

## **TEACHING SIGN LANGUAGE, TEACHING WITH SIGN LANGUAGE: A SPECIFIC PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH?**

Elise Leroy

Karen Meschia

CeTIM (Centre de Traduction Interprétation et Médiation linguistique)

Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès

### *Abstract*

*French Sign Language (LSF) now has full recognition as a language in its own right and, as such, a language to be taught. Acknowledging it as a language for teaching with remains problematic, however. We take LSF to be an iconic linguistic creation that foregrounds the particular position of deafness. This is why, after studying the pedagogy of deaf teachers teaching LSF to deaf pupils (aged 6 to 10) in classes where LSF is both the teaching language and the language taught – still a rare situation in France – we posit the existence of an inherently signed pedagogical method. By drawing on their own empirical strategies and attitudes – particularly their use of eye gaze and pointing – these LSF teachers enable deaf pupils, like any others, to develop linguistically and cognitively.*

*Following on from this research, we have been innovating since September 2011 by developing a new university course that focuses on French/English/LSF translation and includes deaf students. This curriculum is unique in France and has involved giving much thought to meeting the requirements of a combined deaf/hearing public through constantly evolving new teaching methodologies, which we wish to share here. Our experience of three years has already thrown up numerous questions about the widely varying situations of deaf students with regard to their bilingual education and about the didactics of language teaching in French, English and LSF at university level.*

French Sign Language (LSF) is today fully recognized as a language in its own right and thus as a language to be taught. The French 2005 Act relating to 'equal rights and opportunities and full citizenship for the disabled' has led to many new developments. From September 2008 school curricula for LSF made provision for its teaching as a first and second language in primary and secondary education, notably as an optional subject in the Baccalaureate and other vocational certificates. Yet, acknowledging LSF as a language to teach *with* still remains problematic.

It should nevertheless be pointed out that classrooms where teaching is done in LSF have existed in France from nursery to high school since 1984, but these are rare and no analysis of this teaching had so far been carried out. Therefore, during research done in 2010 we aimed to examine SL pedagogy, which is in effect bilingual, as an intrinsically deaf pedagogy. We will show throughout this paper what is specific and unique to teaching in signed classes, by the very nature of the teaching language, then we shall explain how we have developed a university curriculum based on this same bilingualism in order to train students (deaf and hearing) to translate in their future professions.

We first give a brief overview of the teaching of LSF and *in* LSF in France as a background to our discussion. Then the theoretical and linguistic foundations of our research are set out. The specificities of SL pedagogy are identified in describing the creation of our university course, unique in France. In conclusion we raise issues which are of concern in the current political context.

### **Overview : the teaching of LSF and *in* LSF in France**

Contrary to widespread belief, the formal teaching of LSF only emerged in the mid-1970s, as a result of a belated awareness of the value and authenticity of SL on the part of its main speakers, the Deaf. Furthermore, at the time, teaching targeted the hearing, that is, as a second – or foreign – language.

In late 1978 SL teaching grew apace and becoming more structured, mainly in the Paris region and in south-west France. Doubtless, one of the best known and most popular courses was Bill Moody's, which started in Vincennes in 1977, and would subsequently become today's International Visual Theater. From then on, the usefulness of formal SL teaching was taking root in the minds of the Deaf, and with this, a new problematic emerged: which sign language to teach?

Initially, SL classes merely involved teaching lists of signs. But clearly, in the absence of any actual communicative practice or formal distancing from the language, learning lists of words is pointless for the learner, who gains no access to the other's culture. It was at the Dourdan Congress, organised by the Sign Language Academy in 1980, that a formal framework for teaching the language was agreed on. The resulting favoured method, which was adopted by ten or so centres, focused on teaching SL syntax and grammar. The principle was simple: to make hearing people forget the internal logic of French through total immersion in SL. The principle holds for learning any foreign language.

Pedagogically speaking, classes are based on obeying three rules: working in silence, avoiding mechanical translation between languages and using video to establish metalinguistic distance (Kerbourc'h, 2006). This thinking was seemingly only geared to teaching the hearing. We wish to underline how recently it emerged, doing so alongside a recognition of the language stemming from research in linguistics done at the time in France. Thanks to this, deaf teachers of LSF became aware of the importance of formal language teaching for deaf learners also. They therefore worked to evolve new teaching practices, formalised by French education authorities in new curricula in 2008 (see *Bulletin Officiel* n°33 4 sept. 2008). It seems however that teaching exclusively in LSF is having difficulty making headway within the French state system.

Nevertheless, the debate about the best teaching language for deaf children has recently revived. In our view, using a gestural language alters all the pedagogical presuppositions. Thus, the distinction between teaching LSF and teaching *in* LSF is only relevant when learning written French is involved. For when there is a need to formalise the written language (French), to analyse its structures and learn its grammar, then language teaching necessarily becomes more explicit (likewise for a French class taught in French, when dealing with the written form). Accordingly, in recent legislation, some specifications are given about bilingualism for deaf pupils. The introduction to the LSF curriculum in primary schools (ages 3 to 11) illustrates these advances:

'It should be remembered that we are working within a bilingual perspective, where acquisition of knowledge and skills in the first language (LSF) [ the terms first and second are here used purely chronologically] is a prerequisite for learning the second language (French), giving priority, as must be case for deaf children, to written forms.' (idem).

'Bilingualism is part of the individual potential of each child. Through learning and building on his knowledge of French Sign Language, each deaf child whose family opts for this choice is offered gradual access to French at school, first to the written form, since mastering this is crucial for successful bilingualism; this is the responsibility of the education authority, both for deaf and hearing children.' (idem).

Despite this radical shift, putting LSF on a level with French in official documents, it is not quite so simple in practice. At present, compared to the number of pupils involved there are very few places in primary or secondary education – fewer than ten in the whole country – where families opting for bilingualism can find the requirements met. And these schools have difficulty obtaining acknowledgement by the authorities. Implementing the directives is currently a problem as the ministry, now solely responsible for the education of young deaf people, has to conduct a review of existing places before making them officially 'LSF Resource Centres', (idem) meaning that they provide LSF teaching from primary to high school level.

To better grasp the issues involved in the teaching of SL and its assessment, an understanding of the linguistic, social and cultural context of the language is essential. This is the topic of the second part of the paper.

## **Towards defining iconic language: sign language as a language for the deaf.**

Although 95% of deaf children are born of hearing parents (roughly 800 births per year), who are of course unable to transmit a language naturally to their children, the latter are no less intelligent for all that. From early infancy, they apprehend the world visually and use their eyes to take in and analyse the surrounding world. Like all humans, these children are primarily linguistic beings, needing to communicate with those around them. Endowed with a semiotic intentionality, they seek to construct meaning for and with others. This expressive intention is revealed through attempts to produce iconic forms. These draw on cognitive mechanisms which select those elements of experience that must or can be depicted in images ('outlines of shapes and gestural iconic reproductions of the salient features of categorised referents' [Cuxac, 2000, p22.]) and render them linguistically, as utterances. For deaf speakers, since perception is visual, the information to be transmitted will be *shown* by means of gestural forms.

Concretely, to take the simplest example, that of an actual past experience, this means producing sequences which are the equivalent of "so this is how it happened" and where the speaker will tell by showing "it was a room like this" and describing it, or "where there was a person like that" who will be shown by imitation etc. If the hearing environment –familial or social – responds to these linguistic appeals from the deaf child or adult, then the process, observable in the first stages of all sign languages (Fusellier, 2006), can be refined and structured into an emerging Sign Language. This emerging Sign Language, when shared with deaf peers will subsequently become an institutionalized sign language, grounded in the 'iconisation' of practical, perceptive experience, i.e. the construction of language via a visual apprehension of the world. Our observations in signing classrooms amply bore out this linguistic view, with the deaf teacher's role being to foster this emerging SL amongst his deaf pupils (Leroy, 2010).

This formalised SL features two types of speech intention or aim: one telling by showing, the other telling without showing. Depending on the topic, a speaker may choose to tell by showing (so-called iconic transfer), to tell without showing (so-called standard lexicon), or to alternate between or merge the two modes. This theoretical grounding – developed by Cuxac and his fellow-researchers at Paris 8 University, St-Denis-Vincennes – enables us to say that deafness itself is constitutive of the way SL structures developed generally, and that all SL are the result of human genius.

SL, as a visual gestural language, is also a minority language. It is three or four-dimensional and signs are organised within the so-called 'signing space'. Their location provides, amongst other things, the syntax of the language, meaning that the very way the signing space is divided up has semantic significance (Cuxac calls this 'diagrammatic iconicity' [2000]). Tense is itself expressed spatially, whether lexicalized or not. In short, different complex parameters are used in analysing signs (their morphemic-iconic composition): handshape, sign location, direction, movement, but also facial mimicry (adding qualitative, quantitative or modal value), the eye-gaze (a complex parameter due to its linguistic subtlety and multiple functions), the movement of the upper body/shoulders and rhythm. All these parameters, manual and non manual, can be analyzed separately, yet form a holistic entirety, with each parameter playing a part in the construction of meaning.

Another feature should be added to the list: pointing (often combined with the gaze). As a deictic unit, it is used to instantiate three referential fields: person, time and space. Cuxac, (2000) attributes different values to the pointing gesture: narrative, locative, enumerative and anaphoric. This too confirms the relevance of the way the signing space is being used.

One final point singles the language out as unique: it possesses no graphic system, unlike some 200 languages in the world (but only that many) amongst the 6000 or so listed. It is considered as a solely oral language. Yet nowadays, with the advances in new technology, such as videography, the digital age makes it possible to keep a trace of the language whilst preserving most of its spatial features and enabling the multiple parameters to be read.

## **The pedagogy of LSF: thinking through the bilingual articulation**

Our research in 2010, enabled us to define the notion of bilingual pedagogy in primary teaching (6-10 year-old deaf children) by foregrounding the crucial role of SL for written comprehension,

when it becomes the meta-language for explaining, commenting and reformulating what the children see in writing. It also allows the teacher to check that pupils understand. In the production of written work, LSF is an aid to organising ideas, as the pupil first formalises what he means in LSF, often using SL-video, before beginning to write. In terms of bilingual articulation, Sign Language is definitely the first language, in which the child has epilinguistic awareness (through practical/perceptive experience) before acquiring metalinguistic awareness and the ability to stand back and see more clearly the structures specific to his language. Gaining this awareness thanks to SL classes beforehand then makes it possible to tackle French as a second language, using SL to obtain the same distancing from the written language. As to methods, no one method is favoured over another, but practical, interactive pedagogy is the watchword and is, in our opinion, naturally inherent in the teaching language: SL. We therefore believe, with B. Mottez, that deaf pedagogy does exist.

'If this silent pedagogy can be described as typically deaf, what does that actually signify? Saying that some aptitudes are typically deaf ones does not necessarily mean that hearing people totally lack them. It is simply that, as they function in different modes and contexts, hearing people have not developed them to the same extent. (...) This is why I focus on this one, the pedagogy which maybe they too could teach – to the hearing'  
(Mottez, 1993 in 2006, p. 175)

Thus it was, that in developing a university degree course to train French<>LSF translators and mediators, we were determined to pursue the same philosophy of bilingual articulation for our deaf students. So, the course offers two pathways: one with French/English/LSF, with English and LSF learnt as foreign or second languages, and French as the first; the other where LSF is clearly the main language for communication, and French and English second languages.

We thus differentiate teaching to reflect the characteristics and needs of the two groups (deaf and hearing), as follows:

- LSF first language
- LSF second language
- English (oral , written)
- English (written via SL)
- French (2<sup>nd</sup> language, French as foreign or second language-type teaching)
- French (1<sup>st</sup> language)

When teaching SL as first language, given the small numbers involved, classes are shared over the 3 levels of the degree course, which fosters interaction and mutual support, whilst allowing the teacher to differentiate when assessing.

Although it runs through the whole curriculum, the bilingual articulation is most clearly observable in the French second language course:

- Written comprehension and grammar
- Written production
- Contrastive analysis

This 3-pronged approach fits in with the signing learner's logic by using the contrastive analysis class to tackle beforehand, using video material, notions that will be worked on in written comprehension, then written production classes. For instance, we might analyse on video how the notion of language register is applicable to LSF, while dissociating it from the French, both terminologically (formal/ informal) and in terms of linguistic form (use of iconicity and lexicon). At present, three different teachers take the classes, in the absence of sufficient professionals with dual competence (disciplinary plus LSF skills). At the same time, having three different teachers makes the distinction in course content clearly discernible for the student, who can thus situate himself and gradually learns to dissociate the two working languages. For the first time this year, the deaf students have been offered experimental English classes, shared by the three levels, where written English comprehension and production are taught via LSF. There is not for the moment any provision for BSL or ASL teaching. Overall the first year aims to consolidate the two working languages (B1 intermediate) to gradually work towards the acquisition of translating and mediation skills in years 2 and 3.

To conclude we would underline the fact that this course, with its mixed audience, its dual pathways, and courses specifically geared to deaf students, is unique in France and an example of pioneering thinking in the field. We also wish to express concern about the rather worrying situation in France today. Despite some positive legislative changes and the recognition of LSF as a language of the Republic, the actual development of educational institutions teaching LSF, be it at primary, secondary or university level is still struggling to get off the ground. An inverse logic seems to prevail, with courses in higher education becoming accessible to deaf students, but only a 5% uptake because no quality bilingual teaching is available to prepare them for it lower down the line. Similarly, despite the creation of an LSF secondary teacher's certificate, there are practically no training courses offered to deaf primary school teachers, and only a handful of course leaders actually have university status. We are dropping further and further behind... This is the vicious circle we aim to break today by training deaf people for translation, an emerging profession in France allowing information to circulate freely in a naturally accessible language. But how many dare to knock at a door which still seems so firmly closed?

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