SLI@school

Vera Kolbe, Martina Farren, Lorraine Leeson, and **Sigrid Slettebakk Berge**, presenters at the 27th FEAPDA Congress, share considerations for interpreter-mediated education with deaf children in the Republic of Ireland, Germany, and Norway

Introduction

Picture a scenario in a primary school classroom where verbal exchanges occur between students and teachers. Now, envision a situation where a deaf child joins this classroom with an interpreter who facilitates communication between the signed language of the child and the spoken language used in the classroom – a language unfamiliar to both the teacher and the other students.

In this article, we will introduce the legal basics of language-mediated classrooms with signed and spoken languages in our countries, explain the educational concepts used, and provide some adaptations that need to be considered when implementing or counseling schools, teachers, interpreters, or pupils in language-mediated education with deaf children.

Interpreter-mediated education in Ireland

In 2017, the Irish Sign Language (ISL) Act was passed, although the Act was not formally commenced until 23 December 2020, making ISL the third language of the Republic of Ireland. Section 5 outlines a number of requirements relating to education, including the establishment of a scheme for the provision of ISL in-school support for students who are deaf and whose primary means of communication is ISL; it was formally announced in March 2022 by Minister for Education, Norma Foley Teachta Dála (TD) and Minister for Special Education and Inclusion, Josepha Madigan TD (Department of Education, 2 March 2022[1]).

Historical context

Historically, deaf children in Ireland were educated in the Schools for the Deaf in Dublin, and St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys and St Mary's School for Deaf Girls, both of which were boarding schools situated in Cabra in Dublin. These schools amalgamated in September 2016 and are now known as Holy Family School for the Deaf.[2] There is also a school in Limerick (Midwest School for the Deaf[3]), and several smaller units for deaf children attached to mainstream schools. Legislation like the 'Education for persons with special educational needs (EPSEN) Act (2004[4]) provided for children with 'special educational needs' to be educated in an inclusive environment, usually their local mainstream school. Today, most Irish deaf children are educated in a mainstream setting and often, they are the only deaf child in the class, or indeed, the whole school.

Recent developments

We estimate that there are approximately 14 children in mainstream classes in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) at present who access the content of the National Curriculum Framework through the medium of ISL. In 2024 the first Irish Sign Language-Specialist Classroom Support (ISL-SCS) personnel took up their posts in mainstream classrooms in Ireland. There are only two such people in post at present: one at primary level and one at post-primary level, with two more in the process of recruitment. Thus, in Ireland, we are just at the beginning of a demanding development of an educational concept at primary level. We have a more robust history of ISL-mediated education at tertiary level where such provision has been in place since the early 1990s. Provision of interpreters in these contexts stems from the availability of trained interpreters; the first trained Irish interpreters started work in 1994, and interpreter training has been ongoing at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) since 2001.

In schools, special needs assistants (SNAs) with ISL skills have made a little-described yet huge contribution facilitating mainstream schooling for deaf children. SNAs work alongside classroom teachers in mainstream and special classes at schools throughout the ROI to provide for the care needs of pupils. SNAs are appointed by the Department of Education and are appointed to a school depending on the overall needs profile of a school. SNAs do not have a teaching remit, but those with ISL skills play a particular role in helping deaf pupils to access the curriculum through the medium of ISL. However, while

have been educated orally in mainstream schools, ie the children need to adapt to the spoken language classroom communication. Since the 1990s, bimodal-bilingual concepts have been developed and applied in special schools for deaf children. Since 2007 we have seen parents filing lawsuits to secure the possibility for their deaf children attending mainstream schools with language mediation provided by interpreters for German Sign Language (DGS) and spoken German. More recently, since 2019, parents have been filing lawsuits to secure the possibility for their deaf children to attend special schools for deaf children with language mediation provided via interpretation for signed and spoken German.

many SNAs do not have a formal qualification as an interpreter or ISL-SCS, a number of SNAs are Deaf and some completed the first training programme to become Deaf interpreters at Trinity College, Dublin and are now also members of the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (RISLI).[5] In 2023 the first three deaf primary teachers graduated from Dublin City University's pilot ISL Pathway.[6]

Future developments

Once an interpreter is placed in a classroom and has the ability and the skills necessary to mediate the communication between a user of ISL, English-speaking classmates, and teachers with an English-based curriculum, the work is only beginning. There are many adaptations and modifications to be made and we are only beginning to learn what these should be. Norway and Germany are further along this learning journey than we are here in Ireland, and we hope to benefit from their experiences through the joint Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership 'Interpreter-mediated Deaf Education with Signed and Spoken languages in primary schools (IDE)' beginning in December 2024 http://ph-freiburg.de/son-ide

...in Germany

In Germany the number of deaf pupils who are going to school in language-mediated classrooms with signed and spoken languages is currently rising.

In 2022, a total of 9,892 deaf pupils were educated in special schools for deaf children. At the same time, 10,864 deaf pupils were educated in mainstream classrooms. These numbers do not provide any information as to which educational model is applied in the education of these pupils, but we know that a large proportion are in mainstream classrooms with spoken language as the language of the classroom, transmitted with an FM system and or transcribed through a captioning service. Currently we have 73 special schools with the educational focus on fostering hearing and communication, ie special schools for deaf children in Germany. Since the 1980s, deaf pupils

When we look at the **educational setting** used in language-mediated classrooms in primary and secondary schools in Germany, we find mostly that one single deaf pupil is in a mainstream classroom, and typically, this one pupil will be the only deaf pupil in the whole school. We do find some group inclusion of two to four deaf children in a mainstream classroom. There are two different **educational concepts** that are used in these mainstream classes: they may be mediated by interpreters for signed and spoken languages, or follow a team teaching approach where one teacher signs and another teacher speaks. The teacher communicating in DGS is preferably a deaf teacher but could also be a hearing teacher with high language competence in DGS.

In the mainstreaming settings with **language mediation via interpretation**, we find that, in most lessons, there is a mainstream teacher working with two interpreters. The interpreters are not employed directly by the schools; they are freelance interpreters booked according to their availability. Additional support is provided by deaf education specialists, ie teachers from the most proximal special school for deaf children, who advise the school on how best to support student participation and engagement in this educational setting. The deaf education specialists visit the school to work with the teachers and principal before a school takes on a new deaf student. The specialist also works with the pupil to support their individual needs and foster an inclusive experience. The frequency of the visits, unfortunately, not only depends on the pupils´ needs but also on the availability of the teachers.

Team teaching approaches are only possible in group settings as this allows for more teacher time in the mainstream classroom. We know from accounts of pupils in this setting that they very much prefer education through team teaching with their deaf teacher and a hearing teacher rather than the lessons being mediated via interpretation. The pupils argue that their deaf teacher is always informed about the current teaching content, tasks, and goals, whereas the (freelance) interpreters are

potentially different from class to class and the pupils need to explain to the interpreters what they are currently working on.

...in Norway

In Norway there is an increased number of deaf and hard of hearing pupils and students in mainstream education. Formerly, there were four deaf schools in Norway. The last deaf school was formally closed in 2017. These were governmental schools, providing education in Norwegian Sign Language (NSL) for pupils from quite large geographic areas. For instance, the deaf school in Trondheim admitted pupils from the middle to the north of Norway. The schools were important places for the NSL community, both for providing education, not only but also for language and cultural belonging. However, the number of pupils was declining during the late 1980s and 1990s. There were several reasons for this. Due to the UNESCO Salamanca Statement, the educational system shifted towards inclusion and adapted teaching for all pupils. The parents' willingness to send their children to a boarding school was not as it used to be. Instead, they expected that their local mainstream school should hire teachers with sign language and audio-pedagogical competence so their children could live at home, at least until secondary school level. The parents were also critical about the quality of the teaching at the deaf schools as there were few courses to choose between, and the learning material and equipment needed upgrading according to new learning goals in the curriculum. Due to improvements in digital hearing aids (and cochlear implants), several deaf children had access to spoken language. The Department of Education developed a bilingual curriculum, highlighting that the children should learn NSL and Norwegian. Inclusive education can be organized in different ways. Some deaf pupils attend their local mainstream school, others attend schools with sign language units. To provide language mediation, the schools either hired a teacher with sign language competence or interpreters to work in a team with the teachers. The contract for the interpreter is often dependent on the age of the children. In primary schools, the interpreter is sometimes employed in a hybrid role as interpreter/assistant. In secondary schools, and in higher education, the interpreters are hired as interpreters.

There is one public interpreting service for deaf and deafblind people in each county/province. When a deaf person reports their need for an interpreter, the coordinator tries to provide an interpreter. Deaf and hard of hearing people have a public right, ensured by law, to use interpreting services in contexts related to health services, work meetings, education, and private arrangements. The public interpreting service also coordinates interpreting services for university students. Sometimes, they coordinate interpreting services in primary or secondary schools, but the most common way for primary or secondary schools is to employ the interpreters, and the state welfare system will refund their cost.

Interpreters work in educational contexts at all levels. If the schools have many deaf pupils, the interpreters often work in pairs, and an interpreting team can be established at the school. Educational interpreting is the largest arena for interpreters to have full-time jobs. These interpreting teams have been important for professional discussion of roles and ethics, and for developing competence in different subjects and language genres. To interpret a lesson in health care is quite different from a lesson in a technical subject. To mediate successfully, the interpreters need insight into the subject and the teacher's language use. It is also important that the participants involved are familiar with interpreted communication, especially as more and more of the teaching practices are related to cooperative tasks and group work dialogues between deaf and hearing pupils/students. The interpreters must therefore cooperate with the teachers and pupils in finding ways to establish an inclusive learning environment. This job might differ from classroom to classroom, depending on the pupils' expectations, the course of study, the learning activity, the teachers' teaching practice, etc.

Norway has experience, rights, and organization models to provide interpreting services for deaf pupils. However, we still have problems. In social media, newspapers, and magazines, each year we can read reports about pupils and students who don't have access to qualified interpreters, and about interpreters who are underpaid or don't get full time contracts. We also know that pupils and students experience barriers to having equal access to participate in the learning activities. Often the teachers do not have enough information about how to adapt their teaching practices for visual access, for providing bilingual education, and for cooperation with

interpreters. We desperately need more research into the pupils' experiences of learning and inclusion in interpreter-mediated education.

Take home messages – important aspects to be considered

We would like to close this article by addressing some important aspects that need to be considered when implementing or counseling for language-mediated education with signed and spoken languages in schools.

It is important for **school authorities or school principals** to:

- Organize a meeting for information and exchange with deaf education specialists and interpreters as soon as possible in the planning process of a language-mediated class. The exchange should occur prior to the start of the school year with the teachers of that class and also in a school conference with all school staff.
- Cooperation time needs to be assigned to the teachers and interpreters working together in the classroom as part of their work schedule.
- Actively seek to include more than one child in a school to foster social peer development.
- Promote regional exchange meetings for pupils, teachers and interpreters to foster inter-professional advancement and social contact.
- Plan sign language classes for personnel and pupils.

For **teachers** working in a language-mediated classroom, it is important to:

- Embed Universal Design principles[7] in your classroom.
- Adapt your teaching methods and practices to a multilingual, multimodal classroom.
- Collaboration between you and the interpreters requires joint preparation time in which you can discuss curriculum content, and lesson goals and adaptations needed to provide visual accessibility to educational content and the signed language – these two things cannot happen simultaneously, so time must be given to allow a deaf child to see the material you want them to see and to see the instruction as delivered by the sign language interpreter.
- Introduce all pupils to some of the new ways of engaging and what this means in practice, eg language, visual orientation, adaptations needed, etc.
- Initiate metacommunication about discourse practices and misunderstandings, eg based on video recordings.

Interpreters need to:

- Adapt interpreting practices to the educational setting, eg provision of interpreting service with children/young adults, responsibilities and tasks agreed on with teachers.
- Plan and demand for regular collaboration time with teachers to discuss curriculum, educational goals and the allocation of responsibilities and distribution of tasks with the teachers and pupils.

Pupils need to be introduced to the educational concept. They need:

- Sign language lessons for all pupils in the class and interested pupils from across the school community.
- Pupils need to learn about how an interpreter works, the scope of their role, and how to navigate engaging via interpretation.

Overall, communication that is mediated via interpretation needs to be adapted. Pauses and a clear topic structure will make room for participation of all pupils and facilitate better understanding for everyone. Do not let misunderstandings pass – be honest and open about it and try to find strategies that will prevent them reoccurring.

We close with a quotation from the World Federation of the Deaf: "Inclusion is an experience not a placement"[8].




Dr Vera Kolbe, University of Education Freiburg, Germany
vera.kolbe@ph-freiburg.de

Martina Farren, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland
farrenm@tcd.ie

Prof Lorraine Leeson, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland
leesonl@tcd.ie

Prof Dr. Sigrid Slettebakk Berge, NTNU, Norway
sigrid.s.berge@ntnu.no

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