

Sign language is indispensable in the education of children with a CI

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July 2010

In the summer of 2010, the 21st ICED conference is taking place in Vancouver, Canada. ICED is the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf and is a five-yearly congress where experts on and employees from the education of the deaf meet. An excellent opportunity, we thought, to have a look at the current state of sign language as a language of instruction in deaf education in Flanders¹ and the Netherlands.

The ICED congress in Vancouver will mainly be attended by hearing participants, just like the ICED congress in Milan in 1880, where sign language was banned from deaf education. At the previous ICED congress in Maastricht in 2005, one of the deaf keynote speakers said that the ghost of Milan 1880 was still walking the conference. And in 2010 again, the majority of the lectures will be about making deaf people hearing: cochlear implants (CI), auditive assistance and early intervention. Again, sign language and Deaf culture receive limited attention. It seems that after all sign language and Deaf culture do not come to the fore in deaf education, despite the positive developments in the 1980s and 1990s which clearly recognised that sign language is the first language of deaf children. What is the current place of Flemish Sign Language (VGT) and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) in deaf education?

Some time ago, one of us attended a talk in Flanders of a hearing mother with two deaf youngsters. She spoke to a group of deaf and hearing parents about her views on the education of deaf children. For forty-five minutes long, she did not once mention sign language. When someone in the audience asked her about her views on sign language in education, she replied that she is certainly not against it, but that her children “do not need it” and are coping well. In college, they follow courses through lip-reading. Now and then, they feel bored but “aren’t hearing students bored now and then as well?” By that time, the majority of the deaf attendees of course didn’t believe her anymore. Someone knew her children from a deaf youth club and told her that they do use sign language now. “Oh yes”, she replied, “but they learn that themselves when they get older, there is no need to offer that early in life”.

A saddening story. The one thing we know, after decades of research on multilingualism and language acquisition, is that one needs to acquire a language as early as possible in order to fully master it. No matter whether it is a spoken language or a signed language.

In February 2010, the school principal of the Flemish deaf school Sint-Lievenspoort (Ghent) gave a presentation to a group of parents participating in the Flemish project for deaf children and their families “VGT doe mee!” (‘participate in VGT!’). She begins her talk by saying that she can’t say much about the oral history of the school, “but that things have changed a great deal by now”. What follows proves the contrary.

At Sint-Lievenspoort’s primary school, there are three target groups: children with autism, children with language and speech disorders, and deaf and hard of hearing children. The method of teaching is the same for the three groups. Deaf and hard of hearing children are divided into separate groups depending on their hearing loss, auditive functioning, language development, communication method (VGT, signed Dutch or spoken language) and intellectual capabilities. According to the school

¹ Flanders is the northern region of Belgium.

principal, parents and children all choose something else, so the school has to offer everything. Their own view or policy on deaf education is not formulated. It is a bit of everything and nothing at the same time. Not a single word about the importance of VGT. Parents (who in Flanders are typically not at all or at best poorly informed about sign language) can choose from several different alternatives. The education is tailored to the demand of the customers (i.e. parents and child). When asked whether parents can also opt for a bilingual education, the answer is “yes” but after our next question about what that education would look like, we receive no answer. After 20 minutes of talking about the education of deaf children, not a single word is said about VGT. The next slide is about the different communication methods used at the school. VGT is last on the list. Our deaf colleague points out that this is remarkable, but is told that this doesn’t mean at all that VGT is less important. When we consequently ask at which occasions VGT is used, the answer is “only in the ‘signing classes’, not in the ‘oral classes’”.

Admitted, it is an anecdote. But unfortunately, it seems to be a representative anecdote, both for Flanders and the Netherlands. The rise of bilingual education at the start of the 1990s did not follow through. Bilingual education was under threat and has been overtaken by a development which is going much faster and is requiring much less effort from schools and professionals: cochlear implants. As early as possible, and preferably two of them. It is an understandable development from an audiological perspective and also a development which to some deaf adults is not uncomfortable. Some deaf people choose a CI, after many years without sound, to hear more of the acoustic world around them. Birds, music, approaching cars, you name it. But why does this have to have a direct impact on deaf education? What is left of the conclusion that also deaf people with hearing rests, even hard of hearing people, do benefit from a bilingual education, with a signed and a spoken language?

It seems as if deaf education on many levels has never overcome the fear of sign language. Whenever there is an occasion to push sign language aside, it will be done. In the past it was claimed that it is hard for employees in deaf education to learn sign language – and how many people really did succeed in mastering sign language fluently enough to stand before a classroom as a signing teacher? How many teachers can follow deaf children’s conversations? Experience has taught us that very few second language learners reach that level. It is the tangible proof that it is not possible to learn a language when someone is older in the hope to master it fluently. This is exactly what is happening now with a new generation of deaf children. We don’t know if and to which extent the surgical ear forms a fully compensating source for learning spoken language. Yes, research shows that children speak and hear better than previous generations of deaf children, they learn to read and write earlier and better. But how about full participation in social interaction? Ask any hard of hearing person how difficult that is. Acquiring sign language is equally difficult: when a child learns the language at a later age, ‘when the child wants it itself’, it will never reach a total mastery of sign language. Not in Flanders, not in the Netherlands. Nowhere. This demonstrates that the view of deaf education and of the social service sector about sign language has remained the same; ‘sign language is easy, they will learn it automatically. Dutch on the contrary, is a real language that we need to offer early if children are to acquire it well’. This despite extensive research on sign languages which points out that they are fully-fledged languages in all respects. It is a huge misunderstanding to think that deaf children will learn sign language automatically when they are older, especially now with the current development of more and more children getting a CI and more and more children being mainstreamed at a very young age.

The danger exists that a generation is growing up without an environment where they really feel at home. Bilingualism offers the very possibility to feel at home in two communities, where the visual contacts in the Deaf community are the only ones where someone can really and fully communicate without borders.

The Flemish deaf school in Bruges, Spermalie, describes on its website its teaching method as “monolingual” and “differentiated”.² Differentiated in this case again means that the school adapts itself to every single child and the wishes of the parents. Monolingual means (again according to the Spermalie website) “that Dutch (spoken, written or signed Dutch) is the first language. In addition there is a limited place for Flemish Sign Language”. Further on, they do promote “integration in two worlds (bicultural perspective)” through contact with deaf and hearing peers.³ How can one have a monolingual method but aim for a bicultural perspective at the same time? Can we assume that whatever we do or offer, these children will be fine? They will find their own way, and learn sign language by themselves?

Moreover, the website is filled with value judgments⁴: “Some children acquire their language and thus their knowledge via an oral way [...]. Other children acquire their language and thus their knowledge mainly through signed communication. Concerning signs, we choose signed Dutch. (...) Some children do use Flemish Sign Language as well. This is the language of the deaf community. Flemish Sign Language just like Sign Language of the Netherlands does not follow the grammatical structure of spoken Dutch.” And further on: “Even well-speaking oral children know some signs. They also learn that there are somewhat different manners among sign-making peers”. “Sign-making” children. A word still in use in Flanders. Why don’t we also speak of “sound-making” children? In KIDS, the Flemish deaf school in Hasselt, the group of deaf children is called “the auditives”⁵. That says it all.

On April 26th 2006, VGT was officially recognized as a language in Flanders. In 2004, the Spermalie board of directors forbid all its employees to sign the petition supporting the recognition of VGT (a petition which gained more than 70.000 signatures and was the most successful petition ever submitted to the Flemish Parliament). They did not agree with what the petition stated, namely that VGT is the first language of deaf people (and thus also of deaf children). They still do not agree.

Since the recognition of VGT a lot of things happened, especially concerning awareness of and about the language. But as a language of education, VGT gained no recognition whatsoever in Flanders. The deaf schools are still treating sign language as an aid, as something that some deaf children “need” but most of them (with a CI) do not. An exception is Kasterlinden in the Brussels municipality Sint-Agatha-Berchem. But Kasterlinden does not attract a lot of pupils (unlike Guyot, the bilingual school in the north of the Netherlands) because many parents feel the school is too far from home and also because they are not well-informed about sign language and bilingual education.

For children with a CI, sign language is currently not a natural right, but something for which they and their parents need to fight. A mother who is willing to learn sign language for her deaf child told us recently that she was ridiculed by an early intervention service for wanting to acquire that language: “what on earth do you need that for?” Parents who want to offer sign language early to their child need to fight for it. Only if the CI is not working as well as one had expected, then it is accepted that sign language “can perhaps be a solution”. This way, deaf children are missing valuable opportunities.

When did surgery, for which the child itself cannot give permission, become something obvious, and is access to a visual language being advised against? If a CI – in the best case! – offers 90% accessibility, why is the only thing that guarantees 100 % success and accessibility, sign language, being dismissed?

² http://www.ki-spermalie.be/bezoeker/f_main.aspx?pag=txt_dfsh_taco_taal_visi&sub=txt_dfsh_taco_taal_visi_dove (last viewed on July 7 2010)

³ http://www.ki-spermalie.be/bezoeker/f_main.aspx?pag=txt_dfsh_taco_taal_visi&sub=txt_dfsh_taco_taal_visi_2wer (last viewed on July 7 2010)

⁴ http://www.ki-spermalie.be/bezoeker/f_main.aspx?pag=txt_dfsh_taco_basi&men=4%20trajecten&sub=txt_dfsh_taco_basi_zoma (last viewed on July 7 2010)

⁵ <http://www.kids.be/#> (last viewed on July 7 2010)

Sign language is not a “solution” for problem children, no more than a steering wheel is a solution for a car. Sign language is indispensable for deaf and hard of hearing children. Only sign language is fully accessible for children with limited hearing, which includes *all* children with a CI. Not to mention the fact that children are fully deaf again in the shower, in the swimming pool or when the CI battery is flat.

Let us at last take the research results about bilingualism seriously. Half of the world’s population grew up using two or more languages. Learning two languages does not slow down children’s development. Acquiring a signed and spoken language at the same time as two separate languages will happen automatically if those languages are being used around the children. This requires a huge effort from hearing teachers and parents, as well as the employment of deaf adults in deaf education on a much greater scale. At the same time, it is crucial that the deaf communities in Flanders and the Netherlands make a stronger effort to welcome parents and their young deaf children and assist them in learning sign language. Only then will we have within twenty-five years a new generation of deaf adults who are OK with being deaf (whether they have a CI or not), who move freely between deaf and hearing worlds, who are not looking for psychological therapy in large numbers, and of which not half is unemployed.

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