

Leeson, L. and van den Bogaerde, B. (2019) Sign Languages. In D. Newby, F. Heyworth and M. Cavalli (eds.) Changing Contexts, evolving competences: 25 years of inspiring innovation in language education. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Pp100-107.

Sign Languages

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Introduction

In 2018, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a resolution on Sign Languages (Resolution 2247). This recognises the thirty plus indigenous sign languages of Europe as natural languages but also acknowledges that few states have recognised sign languages as official languages to date (See also Wheatley and Pabsch 2012 for an overview on sign language recognition in Europe). As a result, access to education and public services using sign languages remains limited. The challenges faced in acquiring a sign language as a first language, learning it as a second or subsequent language, or accessing information through sign languages are well documented. Most recently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finland, published a report that looks at sign language rights within the framework of the Council of Europe and its member states (Tupi 2019), noting that sign language issues tend to be viewed via a disability lens, rather than seen from a cultural and linguistic perspective.

Key Issues

Plurilingual and cultural education

The right to education is an established human right. However, to access education, one needs to know the language/s of education, of instruction. For deaf signers, this is challenging because there are still far too few opportunities to access their national curriculum through a sign language, or to study a sign language as a language of the curriculum, or indeed, as a foreign language (Leeson 2006, Snoddon and Murray 2019). Part of the reason for this is that sign languages are too frequently considered as 'communication tools' rather than as core to our collective cultural and linguistic capital. This has contributed to the marginalisation of signing communities. Visibility of sign languages is essential to shifting this status quo. This can happen through the inclusion of indigenous sign languages as languages of the curriculum, and/or as languages of instruction; through greater representation of sign language users in the media and online, and through the facilitation and promotion of sign languages, as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, for example.

There is a need to consider the proficiency of teachers who can deliver curricula in a sign language as well as cultural considerations around the need for peers who are also using a sign language across the school years. That is, there is a need for young deaf sign language users to have access to teachers who are also sign language users, and particularly, access to teachers who are also themselves deaf (UNCRPD 2006). This facilitates the transmission of language and culture from generation to generation. We talk about 'Deaf culture' which encapsulates reference to the norms, practices and behaviours associated with being a member of a Deaf community (See Ladd 2003 for detailed discussion of this).

Further, there is an insufficient supply of professional sign language interpreters in most member states. This requires investment in the delivery of high-level interpreter education with linguistic and cultural proficiency being central in this regard (Leeson and Calle 2013, European Parliament 2016). At the same time, there is a need to note that the provision of sign language interpreters in educational settings is not sufficient to guarantee inclusive educational goals – direct communication with peers and teachers via a sign language is essential to this, and one of the reasons why documents like the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities make explicit reference to the need for deaf teachers.

Increased visibility of sign languages in the public domain has certainly led to an increase in demand for sign language classes for hearing learners who are "second language, second modality" learners (L2M2). That is, they are learning a new language (an L2) but, unlike the auditory-verbal languages they have previously been exposed to, sign languages are expressed in the visual gestural modality, an M2 for learners. Evening courses in sign languages have been offered in many countries since the late

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1970s and 80s, but, opportunities for sign language teachers to secure professional teaching qualifications are still too rare, and, even when they do so, employment opportunities are scarce (Danielsson and Leeson 2017). Across the continent, many countries now offer university-based sign language interpreter education, which, in turn, has facilitated the growth of networks of interpreter educators, including sign language teachers. Work in this regard has led to the establishment of *CEFR*-aligned minimal competency recommendations for graduation from bachelor programmes, which emerged in parallel with work on the ECML *ProSign* project, published by the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) in 2013. This work has spilled over into curricula for sign language teaching more generally, but there is a significant body of work that needs to be tackled, with support from the ECML and member states in this regard.

Teacher and Learner competencies

Teacher and learner competencies in the domain of spoken language pedagogy have been extensively researched and described (see Newby in this volume). For signed languages the field is still in its infancy. The ECML has played a major role in providing status to signed languages by including them as a thematic area, via two high impact projects, *Sign language and the CEFR. Descriptors and approaches to assessment (ProSign1)*, and *Promoting excellence in sign language instruction (ProSign 2)*.

When teaching and learning a sign language, there are some unique features that we must take account of, for example, as mentioned above, the fact that sign languages are produced and perceived in a different modality, the historical and contemporary socio-cultural status of the many deaf communities across the continent of Europe, and the influence thereof on the dynamics of language learning and teaching.

Being an L2M2 learner (i.e. learning a new language articulated in a visual-gestural modality) is very challenging to hearing sign language learners with a spoken language background. Not much research has been done in this area to date, but what is known is that non-manual features (the use of specific facial expressions and movements of the head/torso) pose pragmatic and grammatical challenges to L2M2 learners, as does learning to navigate the use of signing space (the space around the signer where sign language is articulated). Further, there are challenges for new L2M2 learners around coming to terms with being constantly on view to their fellow learners and teacher, as they 'perform' in their new language (Sheridan 2019).

While the *CEFR* (2001) became a central component in language teaching, learning and assessment, there was a significant lag in leveraging it for sign languages. In part, this was because of the lack of access to the *CEFR* for deaf sign language teachers - the documentation was not available in a sign language -, coupled with the extremely limited access to higher education and language teacher education programmes, factors which continue to impact on deaf sign language teachers (Danielsson and Leeson 2017).

Responding to this, the *ProSign* project produced the ECML's first adaptation of the *CEFR* for sign languages (Leeson et al. 2016), drawing on earlier, local work in a small number of European countries (e.g. France, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Sweden). Project related meetings and associated events (a series of conferences) generated significant impact across Europe, with many countries subsequently deciding to implement the *CEFR* with respect to their work with signed languages. What became apparent, however, was that the implementation process posed many challenges for sign language teachers and teacher trainers, which gave impetus to the *ProSign2* project.

ProSign2 focused on teacher competencies and assessment literacy in teachers. A survey amongst sign language teaching institutions delivering programmes across a range of levels (from conversation classes to formalised tertiary education pathways) revealed several important issues. First, there are only a handful of official programmes in Europe that educate sign language teachers (Danielsson and Leeson 2017). Second, no generic pan-national curriculum for the training of sign language teachers currently exists. Third, while individual universities had drafted competency descriptors for sign language teachers, there were no official national or pan-national descriptions of sign language teacher competencies that we could find internationally, with the exception of the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) (USA) Qualified Certification.

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The ProSign team has been delighted to engage with colleagues working via the Council of Europe's Language Policy Unit to develop a modality inclusive edition of the Companion Volume to the CEFR, that is, a version that presents descriptors for spoken and signed languages in a single, unified document. This reflects recognition of sign languages by the Council of Europe and member states, and will, we envisage, support the development of national policy and practice around the teaching, learning, and assessment of sign languages across the Council of Europe territories.

From experience, we knew that L2M2 learners were struggling with modality specific challenges during the language acquisition process. These include the fluid management of articulators (e.g. in learning to articulate signs, in learning to fingerspell), management of eye-gaze patterns, essential for marking elements of focus and perspective marking in sign languages, amongst other things), and the development of non-manual features (including markers that have adverbial function).

Given this, it was paramount that the community of sign language teachers became aware of these challenges, and were equipped to meet them with robust *CEFR* aligned curricula and pedagogy. It was therefore very fortunate that, as we worked on *ProSign2*, the ECML's thematic focus on Teacher Competences was active, and the *Towards a Common European Framework of Reference for language teachers* project ran alongside *ProSign2*. Building upon this framework and previous ECML deliverables, teachers and researchers from all over Europe came together to work on sign language teachers' competences (Rathmann et al. in prep). Besides there being a lot of overlap with competencies for spoken language teaching, key elements for sign language teaching were discussed and identified. Assessment was identified as one of the main challenges.

Evaluation and Assessment

There are numerous formalised tests in place for spoken language assessment, but only a few exist for sign languages and these have mainly been developed with a focus on first language assessment (See Tobias Haug's "Sign Language Assessment Instruments" website, for example).

International discussion around how best to evaluate sign language development in L2M2 learners has only really commenced in the past twenty years or so. Here, while core elements of sign language testing is comparable to spoken language assessment, sign language test development has proven quite complicated for a number of reasons. For example, we cannot simply translate or adapt spoken language tests to sign languages because such approaches do not capture the significant modality differences discussed above. Further, we simply do not yet have complete linguistic descriptions of many national/regional sign languages. Fortunately, technology is facilitating the creation of innovative evaluation materials (e.g. Haug et al 2019).

Today, secure investment in L2M2 test development is essential. In particular, this would support hearing parents of deaf children who deserve our support in their language learning so that they can provide a rich language environment for their deaf child (Salamanca Statement 1994; UNCRPD 2006). A range of assessment approaches are currently being investigated, for instance the adaptation of the Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI)(Newell and Caccamise 2008) for use with other sign languages.

The ECML *ProSign2* project also sought to support learners by exploring how we could accommodate the *European Language Portfolio (ELP)* for sign language learners. The results of our pilot *ELP* study in Germany and Ireland are very encouraging and we look forward to seeing the *ELP* implemented widely with sign language learners in order to enhance learner autonomy and, ultimately, language learner success.

How the ECML contributes to this area

The ECML has been central to supporting the professionalization pathway of sign language teachers across the continent through their support of the *ProSign* projects and associated activities since 2012. With the impetus of ECML activity in this domain, sign language teachers have established the European Network of Sign Language Teachers (ENSLT). The financial support for engagement in meetings with peers from across the continent made possible the development of a community of practice, which had close engagement across an extended period of time. Indeed, at our national event, at the University of Belgrade in 2018, a deaf sign language teacher remarked that, as a community of practice, we had

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collectively come a very long way in our understanding, application, and evidence-based response to the teaching, learning and assessment of sign languages as a result of the ECML *ProSign* projects.

The ECML connection also facilitates engagement with policy makers. Being able to say that there are *CEFR* aligned tools for sign languages opens up doors that have, for decades, been hard to budge. *CEFR* serves as a lingua franca when talking with government officials, and pointing to pan European collaborative efforts endorsed by the ECML is, by extension, an endorsement of sign language recognition.

On a more practical, but fundamentally important level, the provision of content around the teaching, learning and assessment of sign languages in International Sign on the ECML's website meant that deaf signers from across the continent could engage in the *ProSign* projects in ways that would have been absolutely impossible otherwise. We would encourage investment in the provision of International Sign versions of key ECML texts to ensure accessibility, which, in turn, supports the goals of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (2018) and the UNCRPD.

The ECML's engagement with the *ProSign* community has allowed for flourishing in our linguistic diversity, enriched our collective understanding of the status quo for sign language teaching across the continent, and facilitated the development of a common set of goals for future development. The endorsement of sign language related projects by the ECML can also be considered as a contribution to recognising the status of Europe's sign languages as modern languages that should be nourished and which require investment. The work on sign languages, in turn, enriches the ECML's broader goals of nurturing plurilingualism and diversity.

Conclusions and future perspectives

Sign languages have greater recognition in Europe today than ever before. However, legal recognition does not automatically ensure that signers are afforded access to the same range of educational opportunity as their speaking counterparts. This is something we need to diligently address. The ECML is essential to this process, functioning as the point of reference for expertise around modern languages, folding in the fledgling field of sign language teaching, learning and assessment. At our last *ProSign2* Workshop, a deaf sign language teacher noted that sign language teaching was at least 30 years behind. We need to play catch up – fast. We need accessible content (i.e. presented in sign languages) and we need to ensure that sign language teaching and learning continues to be folded in to the work of the ECML, that they are visible in the work of the ECML, and, by extension, ECML member states. This means that they are explicitly referenced in projects, that signers are encouraged and facilitated to engage in ECML events, and that sign language versions of key documents are available. This, maps fully to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly resolution, which calls upon Council of Europe member States to support the Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages, in particular its activities concerning sign languages.