

Sign Bilingual Education in Spain: Current Issues and Proposals for the Future

Carolina Plaza Pust
J.W. Goethe-Universitaet Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Victòria Gras Ferrer
Universitat de Barcelona, Spain / University of La Trobe, Australia

Esperanza Morales López
Universidade da Coruña, Spain

The present paper concerns the implementation and the outcome of sign bilingual education programmes with deaf students in Spain. In Spain, sign bilingual education was officially introduced in the course of the 1990's in several schools in Barcelona and Madrid (including nursery, primary, and secondary schools). Sign bilingual education has not been officially implemented in other Spanish towns. However, there is evidence for the use of sign language by individual teachers in some schools with deaf students.

In this paper, we will first explore the socio-political circumstances related to the implementation of sign bilingual education programmes in Barcelona and Madrid. We will then examine the pedagogical and didactic conceptions adopted in these programmes and discuss the available evidence concerning the outcome of this particular type of bilingual education. Finally, on the backdrop of the shortcomings encountered we will make some proposals concerning the measures that need to be taken for the improvement of current bilingual education programmes as well as for the eventual implementation of sign bilingual education on a national level.

Our study of sign bilingual education in Spain is based on a broad data collection including

- semi-structured interviews with the people in charge of the different sign bilingual education programmes
- a national census covering information on Deaf people's attitudes as well as communication systems usage and sign language knowledge by professionals
- elicited written narratives produced by sign bilingually educated deaf students.

We will first discuss the resolutions adopted by the major national political parties in the Spanish Parliament with regard to the official status assigned to the bilingual option in deaf education. Then we will look at the declarations made at the regional level by the political parties which are in charge of the educational policies in Barcelona and Madrid, i.e. *Convergència i Unió* and *Partido Popular* respectively (both right-wing parties). We will see that the *Partido Popular* in Madrid favours the oralist method openly, whilst *Convergència i Unió* in Catalonia seems to support the sign bilingual method rather reluctantly. Then we will show how this ideological debate is mirrored in the educational area and to what extent it has conditioned the improvisation and the confusion encountered in the bilingual programmes investigated. In this context we will present our evaluation of the conception, the implementation, and the outcome of current bilingual education programmes in Spain.

Crucially, we will see that sign bilingual education has been introduced in Spain in terms of a bottom-up model following the pressure of the deaf schools, on the one hand, and the deaf children's parents, on the other hand, upon their realisation of the failure of the oralist method they experienced personally in their school years. Educational councils were not involved in the planning of the sign bilingual option. Neither was professional expertise from related academic fields (linguistics, pedagogy, psychology) involved nor research concomitant to the running bilingual programmes promoted. We will see that these deficits bear important consequences not only as

regards the conception and the planning of sign bilingual education programmes but also concerning the development of appropriate assessment procedures.

Secondly, we will argue that appropriate teacher training is a key factor in the implementation and eventually in the success of the sign bilingual education method. Lacking this opportunity, the teaching staff working in the bilingual projects studied have been left with the task of attaining competence in sign bilingualism and sign bilingual education by learning from their own experience, their few exchanges with professionals working in bilingual schools abroad, and the little information on this matter provided in their continuing education.

Thirdly, we will see that bilingual education needs to be based on a clear concept of how language contact is to be modelled in the classroom. In this context we will see that the definition of sign language as the language of instruction represents a fundamental step in the implementation of sign bilingual education. Yet for a successful bilingual development further aspects need to be considered relating to (a) the sign language variety used to convey the curriculum (standard variety, contact varieties, terminology), (b) the role of L1 sign language in the acquisition of L2 oral written language (cross-linguistic influence, metalinguistic awareness). The role of language mixing in the classroom as well as the use of mixed codes (signed systems) needs to be addressed, too. In this regard, professionals working in sign bilingual programmes may profit from the insights gathered in the areas of sign language linguistics, and sign bilingual acquisition research. The identification of specific learnability problems arising in the acquisition of two languages of different modality is crucial to the conception and assessment of sign language contact in the classroom.

Finally, we will present our proposals concerning future sign bilingual education planning in Spain by taking into consideration (a) didactic conceptions applied in successful bilingual education models involving a signed and a spoken language or two spoken languages, as is the case in Catalonia, Belgium or Canada, and (b) evidence from the area of developmental linguistics concerning bilingual language development and the role of sign language in the acquisition of the written language.

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