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# L2 education for foreign adults who are D/deaf: the role of Sign Language

**Abstract:** In the context of a wider study of the movement of deaf people across Europe and their legal position in Italy, I have conducted a first overview of the methods adopted by D/deaf people to learn a second spoken language, observing the interactions in an experimental class in Italian as a second language. The class comprised 22 hearing migrants, mainly from Africa, and two Deaf people (with initial capital to identify people who are deaf and prefer Sign Language for daily communication). All learners had the opportunity to interact with professional L2 teachers, of whom one was a professional Sign Language interpreter. This article reports on that experience, with a particular focus on the role of Sign Language in all didactic interactions.

**Résumé :** Dans le cadre d'une recherche plus large relative au mouvement des personnes non/malentendantes en Europe, qui portait aussi sur leur statut légal en Italie, j'ai mené une première enquête sur les méthodes utilisées par les personnes S/sourdes pour apprendre à l'oral une seconde langue. J'ai pu observer l'interaction dans une classe expérimentale d'enseignement de l'italien langue seconde. La classe comprenait 22 migrants entendants, principalement d'Afrique, et deux personnes Sourdes (avec une majuscule, afin distinguer les personnes sourdes/malentendantes qui préfèrent l'usage de la langue signée pour la communication usuelle). Tous les apprenants avaient la possibilité d'interagir avec des enseignants de langue étrangère, dont l'un était un interprète professionnel de la langue signée. Cet article présente cette expérience en mettant plus particulièrement l'accent sur le rôle de la langue signée dans toutes les interactions didactiques.

## 1 Deaf people learning (a first) spoken language

Sign language (SL) is an important component of Deaf people's competence, especially when they learn a second spoken language (L2<sub>sp</sub>). The reason for this statement becomes clear when we consider how D/deaf people learn a first spo-

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ken language ( $L1_{sp}$ ) before learning a second one (for an overview, see Leeson 2006).

The development of speech and hearing abilities in children who are born profoundly deaf or become so in early infancy – typically before the age of three – requires special measures that include hearing aids or cochlear implants and speech therapy to enable them to recognize and pronounce the sounds, words and sentences of the spoken language (SpL) into which they are born. Speech therapy begins at a very early stage of children’s life and normally continues until they are in their teens. Whether or not speech therapy for the deaf includes the possibility of using SL to support  $L1_{sp}$  learning depends on the degree of the individual’s residual hearing and his or her ability to reproduce the sounds of SpL. The so-called “bilingual method” makes use of SL, whereas the “oral method” does not. A third approach, known as “total communication”, entails using a combination of signs and SpL that includes SL, finger-spelling, gesture, visual imagery, writing, voice and lip-reading (for more detail, see Marschark and Spencer 2015). When SL is used, either completely or partially, the deaf person can rely on both the auditory and visual channels for learning and on speech and signs to express his or her intentions or interpretation of meaning. Mayer and Akamatsu (2003), Mahshie (1995), Nover, Christensen, and Cheng (1998), and Knight and Swanwick (2002) – to name a few – show that the language development of Deaf children who are naturally exposed to SL is comparable to that of their hearing peers. Actually, the development of studies on Sign Language and the recognition of its expressive power have led to the definition of SL literacy (Snoddon 2012) alongside spoken language literacy.

Because of the number of situations that are possible when talking about deaf people’s linguistic competences, it is common in Deaf Studies to refer to people who use Sign Language as their preferred mode of communication as *Deaf*, with initial capital, and to those who are orally educated – and also to the specific condition of deafness – as *deaf*, with initial lower case. *D/deaf* is used to refer to the whole population of deaf people, regardless of their linguistic choices.

The case study presented here is based on observation of two foreign adult Deaf learners who came from two different foreign countries. Each of them was proficient in the SL of their own country, so the case of orally educated deaf people is excluded from this discussion.

## 2 Being a foreigner and deaf in Italy

In the past few years, Italian universities have experienced an increase in the number of foreign D/deaf students applying for their courses. The rise in the level of D/deaf people's education, natural curiosity and the search for better working positions has led them to travel more and wish to learn more languages. From another standpoint, the growing number of asylum seekers and migrants escaping from difficult situations, such as war or persecution in their own countries, has brought D/deaf adults to Italy in extremely difficult conditions. They often wait a long time for their legal documents and are thus limited in their freedom to engage in activities that could promote their economic and personal growth. Regardless of the circumstances of their arrival, these people have normally had the opportunity to receive special education and to become proficient in at least one SpL and/or SL. Profoundly deaf people arriving in Italy normally find that universities, schools and organizations are unprepared and not always capable of receiving them in an inclusive way. In many cases, educational institutions have never met a D/deaf person before, or have never considered the need to adapt their programmes to this target group. Many D/deaf adults who manage to overcome their initial difficulties with the help of friends or family members, normally integrate into society thanks to the help of D/deaf associations, which provide them with an opportunity to meet people from the host country. Informal conversations with foreign D/deaf people visiting Italy allowed me to get a general picture of the existing situation in my country.

Universities hosting foreign D/deaf students normally provide  $L2_{sp}$  classes with the support of an interpreter who, however, is not always prepared to welcome a foreign person. Sometimes D/deaf people learn the language of the host country thanks to a speech therapist, who helps them to learn basic words of the SpL, perhaps with the support of SL. In other cases, this target group is addressed by non-academic institutions providing lessons of Italian in class or individually.

## 3 Teaching Italian to foreign Deaf adults: the design of an experimental integrated classroom experience.

Working on the design and development of a framework that responds to the situation of foreign people who are D/deaf and arrive in Italy for personal reasons

or as the result of some emergency, I had the chance to participate in the design and implementation of a class in A1-level spoken Italian that was attended by foreign hearing and Deaf adults. The class was taught by two certified teachers of L2 Italian. One of them was learning Italian Sign Language (LIS) in signing environments; the other was also a professional LIS interpreter with a master's degree in migration studies. The first teacher managed the classroom interaction and the second mostly worked as her interpreter, exploiting her experience in L2 education and migration to maximize the effective mediation of lesson content. Both the teacher and the interpreter shared the same methodological framework, derived from theories widely used in the field of educational linguistics. The case of Deaf learners would have been addressed by applying strategies that are common in the field of D/deaf education: reporting oral exchanges by writing on a blackboard to improve exposure to the language in its written form; mediating communication in spoken and signed languages through the services of a professional SL interpreter. The interpreter was prepared to adapt her signing to that of the Deaf learners, supporting the effectiveness of the interactions among students as well as between the teacher and the learners.

The course took place in the spring and summer of 2015 and lasted for four months. Lessons took place on two days a week for three hours a day – about 100 hours in total. The 25 students were mainly asylum seekers from Ghana, Mali, Gambia (males) and Bangladesh (females, joining their husbands in Italy). The Deaf participants were from Gambia (M) and Ukraine (F) and they were both fluent signers in their respective home country's SL. The course was provided free of charge by a local association with long experience of working with migrants (Associazione Passaparola Italia), for which it received special funding from the Regional Plan for the Linguistic and Social Integration of Foreigners in the region of Lazio (PRILS Lazio).

## **4 Teaching Italian to foreign deaf adults: the role of SL**

At the beginning of the course the teacher introduced herself to all students and the interpreter introduced herself and her role of mediator for all communication between the hearing and Deaf students. The teacher spoke Italian the whole time, addressing the class in SpL and engaging all the students in interaction, while the interpreter supported communication among all participants. Deaf students were given suggestions for improving interaction with their hearing peers, and hearing students were taught how to include their Deaf colleagues

by learning some basic finger-spelling and signs, activities that seemed to amuse them and to stimulate interaction. The teacher used the blackboard to capture the topics under discussion and sometimes to record questions in written Italian. Students were also asked to practise writing on the blackboard. This use of writing made classroom communication slow and clear, which helped Deaf students to follow the lesson, keeping up with the class and participating actively when necessary.

What could be called the “warm-up” phase of the course went on for about a month, until the rate of spoken interaction started to increase and the topics under discussion were no longer related to situations already familiar to the Deaf students (greetings, personal introductions, personal experiences, etc.) and started to increase in complexity through the addition of grammatical information about the language. The Deaf students’ limited knowledge of LIS quickly became evident. The interpreter had difficulties in conveying the meaning of her own signing, and the time and space given during the lesson was not enough to allow an effective translation: she was continuously interrupted by the Deaf students, who couldn’t get the sense of her signing.

The effective level of LIS known by the two Deaf foreign students seemed to be too low for them to easily follow the interpreter’s explanations of the grammatical features of Italian. Furthermore, each student showed problems in different areas, and the interpreter needed to check the Deaf students’ comprehension at almost every sentence. She was forced to drastically reduce the rate of translation and ended by disconnecting from the teacher and proceeding at a completely different speed. At this point the teacher and the interpreter decided to stay within the agreed topics, starting the lessons in the same way but then proceeding at different rates for the two groups of students.

## 5 Lessons learnt for the future

This case study provides insights into the critical moments that may arise when D/deaf and hearing people are learning an L2<sub>sp</sub> together. In cases like the one described above, a profound knowledge of deafness and of the roles of both the L2 teacher and the SL interpreter, led to a perfect combination of professional skills and allowed teacher and interpreter to face the emerging difficulties in a creative and effective way. It is thus important for L2<sub>sp</sub> teachers to prepare for the possibility of having D/deaf students in their class and to be ready to manage interactions with the help of an interpreter. It should be noted that under normal conditions the role of the interpreter is only to transfer meaning from the SpL to SL, without adding any extra information to what is being said. However, in cir-

cumstances like the one described above, the fact that the students were not able to follow the interpreter at her level of LIS forced her to interrupt the explanation of Italian grammar to give the meaning of the signs she was using. This is the second important lesson to come from this experiment: as SL mediation is vital for communicating meaning to Deaf learners and allowing their full participation in the class, it is essential for them to be fully proficient in the host country's SL before enrolling in a L<sub>2sp</sub> course structured like the one presented above. An inclusive approach in a hearing/deaf classroom of foreign adults is possible, provided that professionals are adequately prepared to face the linguistic difficulties that may arise.

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