to country. Sixty-one percent were married (slightly less than hearing people) and 48% were male, close to the figure for hearing people.

Of the sample, 17% were still living at home, although 61% had set up their own home with a partner or children. In terms of the schooling, more people attended day schools, but there are quite large country variations.

TABLE 1: *Aspects of Schooling*

	Day Schools %	Age Started school (years)
Sweden	65	7.11
Norway	42	7.33
Finland	25	6.50
UK	63	4.19
Germany	60	6.50
Greece	48	8.30
Portugal	60	6.06
Spain	59	5.20
Total	54	5.73

There are also differences in terms of the age at which they began primary education. Latest starters seem to be Greece, Sweden and Norway, with Britain allowing children into school earliest. One has to treat these figures with some care, as the meaning of school is different from one country to another.

One way of promoting a language is to take action in public. Among the Deaf interviewees, 22% had signed a petition, only 7% had written a letter, while 27% had marched on the streets. Less than 5% had organised courses or training. Twenty-eight percent had been involved in other activities, although 21% had never been involved in anything in support of sign language. Nineteen percent had been involved in more than one type of activity. The politicisation of the Deaf community seems to be in an early stage and the numbers of activists seem low. It would appear that there has been no co-ordinated activity or campaign to achieve the recognition of sign language in Europe.

SIGNING IN SCHOOL

When asked about the teaching in school, relatively few had experienced sign language in use by their teachers *all the time*. Overall, less than a quarter of the respondents had teachers signing throughout their time in the school which they attended for the longest time. In Portugal and Germany, more than two thirds of the respondents had teachers who never signed to them. The majority of Deaf people experienced oralist regimes during their schooling.

TABLE 2: *Did your teachers sign to you (%)*

	All the time	Outside the classroom	Rarely or Never
Sweden	39	22	39
Norway	42	42	17
Finland	25	8	66
UK	9	9	81
German y	0	0	100
Greece	48	13	39
Portugal	19	0	82
Spain	21	12	68
Total	24	13	63

An interesting division of the data was according to the age of the interviewees. This allowed us to make comparisons of Deaf people up to the age of 40 years and over the age of 40 years. The first group will have left school after 1975, the second group will have been in school prior to 1975. Around this time, sign language was first being described and Total Communication was taking hold in the USA. We should hope for an improvement in that younger people were more likely to have had teachers

who signed. The pattern is mixed. Countries where Deaf people are more likely, since 1975, to have teachers who signed are

Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, UK.

In some countries, the situation had deteriorated, where Deaf people under the age of 40 years have experienced less signing than those over 40 years: *Greece and Spain*. It seems that new oralist regimes have been put in place.

However, despite these circumstances of reduced communication in sign from their teachers, Deaf children signed to each other whenever possible (Table 3). We see a complete reversal of the situation of use of sign with teachers – except for Sweden and Norway where it was already advanced and Greece which is probably at an earlier stage of development.

TABLE 3: *Use of sign by teachers compared to use with other Deaf children (%)*

Use of signing in class or outside	Teachers	Other children
Sweden	61	95
Norway	84	100
Finland	33	100
UK	18	88
Germany	0	87
Greece	61	87
Portugal	19	94
Spain	33	83
Total	37	88

Despite the efforts of teachers Deaf children have always been signing to each other. A conclusion is that it seems

reasonable to begin to use that signing in education, rather than to ignore it.

SIGNING EXPERIENCE

We asked people when and where they had first seen sign language and a range of other questions about experiences. It is a rather strange question to ask, *when did you first encounter your native language?* For the majority language users in a community, the reply is likely to be *from birth*. Even in oppressed minority groups, the family are likely to ensure the preservation of their culture by using the language at home with infants. The reality for Deaf people is quite different. Deaf children learn the language much later than do hearing children. This is of great significance to well-being and later development. It is of course, an indicator of status of the language.

TABLE 4: *When did you first see sign language? (%)*

	<5 years	<10 years	At School	After leaving School
Sweden	72	28	0	0
Norway	33	50	17	0
Finland	58	42	0	0
UK	55	26	13	6
Germany	47	38	16	0
Greece	21	50	21	8
Portugal	19	81	0	0
Spain	35	41	9	15
Total	48	37	8	7

Less than half of the Deaf community members experienced their own native language before the age of five years. Two thirds of Deaf people had first seen signing at school. Most learned after the age of five years.

TABLE 5: *When did you learn sign language?*

	< 5 years	6-10 years	11-18 years	19 years +
Sweden	56	44	0	0
Norway	33	58	8	0
Finland	42	58	0	0
UK	47	38	9	6
Germany	34	56	9	0
Greece	4	48	43	4
Portugal	13	44	44	0
Spain	21	53	12	15
Total	35	43	16	6

These results are not so surprising but they are very important. When we think about Deaf people reaching their potential (our stating point), we can see that there is a major obstacle from the beginning – lack of access to their own first language. The majority (two thirds) of Deaf children have to struggle with lip-reading and limited access to speech for the first five years of life. One in five in Europe have to learn sign language after school.

PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE USE

We asked a series of questions about where, when and with whom, sign language was used. Deaf people are likely to use sign much less, as there are fewer opportunities - they do not work with other Deaf people most of the time and they do not live next door to other Deaf people and so on. There are likely to be major implications of this reduced opportunity for use of the native language. On the one hand, Deaf people are likely to have less opportunity to apply the language and thereby to develop it through interaction; and, on the other hand, they are more likely to value the times when it is possible to use the language free from external pressures. It has also the negative implication that Deaf people who are entering the community will take longer to master the language as they have fewer opportunities to use it in groups.

When we analysed other communication settings, virtually all communication with hearing people is in speech or some speech combination. It is Deaf people who make the major adjustments when hearing and Deaf meet together.

Deaf people are signed to by their partners (who will usually be Deaf themselves) and by Deaf friends, but hardly ever by anyone else. Strikingly, hearing friends do not make a switch to learn sign language – Deaf people are spoken to by hearing friends.

There is a clear dualism or pseudo-bilingualism. With other Deaf people, the Deaf person uses sign more than 85% of the time; with hearing people, the figure drops to less than 13% and even

their own children sign to Deaf people only in 38% of the cases. This would be a very surprising figure for any other minority groups of parents.

THE EXTENT OF USE OF SIGN LANGUAGE

Table 6 provides some details of the beliefs of Deaf people about the extent of sign language in institutions. In terms of the existence of a law, only in Finland were most Deaf people convinced there *was* a law about sign language. This is consistent with the real existence of the law, since 1995, and the positive steps to publicise it, which the Deaf association has undertaken. Beliefs about sign language used in a bilingual approach in school in each country, seem to be rather optimistic.

Only in Sweden was there the belief that there existed a sign language research centre at University. All of the respondents believed this. This might be partly explained by the concentration of the sample in the Stockholm area. Seventy-five percent of Germans and Norwegians knew of a research centre on sign language. In most other countries the percentage of people, who knew of a centre, was rather low.

In terms of television programmes for Deaf people with signing, the majority believed that there were such programmes in their countries. Notable exceptions were Spain, and Greece (with only 4%, even though there is legislation to provide television for Deaf people). Apart from these countries, it would seem that there is awareness of the TV programmes for Deaf people in most countries.

Full time interpreters were thought to be available by all respondents, only in Sweden and Denmark. Very few people in Greece and Portugal thought that there were full-time interpreters.

Only in Denmark did all the respondents think that there was a sign language dictionary. Almost 40% of the UK sample were not aware of the BSL dictionary which had been produced after 20 years of work, by the national Deaf Association.

TABLE 6: *Percentage of Deaf people who believed that the following existed in their country*

- 1= Law about sign language
- 2= School using a bilingual approach
- 3= Research centre for sign at University
- 4= TV programme for Deaf people which uses sign
- 5= Full time interpreters
- 6= Sign dictionary

Country	1	2	3	4	5	6
Sweden	28	88	100	100	100	89
Norway	17	83	75	100	92	92
Finland	73	42	42	67	83	75
UK	9	68	45	94	87	61
Germany	9	63	75	81	81	75
Greece	8	83	0	4	22	35
Portugal	0	44	19	63	19	81
Spain	21	24	15	24	59	59
Total	15	58	37	60	58	63

SUMMARY OF THESE RESULTS

Relatively few Deaf people had sign language at school. The majorities in Germany, Portugal and the UK said teachers never signed to them. This led to a situation where Deaf children were experiencing signing prior to 10 years old but mostly from other Deaf children. However, in Greece and Portugal, over 40% said they learned sign language

after the age of 11 years. The impact of such late learning of a community language must be very great.

In terms of language use, Deaf people showed a marked dualism with signing used primarily with partners at home and with other Deaf people, but very rarely in any circumstance outside of the home

In terms of status, it is clear that there is low objective status for sign languages as they are used relatively little in a range of places and by a range of people. Even professionals in the field of Deafness were not likely to use sign language. Both the knowledge of, and the real existence of laws, on sign language, research centres, TV programmes, interpreters, and dictionaries varied enormously from country to country; the traditional north-south divide appeared to apply with Nordic countries, better provided for and Southern Europe, less well off.

It seems on the whole that sign language use is confined to home situations and meetings with Deaf friends. When hearing people are involved, the situation is dominated by spoken language.

THE CHALLENGES

Although we tend to see Europe as a consisting of Developed countries with great resources and extensive education, it can be seen that there are major problems for Deaf people in the south. Only in Nordic countries is there advanced provision and better awareness. In their cases, there are laws about sign language and Deaf people, there are interpreting services and opportunities for Deaf people to progress

in a school system which uses sign language. There are dictionaries of sign language and places where training is offered in sign language and there is research. Deaf people take up professional jobs after training at University and can make significant contributions to their own community and to the life of society as a whole.

However, in contrast, in South Europe, in Portugal, Spain, and Greece, there is little provision and fewer opportunities for Deaf people to progress in the community as a whole. Fewer Deaf people complete their education, there are few (Portugal) or virtually no interpreters (Greece). There is no television presence for sign language and there is no system for learning sign language.

AGE AT WHICH SIGN LANGUAGE WAS LEARNED

However, changes in Europe, even in the advanced countries, have been recent – over the last thirty years. Prior to that the educational system was wholly oral. Even today, the majority of Deaf people have experienced oralist education systems. More significant, is that the *majority of Deaf people have learned sign language late*. Even in Sweden only half of the respondents have learned sign language, their preferred language before the age of 5 years. And this is a very high figure for Europe. Although there is an increase in sign language use throughout Europe in schools for the Deaf, this does not impact directly on the numbers of people learning sign language at the right time and in the right place – at home. Sign language as a first

language should be introduced much earlier.

EXTENT OF USE OF SIGN LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

One of the major points from our study is the extent to which sign language is used in everyday life. Since sign language is not a written language, there are few fixed resources for sign language – video mostly – and some regular transmissions (which are considered below). It is all the more important that there are places and times when Deaf people meet together and where sign language is seen and used. If we ask hearing people about the situations in life where they use their language, we find it pervasive – it is hard to think of situations where the language of the community is not used – in shops, on the radio, on buses, at the workplace, at home, with the children, at the sports clubs and so on.

When we think of minority groups, there are reduced opportunities for public use of the language but a whole range of situations in which the language is preserved and protected. In particular, the home, where the certainty is that parents will communicate with their own children in their language. There are likely to be meeting places, family reunions. And of course, there is almost certainly a place where the language is used by a majority – a source of tradition and culture. Almost all minorities are majorities somewhere else.

It is different for Deaf People. Deaf people use their language with their partners at home and with Deaf friends when they meet. They seldom use sign

language at work and there are very few services which offer sign language. Only in the Nordic countries and UK, is there extensive provision of interpreters. Significantly, Deaf people do not use sign language with their hearing children – at least not in the same way as do other minority language users.

The actual use of sign language is much less than any other spoken language for reasons of lack of understanding of the need to work at the preservation and development of the language. Deaf people as a result of their educational experiences may believe sign language to be inferior and transient and have no basis to promote its use.

Sign language is stigmatised and the relevance to Deaf life and advancement is attacked by circumstances. If Deaf people have little opportunity to use sign language, then its development is hampered and delayed. In many respects, because of the structure of the Deaf community, each generation is destined to re-learn and re-create sign language. The cumulative effect of knowledge based in language does not apply to the Deaf community.

The challenge is enormous. The implications are far reaching and the need to act is a long term and continuing goal for Deaf people and those hearing people who have an interest and professional involvement.

PUBLICLY AVAILABLE SIGN LANGUAGE

Even for those communities which are isolated and have few members, there are usually opportunities to return to the

homeland and/or to receive fixed media (newspapers, magazines, journals) in their own language. There are virtually no publications *in sign language* which are regularly received or accessed by Deaf people.

There are TV programmes in many countries in Europe. Only in the UK is there a Broadcasting Law² which covers the transmission of programmes in sign language. But in countries like Greece and Spain, there is no television programme for Deaf people in sign language and no public resource for sign language users.

In the case of the UK, there are daily news programmes provided by Deaf people and weekly magazine programmes presented and researched by Deaf people. These can become a video resource of information. But there is little other archive material available.

Sign language videos in any case do not serve the purpose of books or newspapers as they are linear in format, meaning that information is consequential and has to be viewed more or less from beginning to end. Books and newspapers are indexed and accessible from many different points.

Information resource on the development of sign language is hard to maintain and hard to use. The obstacles to progress of

² The Broadcasting Act in the UK ensures that virtually all peak time (evening) programmes including news are available with subtitles (captions) and that there is a requirement on broadcasters to produce 5% of content (an hour each day) with sign language.

knowledge in the community are considerable.

PUBLICLY AVAILABLE SIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

A further issue is that of the availability of sign language learning opportunities for hearing people, notably parents and professionals but in reality anyone with a role or with contact with Deaf people.

In the UK, this is formalised in a national curriculum and three levels of examination which are nationally monitored and arranged. Few countries in Europe have such a formal system and as a result, for example in Germany, the opportunity to learn sign language is limited for those parents and professionals. As a result there is very little movement and development and little challenge to an oral system. In the UK the vast majority of sign teaching is done by Deaf people and this has helped with the professionalisation of Deaf people. It raises status of Deaf people and the Deaf community and ensures that teachers and others can learn the community language.

This type of development fits with the need for research on the language, the production of sign language resources, such as dictionaries and the training of enabling professionals such as interpreters. From the results from Deaf people in Europe, only Sweden, Norway, Finland and to a lesser extent, the UK, has made progress on these.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal for Deaf people is clear – it is the same as for hearing people. It involves self-realisation and the

achievement of potential. It should involve the support of society but also the corresponding contribution from Deaf people to society as a whole. It should enshrine basic linguistic human rights and the possibility for development and representation of the Deaf person's own language, community and culture.

As we accumulate information on the situation in Europe, we develop our understanding but the data indicates the considerable challenges which are ahead.

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