

EUROPEAN BRIEFING :
SIGN LANGUAGES

The EU position

There are half a million profoundly deaf people in the European Community most of whom will never be proficient in spoken language and whose preferred or only language for communication is sign language.

In 1988 the European Parliament recognised that sign languages can properly be regarded as languages in their own right and called for the official recognition by each Member State of the sign language used by its deaf people and to abolish any remaining obstacles to its use.

Calling for the Commission to set an example, the European Parliament now makes provision, as a matter of principle, for sign language interpretation at meetings organised under their auspices and attended by deaf people.

In addition, it called upon the Commission to consider how Community-led exchanges might best be brought about between those proficient in their respective countries' sign languages and cultures.

Sign languages and international communication

Although there are ways in which the language structure of one national sign language resembles that of another, they do differ, just as oral languages do, and have to be learned. However, judging from reported experience, it seems clear that it will take a native user of, say, British Sign Language (BSL) far less time to achieve basic communicative competence with signing counterparts abroad than it would for a monolingual English speaker to learn to communicate with a user of a foreign spoken language.

This seems to be borne out by the experience of Scottish teachers travelling abroad with deaf youngsters who report that their students communicated more successfully with foreign signers than with foreign speakers of the language, even in cases where the Scottish children had not been taught full BSL and knew none of the foreign signed language.

Curricular implications

In Scotland at present, pupils with a significant hearing deficit are, along with those with severe and multiple disabilities, the youngsters least likely to be studying a second language, on the grounds that their development in their first language (English) is already retarded.

For this project, concerned as it is with the European dimension and with extending opportunities for "Languages for All" to as many of our youngsters as possible, the exclusion of some able deaf youngsters from such opportunities raises a number of interesting questions.

- What place does/could/should BSL have within the language mode in the curriculum of profoundly deaf children?
- Is BSL, in the case of mother tongue users, considered as the child's first language, so that English could logically be regarded as the child's second, 'European' language?
- If a deaf child does not have the opportunity to acquire BSL as a first language, could/should BSL be regarded as a useful second European language for that child?
- Where a child is proficient in both BSL and English, does he/she receive accreditation for achievement in both languages?
- What opportunities for further foreign language learning should there be for youngsters already proficient in both native languages?
- What form should that language learning take?
- Is there a unique deaf European dimension we need to take into account?

We would welcome debate on these issues.