

Teaching and Learning Signed Languages

International Perspectives and Practices

Edited by

David McKee
Russell S. Rosen
Rachel McKee



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Introduction

David McKee, Russell S. Rosen, and Rachel McKee

The profile of signed languages as taught second languages has soared in recent decades. This volume responds to the fact that innovation and knowledge in the sphere of sign language teaching remain scarcely documented compared with the scientific description of linguistic and cultural properties of signed languages.

Worldwide, second language courses in signed languages have flourished across the spectrum of educational contexts, from elementary schools to community education settings to university degree programs. Acceptance of signed languages in the domain of foreign language study has become widespread, in many instances overcoming misperceptions about their 'universal' or non-foreign character, and concerns about their non-written form and lack of a conventional literature. Indeed, learning sign language has become highly popular. In the USA, for example, the Modern Language Association reported a startling 432 percent increase in enrolments in American Sign Language (ASL) courses and the establishment of 187 new programs between 1998 and 2002.¹ Teachers of signed language as a second language work across a variety of institutional and community contexts, and respond to diverse learner goals and characteristics, sometimes within the same classroom or program. Sign language learners bring a host of motivations, including preparation and credential requirements for teaching, interpreting, and service professions, a desire to communicate in family and social contexts, and purely linguistic interest. Most learners of sign language aim to make use of their language skills to interact with members of the local target community, thus giving sign language teachers a responsibility for preparing learners not only with language competencies but also with the pragmatic and cultural knowledge needed to engage with Deaf sign language users in a visual modality, in real contexts.

Worldwide, the teaching and learning of signed languages as second languages has been crucial to fostering understanding of their importance to Deaf communities and promoting their status in society. In countries where the teaching of signed languages is well established and institutionally supported, there is usually also stronger recognition of the needs of sign language users by governmental and administrative bodies. The relationship between the development of sign language teaching and advancing the linguistic human rights of sign language users is complementary: societal commitment to improving communication accessibility requires that a range of professionals and service providers acquire sign language proficiency, which in turn supports the development of a sign language teaching industry and the production of research and resources that support it.

Following the description of ASL in linguistic terms by William Stokoe and associates in the 1960s, sign language research and teaching centers were established in many countries from the 1970s onwards. By the 1980s a burgeoning literature attesting to the linguistic properties of signed languages and the production of national sign language dictionaries supported acknowledgment of signed languages as bona fide and nationally distinct languages. Sign language and Deaf Studies teaching programs have frequently co-existed in proximity to linguistic research activity, and the scholarly description of lexicon, grammar, and use of signed languages has provided an important source of ideas about how, and what, to teach second language learners.

Nevertheless, the application of knowledge from sign language linguistics to curriculum design and teaching remains under-developed in comparison to the bridging field of applied linguistics that exists for spoken languages. While the sign language teaching profession has grown apace, the literature on linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of signed languages still far exceeds the scope of publications that address applied issues of learning and teaching. Similarly, the application of theoretical and empirical knowledge about spoken language L2 pedagogy is under-explored in relation to signed languages. The distinctive bimodal parameters of adult sign language learning are recognized by practitioners, but are not yet well articulated in terms of evidence-based teaching practices. Rather, signed language pedagogy has relied strongly upon the generation and sharing of practitioner insight, often in face-to-face contexts such as workshops, conferences, training courses, and on-the-job mentoring, which can be highly effective but ephemeral. A relatively small selection of commercially published and custom-made sign language teaching curricula and student materials have also

been influential in disseminating teaching approaches adapted from the field of spoken language L2 teaching. Sign language teachers often state that their methods rest on intuition and their understandings of language and linguistics, developed through practical experience, available learning materials, and familiarity with their learners. This basis for teaching practice can become deeply developed and effective, but may not systematically lead towards evidence-based improvements in practice across the field, which is broadly the goal of applied linguistics.

Besides a short history of professionalization, the emergent status of applied sign language linguistics reflects some structural realities surrounding the teaching of signed languages. Conditions vary between countries, but some common factors include, first, a small number and typically casual employment status of Deaf sign language teachers which constrains the development of a professional infrastructure; second, the historical hosting of sign language teaching programs in academic disciplines such as communication disorders and special education or in community education contexts which are outside the domain of second/foreign language teaching; and, third, a lack of specialized qualification requirements for sign language teachers in many (though not all) contexts. Variable professional preparation relates to employment of teachers across diverse contexts, and also reflects the barriers to mainstream higher education experienced by first language sign language users, and the lack of sign language specific teaching preparation programs that are available. Programs and temporary projects to train teachers of signed languages have been established in numerous countries, mainly from the 1990s; internationally, some are offered at a foundational level and in a format designed to empower Deaf community participation, while a smaller number are offered at Bachelor's or Master's degree level. All such programs are challenged by the scarcity of professional literature (in either written or signed form) that would form a common foundation for promulgating effective pedagogical practices. In turn, the relative scarcity of permanent and advanced-level academic programs that address sign language teaching constrains the growth of research and curriculum development, which is most likely to be generated by faculty and graduates of such programs.

Notwithstanding these facts, a growing number of researchers and teaching practitioners are actively investigating principles, practices, and outcomes of sign language teaching for diverse learner groups. This volume brings together an international collection of contemporary work by such scholars, as a contribution to the development of an applied sign linguistics literature that we observe to be needed.

Research approaches represented in this volume range from qualitative, ethnographic, and documentary studies to quantitative and experimental designs. Topics span learner and teacher perspectives on learning, teaching, and teacher training, and issues of curriculum, task, and assessment design. Some chapters make an explicit link between empirical findings of linguistic analysis and the design of curricula and learning tasks. Another prevalent source of pedagogical innovation featuring in the volume is the dynamic capacity of digital media and online learning tools to reconfigure the types of resources, tasks, and assessment methods available to learners and teachers. The effects of learner characteristics and strategies, and of specific instructional conditions, are explored in some studies. Several contributors provide a macro-level overview of teaching and training developments in a specific geographical context, which enables comparative reflection on patterns in the development and impacts of sign language teaching. The following section provides a preview of the contents of the volume, which is organized into four sections.

The first section offers comparative insight into the development and impacts of sign language teaching and teacher training through case studies in three regions of the world. Anna-Lena Nilsson and Krister Schönström start with a historical overview of factors that have contributed to the development of teaching and learning of Swedish Sign Language (SSL) as a second language, and consider future prospects for SSL as a first and second language in light of the increasing number of deaf² individuals who are growing up as cochlear implant users, and associated changes in deaf education practices. These contextual changes surrounding sign language teaching clearly have international relevance.

Initiatives to formally train Deaf people as sign language teachers have contributed not only to improving the standard of sign language teaching and learning, but also to the internal development of Deaf communities, by raising consciousness, increasing employment opportunities, and disseminating knowledge that underpins the advocacy for recognition of a signed language. From the Oceania and Asia region, David McKee and James Woodward report on teacher training programs established with broad development aims; their chapter outlines the aims, structure, and participant perceptions of programs in two contexts – New Zealand, and an Asia-Pacific regional program in sign linguistics and teaching based in Hong Kong.

Moving a level beyond language teacher preparation, Gary Quinn and Graham Turner's chapter reports on a Graduate Diploma program in

Teaching British Sign Language Tutors, a course designed to train the Deaf trainers of prospective BSL teachers. They discuss the rationale for establishing the course, and its content, and evaluate impacts of the program on course participants.

The second section of the volume focuses on teaching techniques and task design, highlighting the application of digital tools and research methods to sign language learning. Donovan Cresdee and Trevor Johnston make a case for the merits of sign language teachers and curriculum planners utilizing corpus-based evidence about sign language structure and usage (illustrated by their work on Auslan) to inform curriculum content, and as a resource for inquiry-based learning by teachers and students of signed language. They argue that empirical evidence from a corpus does not always align with intuitive or conventional explanations about language use that teachers present to learners.

Mastering the use of constructed action (CA) is known to be a bimodal challenge for second language users of signed languages. Recently, conceptual renewal in sign linguistics has resulted in re-evaluation of iconicity in CA and led to enriched description of constructed action as a discourse structure which is helpful for pedagogy. In this chapter, Renate Fischer and Anke Müller report on the development and use of an e-learning tool (eLCA) designed for students of Deutsche Gebärdensprache (German Sign Language, known as DGS) as a means of improving metalinguistic awareness, comprehension, and production of CA.

Also addressing the development of metalinguistic awareness for DGS learners, Thomas Kaul, Reiner Griebel, and Emily Kaufmann report on an experimental study using transcription to improve students' receptive language competence. The aim of the transcription task was to promote 'noticing' of non-manual features and mouth gestures, through close analysis of sign language texts – using a method that parallels phonological awareness tasks for learners of spoken languages. Results from grammaticality judgment tests show a performance advantage for the test group over a control group, indicating that repeated practice using the transcription technique strengthens metalinguistic awareness of the target features.

The third section of the volume comprises four studies that reveal perspectives, strategies, and contexts of differing types of sign language learners. Given that hearing learners are learning to communicate in a visual modality, yet have the sensory capacity to be bimodal, teachers may choose to keep classroom instruction and interaction 'unimodal'

(in sign language only) or bimodal (utilizing both native (spoken) and target (signed) languages). The effects of target versus native language as the medium of instruction in ASL classrooms is the focus of three experimental school classroom studies reported by Russell Rosen, Mary DeLouise, Amanda Boyle, and Kerry Drake. Comparison of learner performance on vocabulary retention tests under each condition indicates the overall advantage of target language or mixed modes as the medium of vocabulary learning; however, some differential effects for students with learning disabilities are also discussed.

Parents of deaf children are a target group of second language users who have highly specific and important learning needs, and empirical research is needed to identify effective contexts and approaches for supporting their learning. Kristin Snoddon's contribution reports an ethnographic study of a series of workshops teaching parents how to read books with their young Deaf child using ASL. In particular, parents' perspectives and orientations towards ASL and literacy and learning goals are highlighted in comparison to the teaching goals of three Deaf instructors. Implications of these findings regarding parents' plurilingual orientation and repertoires are discussed in regard to early years programming and policy.

Enrichment of linguistic and pragmatic competencies through independent practice in authentic language contexts is a dearly held goal for educators of sign language interpreting students. In a qualitative study of interpreter trainees in New Zealand, Lynette Pivac explores learners' reflections on their strategies and resources for autonomous learning within academic and community contexts during a two-year program. Learner perspectives gleaned from participants are considered in relation to notions of 'good language learner' characteristics and sociocultural perspectives on learner autonomy.

Deaf people as unimodal learners of a foreign sign language are only emerging as a subject of consideration in course design or research. Returning to a theme of plurilingualism, Jens Hessman and Liesbeth Pyfers report on a collaborative project undertaken by a group of Deaf and hearing researchers from EU countries which resulted in an online course in British Sign Language as a foreign language (titled 'Signs 2Go'), for Deaf sign language users from Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. Their chapter identifies native language knowledge that is apparently transferable for such learners, and considers what kinds of metalinguistic annotation of authentic materials and tasks are most useful for them in an online medium. The authors suggest that lexical information is most critical to this target group, and draw attention to

the wider point that vocabulary acquisition and enrichment should take a central place in all sign language instruction.

A final section comprises a chapter by David Smith and Jeffrey Davis that begins by reviewing the existing literature on assessment of L2 sign language users, differentiating summative and formative assessment, which is the focus of their chapter. They highlight the importance of formative assessment as a means of measuring learner progress and as a tool for evaluating instructional effectiveness within programs. By way of illustration, they discuss the efficacy of one approach currently offered online at a large sign language program at a university in the USA, which they regard as a pioneering formative assessment tool. Smith and Davis' review reiterates that sign language teachers need more assessment tools that have proven reliability based on empirical trials with large numbers of learners.

The scope and diversity of this volume were determined by the range of work offered in response to a call for papers. While this collection addresses only a sample of the potential issues and contexts that are pertinent to teachers and researchers in the field, we believe it provides valuable insights on current practices and perspectives that will inform sign language teachers, teacher preparation programs, and researchers. It is the editors' hope that this volume will encourage further investigation and publication about problems and innovations in second language teaching, learning, and assessment of signed languages.

Notes

1. Welles, E. B. 2004. Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002. *ADFL Bulletin*, Vol. 35, Nos. 2–3 (Winter–Spring 2004).
2. Regarding use of 'deaf' and 'Deaf' in this volume: in the Deaf Studies literature, upper and lower case forms of d/Deaf are commonly used to denote audiological status vs cultural-linguistic identity, and may be applied differentially to children and adults according to their assumed degree of affiliation with a signing community. Variation in the use of this orthographic convention between chapters in this volume reflects authors' own preferences in the use of this distinction.

Section I

Development and Impacts of Sign Language Teaching

1

Swedish Sign Language as a Second Language: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Anna-Lena Nilsson and Krister Schönström

Introduction

Sweden was one of the first countries in the world to officially recognize a signed language as a language. In 1981, Swedish Sign Language (SSL) was recognized in a government bill (Proposition, 1980/81:100). This recognition, in turn, had major consequences for the acknowledgement of SSL as the first language of deaf children, and also increased the need for formal courses in SSL. This chapter will mainly provide a historical description of the teaching and learning of SSL as a second language (L2) during the late 20th and early 21st century. In light of recent technical developments like, for instance, cochlear implants, some future considerations for SSL, both as a first language (L1) and as L2, will also be discussed, as will changes in the signing community in Sweden.

The academic study of how people learn a second language is relatively recent, but the phenomenon itself is not new. As long as people have migrated there has been second language learning, with people moving into a new linguistic environment learning that language, or people conquering an area and forcing their language upon the people already living there. Certain parallels could possibly be drawn with regard to signed languages, even though the circumstances are different. When it comes to signed languages, it is usually not a matter of crossing geographical borders. However, deaf people have always been surrounded by a hearing majority in their respective countries. In order for hearing people to communicate successfully with deaf people, signing skills are required. Therefore many hearing individuals have been learning sign language as a second language, thereby crossing the

linguistic border between the groups. For what purposes and to what degree they have learned to sign has depended on the values and ideals prevailing in society during different periods of time. However, as is the case for many other signed languages worldwide, the teaching and learning of SSL as L2 has been the subject of very little research. This chapter presents background facts and some experiences of the teaching and learning of SSL as L2, analyzing and contextualizing them in order to document important knowledge in this field and to share this information both nationally and internationally.

We will provide a broad description of the teaching and learning of SSL as a second language, describing it from a historical point of view, and in addition portray the development up until today's state of the art, focusing on some key areas. To date, there has been no research on this particular subject in Sweden, which makes the need for a historical description even greater. It is also our firm belief that many of the trends described in this chapter will have parallels in other countries, and the chapter will therefore be both useful and interesting from an international perspective.

The formal teaching of SSL as L2 will be described from a general perspective, as regards both how it started and its development. We will look at the main types of SSL as L2 teaching from a historical perspective, but also at the situation today. Some main target groups for the teaching of SSL as L2, as well as the specific types of courses aimed at them, will also be briefly discussed, as will the teachers. As an example of the teaching materials used, we will describe how the ideas behind the production of SSL dictionaries have changed over time. The chapter concludes with some remarks regarding how both the L1 and the L2 learner groups of SSL are beginning to change, and some implications this may have for the future of the signing community in Sweden.

The emergence of SSL as L2

Formal teaching of SSL as L2 is a relatively new phenomenon. The language used to be transmitted from one generation to the next in deaf families, in direct contact between people, for example, in schools for the deaf, and in other situations where people were communicating in sign language. As we will see, political decisions of various kinds were instrumental in changing society's views of deaf people and their language, and as a result more and more hearing people needed to – or quite simply wanted to – learn SSL.

The Government Commission on Handicapped Persons (*Handikapputredningen*) delivered its final report in 1976 (SOU, 1976:20). The report contains a general discussion on the importance of language, culture, and accessibility for everybody in society. The Commission stresses that parents of deaf children have a right to learn sign language, and that deaf children must receive linguistic stimulation by learning sign language in pre-schools and schools. In addition, the importance of sign language interpreters, the development of telephone services ('TV-phones') for the deaf, and cultural activities like theater plays in sign language are also discussed.

As a consequence of this change in society, the demand for formal courses for parents of deaf children as well as other people in how to communicate with the deaf increased. In these courses, however, participants did not usually learn SSL – that is, the signed language used in the Deaf community. When the political compass regarding the communicative needs of deaf people started to change towards an acceptance of using signs in the 1960s–1970s, what was recommended was in fact a construction known as 'Signed Swedish' (*Tecknad svenska*). Hearing people were told that they should speak Swedish while simultaneously producing one sign for each Swedish word they uttered. Using this method of communication was erroneously believed to help deaf people learn Swedish, which in turn was seen as crucial for the integration of deaf people in the majority society, and as a way to 'normalize' deaf people. Thus, signing was seen as a tool to reach this goal, whereas SSL was not regarded as a valuable language in its own right.

Political trends and decisions

In 1967, a government committee suggested that society should offer interpreting services for the Deaf free of charge, and in 1969 such provisional services were organized for the first time (SOU, 1976:20, p. 108). Before there were professional sign language interpreters in Sweden, hearing children of deaf parents were a bridge to the hearing majority society. They would interpret for their parents, and sometimes also for their parents' friends. As these new, formalized interpreting services increased in volume a need for more SSL interpreters and for formal training to become an interpreter became apparent. The Swedish National Board of Education (*Skolöverstyrelsen* (SÖ)) initiated such a training course, in co-operation with the National Association of the Deaf (*Sveriges Dövas Riksförbund* (SDR)), The Association of the Swedish Deaf Blind (*Föreningen Sveriges Dövblinda*), and The National Board of

Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*). The money to set up the courses was taken from the state budget, from money set aside for 'cultural activities for handicapped people'. Gradually, persons who were not already fluent signers were also trained to become SSL interpreters, and these interpreting students constituted one of the first large groups that needed formal teaching of SSL as L2. It has been estimated that already during the period from 1969 to 1976 approximately 200 persons were trained to be SSL interpreters (SOU, 1976:20, p. 116).

Another driving force behind the emergence of the teaching of SSL as L2 was a realization that not even the new technological advances and improved hearing aids were enough to make the oral method of teaching deaf and hard-of-hearing (HoH) children successful for all children. In Sweden, a major turning point was an information meeting held in Uppsala on May 10, 1970. At this meeting, members of SDR and members of the Swedish National Association for Deaf, Hearing-Impaired and Language-Impaired Children (*Döva barns målsmän*, DBM) were invited to put questions to a panel of experts. The panel consisted of researchers specializing in communication of the Deaf, and also the principal of the Manilla School for the Deaf in Stockholm. Fortunately for those of us who were not there, this decisive debate was transcribed and published (SDR, 1971). Some of the experts stressed the importance of early communication to ensure that a child develops into a normal, healthy individual. During and after this meeting, many parents abandoned their earlier negative attitude towards using SSL in their homes and towards its being used in the education of their children.

As we will see below, some of the main target groups for the teaching of SSL as L2 have thus been the (hearing) parents of deaf children, teachers of the deaf, and interpreting students.

Contributions from early research

During the early 1970s, there was a generally held belief that SSL was not a 'real language', and therefore needed to be 'developed' in order to be used in for instance educational settings: 'To develop sign language and make it fit better with the spoken language is one of the biggest problems. In that area we have other specialists better equipped than me, that can tell us how well developed it is today' (Prof. G. Hanson at the meeting held in Uppsala in 1970, SDR, 1971, p. 6, our translation).

Research into SSL began in 1972, in the Department of Linguistics at Stockholm University. The results of early research on SSL, as well as research on other signed languages, formed the foundation for efforts to demonstrate that SSL was indeed a real language. Knowledge about the

grammar and lexicon of SSL was also important for the formal teaching of SSL as L2. In addition, these research findings were fundamental for the official recognition of SSL in 1981, when a government bill (Prop., 1980/81:100) stating the need for deaf people to be bilingual was passed in the Swedish parliament.

This bill stated that '[t]he Government Commission on Integration points out that profoundly deaf people have to be bilingual to function among themselves and in society. Bilingualism on their part, according to the Commission, means that they have to be fluent in their visual/gestural sign language and in the language society surrounds them with – Swedish' (Government Bill (Prop. 1980/81:100); our translation). In passing this bill, the Swedish Parliament was the first to officially recognize a signed language as a language in its own right.

Research on the linguistic status of SSL was, of course, essential, but there were other areas of research that were of equal importance during these early years. In a project during the 1970s, the early linguistic cognitive development in deaf and severely HoH children was investigated in the same department at Stockholm University (Ahlgren, 1978). In this project, the research team also examined the effects of teaching 'real sign language' (as opposed to Signed Swedish) to parents of deaf children (Ulfspärre, 1978). The work carried out in this research project helped convince hearing parents that both they and their children would benefit from learning SSL. The research team at Stockholm University also hosted the First International Symposium on Sign Language Research, which was held in Stockholm in June 1979 (Ahlgren & Bergman, 1980).

Research on SSL continues at Stockholm University, and currently covers areas such as children's acquisition of SSL (Bergman, 2012), constructing a corpus of SSL for various educational and research uses (Mesch, 2012), and the use of signing space in simultaneous sign language interpretation. In addition, data will be gathered from students learning SSL as an L2 in a new Bachelor's program, and this data can subsequently be used in future studies of this important area. Making sure that research results continue to feed into the teaching of SSL as L2 is an important consideration for the future.

Teaching SSL as L2: Some target groups, courses, and teacher provision

In the next three sub-sections we will look at some of the main target groups for the teaching of SSL as L2 and the SSL courses specifically

aimed at them. Our focus will be Swedish/SSL interpreters, parents of deaf and HoH children, and teachers of the deaf, but some other important groups will also be mentioned. After this, we will briefly discuss the matter of teachers for these courses.

Interpreters

In 1969, the Swedish National Association of the Deaf had founded *Västanviks folkhögskola*. This is a so-called folk high school, a special type of adult education college, and most of the courses at this particular folk high school were held in sign language. The early sign language interpreting courses, which varied in length between two and six weeks, were located there. The very first interpreters' training course was held from April 14 to May 24, 1969. The participants in this six-week course were 11 persons who were fluent users of SSL, and had already been interpreting for several years (Lundström, n.d.). Nine of the participants were the children of deaf parents.

During the first years, courses training SSL interpreters were aimed at fluent signers. However, as the need for interpreters increased, people who had hardly any signing skills at all were sent on the courses. In order to resolve the problems this created during the courses, which were in part taught in sign language by deaf teachers, an admission test to make sure the students had the necessary signing skills was launched in 1977. In addition, the interpreting courses were supplemented with short courses in SSL, aimed at helping applicants to learn enough SSL to pass this admission test.

The interpreters' training courses gradually became longer and longer. In 1981, a one-year (full-time) program was established. This program was expanded into a two-year program in 1989. In addition, there was a two-year program to learn SSL in place for those who needed to learn SSL in order to pass the admission test to be accepted into the interpreters' training program. During the 1990s more programs were set up in similar training institutions in other parts of Sweden, all modeled on the same pattern. 'Two-year programs in SSL are offered by six folk high schools as a preparation before the interpreters' training program' (SOU, 1996:102, p. 30, our translation). The programs eventually changed into four-year programs integrating the contents of the SSL programs and the interpreting programs, and the centralized admission test was abandoned.

In 1983, a diploma program in SSL interpreting was established at Stockholm University. This was an advanced course for people who were already working as sign language interpreters. There was a special

admission test, in which applicants had to show their ability to interpret. The program was a year and a half, full-time, with the explicit aim of training interpreters to work in higher education. Since then, there have been different types of interpreting courses and programs at Stockholm University which have all included teaching of SSL theory/grammar, and several of them have also included classes aimed at improving these interpreters' SSL skills.

Until today, all courses and programs in sign language interpreting at university level in Sweden have thus been further education courses of varying length, but there has never been any university program to train SSL interpreters from scratch. In 2012, the Swedish government appointed Stockholm University to create a Bachelor's program (three years, full-time) in 'sign language and interpreting', launched in 2013.

Parents of deaf and hard-of-hearing children

As mentioned above, hearing parents of deaf and HoH children began to show an increasing interest in learning SSL in the early 1970s, and summer courses in SSL for parents of deaf and HoH children were organized at *Västanviks folkhögskola*, the folk high school owned by SDR (SOU, 1996:102, p. 24). The whole family was invited to these courses, and, while the parents were learning SSL from deaf tutors, the children were playing together and looked after by other deaf people. Later, this type of combined SSL course and summer camp for the whole family spread to many places in Sweden. Many parents have expressed their gratitude for these camps, where they met other parents of deaf children and, in addition to learning SSL, also formed informal support groups.

From the early 1970s until today, parents have played a key role in the development of bilingual education for the deaf in Sweden. The national SSL teaching program for these parents that gradually came into existence was of major importance for this development. As soon as a child was diagnosed as deaf, parents were offered courses in SSL. The government paid for these courses, and parents were compensated for course fees as well as receiving compensation for loss of income. In a government committee report in 1976, it was proposed that both the father and mother of a deaf child should be ensured the right to attend sign language courses, and that the government should compensate them for their loss of income (SOU, 1976:20, p. 78). During the 1990s, this system was further improved, with a new national curriculum for the courses, totaling 240 hours, offered to all parents (SOU, 1996:102, p. 12). The courses are offered by folk high schools throughout Sweden, which are