

How do deaf and hearing educators understand sign bilingual education? Comparing South Africa and Scotland: a pilot study

Aims

- How do teachers of deaf children– both deaf and hearing – define their own bilingual skills within the deaf education context?
- What are current bilingual pedagogies that teachers use in Scotland and South Africa when teaching deaf children?

Literature

As teacher educators in South Africa and Scotland, we wanted to explore the attitudes and views of teachers of deaf children. In South Africa, deaf children are more likely to be unaided and attend deaf schools. In Scotland, they are more likely to be aided and mainstreamed. Both countries have official support for the signed language, South African Sign Language (SASL) and British Sign Language (BSL), but is this respect borne out in classroom practices? In both countries, deaf teachers are highly involved with sign bilingual education: in South Africa often as unqualified teachers, whereas in Scotland in a mixture of roles as BSL tutor and qualified specialist teacher with a Masters qualification. Their views matter, because up till now they have hardly been heard. To move bilingual education for deaf children forward in both countries, we know we have much to learn from looking at the way teachers describe their skills and the pedagogies they use.

Translanguaging is a concept which has met the field of deaf education with some controversy (De Meulder et al., 2019). Does it mean perpetuating the over-use of signed English systems, close to spoken languages, or the shifts which deaf people use every day to navigate the hearing world using other language resources at their disposal from written, spoken and signed languages? Recent debates about sign language pedagogies suggest deaf teachers may use techniques which hearing educators can learn from (Rosen, 2019; Ladd, 2022).

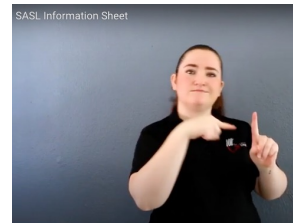
Methods

Following the principle of translanguaging, we wanted to ensure that the online survey to teachers was available in the languages preferred by the teachers: BSL, SASL, written Zulu, Afrikaans and English. We built the survey in RedCAP so that users could shift between languages for different questions, and unusually could upload responses in a signed language or a voice file or by typing. In this way we aim to have a survey accessible to the whole target group of deaf and hearing teachers. This is a pilot study which allows us to test the method and the analysis approach before planning a study including more countries.



The survey is still open and available to evaluate via the QR code above, but data collection has closed.

Survey



The survey was made up of 24 questions: 3 consent, 6 to establish eligibility, 10 multiple choice about their teacher experience and their self-evaluations of sign language skills, 5 for comments about how the participants taught bilingually and how deaf children were able to become multilingual in their teaching context.

The survey was distributed to all schools for deaf children in South Africa (44) and to all local authority services for deaf children in Scotland (32). Members of the Scotland Deaf Teachers Group were specifically invited to respond. We invited teachers who were unqualified classroom assistants to participate as well as specialist teachers of deaf children. The survey was open for 8 weeks in May-June 2022.

Findings

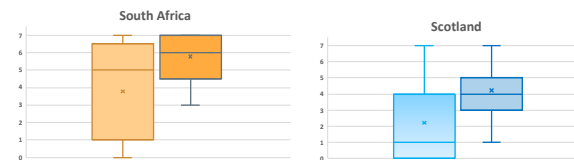
| Completed Sections | Scotland | South Africa | Total |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|-------|
| Eligibility | 30 | 15 | 45 |
| Background | 21 | 9 | 30 |
| Bilingualism | 10 | 7 | 17 |

45 valid responses were received. The final qualitative responses were shorter than we had anticipated and only 35% of respondents persisted till the end. Partially completed sections also yielded useful data.

| Characteristics | Scotland | South Africa | Total |
|-----------------|----------|--------------|-------|
| deaf | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| hearing | 28 | 8 | 36 |
| female | 28 | 14 | 42 |
| male | 2 | 1 | 3 |

Deaf teachers (n=7 answered this question) had spent a mean of 13.6 years teaching deaf children whereas hearing teachers (n=25) had spent a mean of 13.0 years.

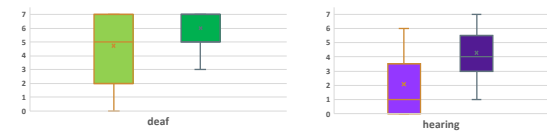
Teachers' improvement in signing skills over the years they have been working with deaf children.



The y axis shows the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) self-assessed language skills in South African Sign Language and British Sign Language. 0 = beginner, 1 = A1, 2 = A2, 3 = B1, 4 = B2, 5 = C1, 6 = C2, 7 = D. Data for 9 South African and 25 Scottish participants. Left-hand box in each pair shows self-assessed level when teacher started teaching deaf children. Right-hand box shows levels in 2022.

Limitations: small numbers, and teaching settings are not comparable in the two countries. The CEFR scale is descriptive, not linear. Self-assessment, not an objective measure. Self-selected participants more likely to be more fluent in sign than total teacher of deaf children group.

Deaf and hearing teachers' improvement in signing skills.



Theme 1: Complexity of language learning contexts with deaf children

Deaf teacher, South Africa:

Teacher: General in all areas - SASL / SSE with voice. First addition language - SSE (Signed Support English with voice) / Cueing / SASL.
Leamer: They choose whichever method they are comfortable with - SASL / SSE with or without voice. Encouragement to use SSE / cueing during FAL lessons.

Hearing teacher, Scotland:

...translanguaging... using whatever blended method of languages needed to progress the learning and experiences of other young learners. I also believe Bilingualism has many barriers, especially in the signing abilities of staff that need to communicate with full BSL users.

Theme 2: Bilingual approaches for deaf children

Hearing teacher, South Africa:

A thorough understanding of what language is, how it is used and the role it plays in education is the first step. The chalk and talk approach, especially with Deaf kids, is a waste of time and teachers need to be able to see how language, activity, assessment, social discourse and metalinguage all feed into the educational process.

Deaf teacher, Scotland:

Providing opportunities for young people to thrive and succeed no matter which language they prefer to work in and giving them the agency to decide how they want to communicate.

Discussion

Teachers' self-assessment of sign language skill is worth pursuing in both countries and was effectively explored through the online survey. The survey encouraged viewing in different languages but only elicited two SASL responses. Interviews, and diaries are more likely to achieve in-depth responses from deaf as well as hearing teachers. Translanguaging practices are evident but overlap on an English-first policy discourse.

References

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- Wilks, R., & O'Neill, R. *Deaf Education in Scotland and Wales*. Report. <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/deafeducation/publications/>

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