

LIS and Deafness in a North-Italian Border Region: Results of Research on the Linguistic Needs of Teachers and Students

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Abstract : The passage of the law recognizing Italian Sign Language (LIS) as the language of the Italian deaf minority in 2021 allowed this visual-gestural language to enter university classrooms and the training curricula of people who wish to become sign language interpreters. As the training of interpreters improves, a gap remains in that of teachers and communication assistants (who are professionals dedicated to assisting deaf learners at school while interacting with the classroom). As literature in the field well demonstrates, deaf children can present serious difficulties with the languages spoken in the country in which they grow up, manifesting in all levels of competence. In the research that I introduce here, I explore the experience of deaf students (and their teachers) attending schools in areas that are characterized by strong native bilingualism, such as the schools of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG), facing Italian North-East borders. This region is peculiar as the native population may be bilingual Italian and Friulian (50% of the local population), German, and/or Slovenian. The research involved all schools of all levels in Friuli to understand the relationship between the language skills expressed by teachers and those shown by deaf learners with a background in sign language. In addition to collecting specific information on the degree of preparation of teachers in deaf-related matters and LIS, the research has allowed to highlight the role, often poorly considered, covered by the communication assistants who work alongside deaf students. On several occasions, teachers and assistants were unanimous in affirming the importance of mutual collaboration and adequate consideration of the educational-rehabilitative history of the deaf child and her family. The research has been conducted through a mixed method of structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the referring teachers. As a result, a varied and complex framework emerged, showing an asymmetry in the preparation of personnel dedicated to the deaf learner. Considering how Italian education has long invested in creating an inclusive and accessible school system (i.e., with the "Ten Theses for Democratic Language Education"), a constructive analysis will complete the discussion in an attempt to understand how linguistic (and modal) differences can become levers of inclusion.

Keywords : bimodal bilingualism, Italian sign language, deaf teachers' education, communication assistants, Friulian

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