



2015-1-PT01-KA202-012971 “Give Me A Sign”

Intellectual Output 07: Final Recommendations Concerning the Teaching and Learning of Foreign Sign Languages

Introduction

On the contrary to popular opinion, sign language is not universal, and in fact each community has naturally and spontaneously created and developed its own sign language over the years. There is a system of international signs which enables deaf people to communicate at international meetings and conferences, but this is not in any way a natural language and is rather a convention of signs in order to summarise. For these reasons, fluid international communication between deaf people requires the learning of foreign sign languages, in exactly the same way as oral languages. However, in spite of the several initiatives put in place by the European Commission in order to promote multilingualism in Europe, little or nothing has been produced in terms of projects to create teaching and learning materials which might make this idea of multilingualism accessible to the deaf communities across Europe and, indeed, across the world. As a result, opportunities to learn foreign sign languages are severely limited when they exist at all, which therefore represents a significant obstacle to transnational communication between deaf people and, in turn, a clear limitation to their rights of citizenship, most obviously as far as the free circulation of citizens in Europe is concerned.

With this in mind, the Give Me A Sign project has carried out research into the language learning needs of the deaf, which can be consulted on the project website www.givemeasign.org. Among the instruments we have produced with the aim of kick-starting the idea of foreign sign language learning is a collection of learning programmes at A1 and A2 levels for Portuguese Sign Language, Austrian Sign Language, Turkish Sign Language and British Sign Language, created in accordance with the indicators described in ProSign (Sign Languages and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and which together constitute Intellectual Output 02 of our project. These learning programmes, together with a number of pedagogical approaches discussed by the project partnership and several sample lessons, have in turn been subject to validation by the deaf communities and schools for the deaf in the different partner countries.





Specific objectives of the project:

- a) To carry out research into foreign sign language learning and training needs, as second or third sign languages (depending on the specific situation) and thus identify the most important language and cultural components appropriate to the nature of this type of learning;
- b) To promote the exchange of knowledge and experience among the various professionals involved and bring together the deaf communities in each participating country;
- c) Given the fact that written languages effectively constitute communication barriers for deaf people, since the sign languages of each country do not correspond to their written languages, a further objective is to minimise and/or remove these barriers by altering the role of written languages. In other words, written languages will become a learning objective in themselves, rather than “intermediate languages” used to learn another sign language. In this way, we aim to make it possible to learn a second sign language directly from signs. The "Give me a Sign" project therefore aims to contribute decisively towards a paradigm shift in teaching / learning programmes of foreign sign languages, the most important contribution being the abovementioned strategy of learning from signs, without the use of the written component, thus improving the language skills of deaf people and all those using sign languages, enabling better and more efficient communication between deaf European citizens and opening the doors to the mobility of deaf people, with a view to improving accessibility and equal opportunities;
- d) "Give me a Sign" also aims to reinforce the recognition of European sign languages as official languages, part of the national heritage of each country, just like oral languages, which are already widely recognised and valued. In this sense our project will also contribute towards broader awareness of this form of communication.

Following the completion of the current project, we intend to transfer the results achieved (in particular the sign language programmes created) to a new project, in which the learning content of these programmes will be developed and mobile applications will be created to help learn the sign languages of the partner countries. In this way, our project will combine European incentives towards greater multilingualism with the use of ICT, an area of great importance for the deaf communities. In this second phase of the project, students from the partner institutions will be involved, not only during the testing phase, but also in terms of the effective learning of these sign languages, so as to allow training institutions working with deaf to be able to provide foreign sign language learning for their students. In turn, students with skills in foreign sign languages may then, in the near future, become able to participate in transnational EDUVET mobility programmes, finally breaking the existing language barriers which currently make this very difficult, not to say impossible. The learning programmes produced by Give me a Sign will therefore constitute a benchmark for the teaching of foreign sign languages to the deaf.

It is estimated that in Europe there are currently about 1 million sign language users, including deaf people, their parents, the children and relatives of deaf people, teachers and auxiliaries, among others. For this reason, considerable impact is expected at both national and transnational level, and in fact our work during this phase of the project has clearly indicated that expectations are high. In addition, another area of impact is a contribution towards increasing the awareness of the "hearing community" in terms of the advantages of including deaf people, both in everyday life as well as professional life.

Within this context and with these values in mind, we started the project with the application of a questionnaire regarding foreign sign language learning in all the countries involved. The questionnaire was adapted to each of the four national sign languages, thereby creating a truly accessible tool for this purpose (see Intellectual Output 01). The results of the questionnaires were as follows:

Research into the language needs of the deaf

Having identified the deaf community in each of the partner countries and the state of the art in terms of deaf education of the deaf (see needs analysis), the questionnaire mentioned above was applied. The questionnaire was adapted to the various national sign languages of the project in order to make the issues truly accessible to deaf people. The questionnaires were built on Google Forms, made available via the internet and sent to reputable institutions in each country, so that they could consequently be made available to the general population. The questionnaire was publicised via social networks (Facebook, Twitter, among others) and shared on the websites of schools and associations for the deaf. We obtained a total of 270 valid responses.

Personal data

The sample was intended as being representative of the community of sign language users and therefore included all persons using sign language as their first or preferred language, together with those who use sign language for professional reasons. We felt that if the sample had only considered the deaf community, many regular users of sign languages would have been (incorrectly) excluded. We decided that the important thing was to ascertain the degree of use of sign language as a means of communication, rather than whether the users were deaf or hearing.

For the deaf, sign language is the only language that guarantees accessibility to information and knowledge. Hearing impaired people, on the other hand, often use sign language because they feel unable to acquire oral language skills to the degree that they can communicate comfortably with the hearing. As a result, their oral language may often be imperceptible to the hearing, especially when there is no prior personal relationship, which can obviously lead to frustrating situations. Most hearing people who use sign language either use it for professional reasons or to communicate with members of their families (they are the children of deaf parents (CODA) or parents of deaf children).

All the partners in the four countries reported that the state of the art of deaf education is not yet ideal, and is certainly not at the same level as that given to the hearing. According to the data obtained, it would seem that the most favourable conditions for deaf education are in the United Kingdom and Portugal, but there is still much work to be done in Turkey and Austria. In all four countries more efforts must be made to improve the educational situation of the deaf.

Other results obtained through the application of the questionnaires were as follows:

- The majority of respondents were between 14 and 44 years of age, mostly female and residents in the countries in question.
- The respondents included both deaf and hearing people, which among other things clearly demonstrates the interest of hearing people in this subject.
- Most subjects were highly qualified.
- On average, deafness was detected at 3 years of age, although the age may vary from country to country.
- The most common professions identified among the respondents were as follows: sign language trainers, teachers and support technicians.

Results concerning training needs

There is a clear need and/or wish to communicate with deaf people from other countries, but the deaf have to deal with the communication barrier referred to on pp 1-2. In situations where there is a need to communicate with sign language users from another country, most of the respondents used a mixture of forms of communication but none could guarantee fluent or even satisfactory communication. This is also confirmed by the fact that most respondents are convinced that learning another sign language would be beneficial to them. The most important reason given for learning another sign language is for professional use, followed in second place by day-to-day communication contexts such as vacations, leisure activities and social contacts. The most frequently chosen foreign sign language, in terms of the sign language respondents said they would most like to learn, was British Sign Language (BSL), although they also showed interest in learning American Sign Language (ASL) and International Signs. There was broad consensus among respondents in relation to the need for common content in all foreign sign language learning programmes.

Regarding the preferred learning/teaching methods of learning, respondents were interested in both face-to-face learning (50%) and via an e-Learning platform (50%). In relation to the level of the learning, a slight majority mentioned preference for “intermediate” level. It is relevant to observe that given the hitherto inexistence of courses for foreign sign language learning, most deaf people currently learn something of a foreign sign language through friends or over the internet, and have (obviously) never attended a course. It seems that, at present, only sign language classes as a second language for hearing learners are available; for example, for the Portuguese hearing community wishing to learn Portuguese Sign Language.

In conclusion, we can state, without a shadow of a doubt, that there is great interest in foreign sign language courses. The needs analysis mentioned above was accompanied by an extensive inventory of deaf culture in each country (see Intellectual Output 01).

Foreign Sign Language Learning Programmes at A1 and A2 levels

While in the process of creating learning programmes for A1 and A2, the deaf colleagues from each partner country carried out and exchanged experiences related to the teaching of sign language as a foreign language, which allowed additional insight to be included in the programme design. For example, in Portugal, LGP courses were held for deaf learners from Brazil and Guinea, and in the United Kingdom a BSL course was held for deaf learners from several countries, while in Austria an ÖGS course was organised for Syrian migrant learners. Based on these experiences, LGP teacher Amílcar Morais, from The Factory in Portugal, circulated a proposal for a learning programme in LGP as a foreign language among all the partners. This proposal was then discussed among the partnership in order to find common ground, and certain improvements were proposed and added during the 3rd project meeting in Doncaster (UK). Each country then finalised its own A1 and A2 learning programmes, before finally fine-tuning them via a series of Skype meetings among the deaf colleagues from each partner organisation so as to achieve the common structure referred to in the results of Intellectual Output 01. Our colleagues from Austria then took the programme one stage further, providing a proposal for a detailed, unit-by-unit, lesson-by-lesson course plan, which will serve as a model for the work to be done during the expected second phase of this initiative (see Intellectual Output 02).

Validation of programmes

In addition to the pilot experiences described in the previous paragraph, the final programmes were tested and validated at the Foreign Sign Language Workshop, held as part of the 4th project meeting in Izmir (Turkey) on 12th and 13th September 2017. During this two-day workshop, three foreign sign languages were presented and taught: Portuguese Sign Language, Austrian Sign Language and Turkish Sign Language, based on the A1 programmes produced in each country. At the end of the three sessions, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants in order to evaluate the results of the sessions (see Intellectual Output 03).

The participants were unanimous in showing great interest and motivation in the learning of the foreign sign languages introduced and practised during these sessions. The ultimate goal of being able to communicate with deaf people from other countries was always firmly present in their minds. At the end of the sessions, the participants requested more, much more: progressive levels of learning and more hours of training. They also expressed very positive feedback in relation to the teaching approach, mentioning in particular the fact that the teachers continually took into account the ongoing feedback of the learners during the sessions, thereby adapting the learning strategies to fit the reality of the learners.

In the end, there was great interest in the idea that the project should continue, and that it might be extended so as to include more countries.

Website www.givemeasign.org

The website, Intellectual Output 04, was originally planned simply to contain information about the development and progress of the project, but has, as the project moved forwards, been broadly expanded into an information and support platform and has become the visible face of the Give Me a Sign project.

The site has several different kinds of content, all of which have been produced in written English (the project language) and in the four sign languages which form part of the project, by means of video documents.

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Final Recommendations

The final recommendations are based on the points previously addressed, which together constituted our working methodology:

- Identification and characterisation of the deaf communities in each country (Deaf Culture)
- Analysis of the situation of deaf education in each partner country
- Results of the application of the questionnaire:
 - Personal data
 - Learning needs
- Production of foreign sign language learning programmes at A1 and A2 levels.
- Application and validation of these programmes.
- Development of the online platform.

Our recommendations are therefore based on the following principles:

- a) In order to develop the A1 and A2 syllabuses for the teaching and learning of foreign sign languages, it is essential to understand the reality of the deaf communities in the partner countries of the project and the situation of the education of the deaf in each of these countries.
- b) Knowledge of these two realities has helped us to build these programmes taking into account the specific cultural and educational contexts of the deaf communities of each country.
- c) The results of the application of a questionnaire into these two issues clearly demonstrate the need and/or wish to learn foreign sign languages, the main reasons being professional and everyday communication contexts.
- d) The respondents indicated that the courses should have common contents and that the most appropriate means of teaching and learning should be a blend of face-to-face and e-learning.
- e) They also emphasised that those who had certain skills in foreign sign languages had acquired these skills through friends or the Internet, confirming the idea that courses for the teaching and learning of foreign sign languages do not yet exist, which clearly underlines the great relevance of this project.
- f) The programmes for teaching and learning foreign sign languages have been created based on recent experience in the partnership in the teaching of sign languages to deaf learners from other countries, thereby ensuring relevance to real needs. In addition, regular contact among the deaf members of our teams, both at project meetings and by means of Skype meetings, have helped ensure a common structure for teaching the four sign languages of the project.
- g) The programmes produced were tested and validated in several pilot experiences in each partner country, culminating in the main validation event, the Foreign Sign Language Workshops held in September 2017. There would seem no question of the extremely favourable reaction of the participants (see pp 5-6).

Our recommendations for the future of foreign sign language learning are therefore the following:

a) Teaching materials should be essentially visual. Using written national languages as a form of learning support will probably not be useful, given the fact that the way oral / written languages work does not always correspond to the way sign languages function. Written language may therefore even represent a distraction or an additional barrier.

b) This visual material would perhaps work best if based more on image, in the initial stages of a course, and then on video in the later stages of the course (exercises, dialogues in sign language, understanding of stories, etc.).

c) The content of the lessons should include vocabulary, understanding grammar, texts in sign language, sign language production and cultural aspects of the deaf and hearing communities in the respective country.

d) In terms of teaching methods and activities, the lessons should be as rich and varied as possible, including interactive exercises and dynamic games and teachers should take into account the profiles of the learners who make up the group so as to ensure that learning is both viable and relevant.

e) As far as the length of the sessions is concerned, classes may be organised during a whole day, in which case there should be two teachers, or alternatively in blocks of three hours (with breaks). The decisions on session length should be taken according to the needs and availability of the participants.

f) At the beginning of the courses there should be initial evaluation to assess the existing language skills of the participants (using the template provided by the UK partners), as well as a final evaluation of the whole course (again, using the template provided by the UK partners).

g) In relation to the A1 programme, it was agreed that the teaching methodology should be preferentially face-to-face, and that the participation of a tutor could function as a learning facilitator. A small working group should be created so as to contribute towards innovative practices in interaction with deaf people. The learning programme should involve continuous assessment based on the student's participation in the activities carried out during the sessions, and should also include evaluation questionnaires in order to measure the feedback of the participants.



h) Regarding the A2 programme, the deaf colleagues mentioned that they could include forms of verb conjugation and the use of different kinds of lexical verbs in sign language for the construction of sentences when discussing topics such as food, drinks, sports, shopping, among others.

i) Slides (for example using Powerpoint) should be included as language-based visual aids relevant to the contextual themes of the courses, including different types of gestures, such as one-handed or two-handed gestures. The materials should then be provided to the students or made available on the platform www.givemeasign.org, which will in turn enable us to test the learning skills of the participants by means of short videos.

j) The A2 programme should also include activities and exercises using Skype (videoconference between two and three people), which would facilitate the description of daily routines by completing short, clear and precise sentences in sign language, respecting the syntactic rules of each sign language. This strategy will simultaneously result in more in-depth vocabulary and a more interactive approach. Teachers can also take advantage of videoconference as a means of evaluating their students' progress.

k) Deaf culture should be introduced when foreign sign language is presented to learners in the A1 programme, and is an essential component of the A2 programme. The four main components should be sign language, behavioural norms, values, and traditions.

l) Learners who complete the A2 programme should be encouraged to further improve their foreign sign language skills by watching television, exchanging information through social media such as Facebook, etc.

m) The project website, which has considerably exceeded its original objectives, will continue to be used as the visible face of the entire GMAS project, containing all the information related to the project, the main aspects of the deaf culture of each country the progressively expanding A1 and A2 programmes and learning content.

n) The pedagogical materials, which we intend to produce in the second phase of this initiative, based on the programmes which form part of the present project, should be made freely available on the platform, as should activities to promote the application of the contents learned. Learning classes or sessions can be recorded and stored on the platform so that learners can study, revise and review their knowledge, and clear up any doubts that may still exist.



In conclusion, we consider that the Give Me A Sign project, in this first phase, has reached its objectives in full, and indeed has in several cases exceeded not only these objectives but also our own expectations. In the subsequent second phase of our work, the range of programmes will be expanded in accordance with ProSign, the Common European Framework of Reference for Sign Languages, and the partnership will produce a variety of teaching and learning materials teaching materials to transform the programmes into real skills. Finally, the platform will be expanded to include more European sign languages , with the overall aim of becoming a European benchmark for the teaching and learning of foreign sign languages.

