

**Sign Bilingualism and Deaf Education in Hong Kong –
Recommendations to the Panel on Education, Subcommittee on Integrated
Education, Hong Kong SAR Government**

**Prepared by: The Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies, The Chinese University of
Hong Kong**

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1. Introduction: Sign Language is a Natural Language with a Full-Fledged Grammar

1.1 Recent advancement in Sign Linguistics and Sign Language Acquisition research have enabled us to reconsider the role that sign language may play in bringing up deaf children, independent of their degrees of hearing impairment. The proposal “Sign Bilingualism” is built upon the assumption that sign language can partner with spoken language and cochlear implantation in supporting the language, cognitive and social-psychological development, as well as education, of deaf children (Grosjean 2010; Plaza-Pust 2008, Humphries et.al. 2012). In fact, faced with accumulating evidence from sign linguistics research, and subsequent to the 2007 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Organizing Committee of the 2010 International Congress on the Education of the Deaf staged a public apology to the Congress and Deaf Communities worldwide for having deprived Deaf people of access to sign language and Deaf teachers in deaf education for 130 years. This apology was accompanied with a landmark decision to urge the restoration of sign language and Deaf teachers in educating deaf children in whichever educational setting where this need is called for.

1.2 There are different modes of sign bilingual programmes in the world, many of which are implemented in deaf educational settings. Parallel to this development, an increasing number of programmes in the world attempt to bring Sign Bilingualism in line with inclusive education. To facilitate deaf children’s learning in these mainstream settings, sign interpreters, teaching aides who have fluent signing skills, or simply deaf teachers are called in. It’s high time that Hong Kong complied with these international standards that

aim to resolve the fundamental issues of language in deaf education and basic human rights of Deaf people for decades. Below are the major recommendations prepared by the Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

2. The Potentials for Deaf Children to Become Sign Bilingual

2.1 Since the appeal of Grosjean (1999) that deaf children have the right to become sign bilingual for support of their language, academic, as well as socio-emotional development, many countries have responded by implementing research on sign bilingual acquisition, sign bilingual processing, as well as sign bilingual education, to justify the potentials sign bilingualism may have for deaf children. Concertedly, results show that deaf children can benefit from being sign bilingual because both languages are linguistically equal in status and they complement each other in supporting deaf children's language development, social interaction and access to world knowledge. In many countries nowadays, governments have sign language provisions for not only deaf children but also their parents and family members. A website for the translations of Grosjean (1999) into different languages can be found at http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/the_right_en.html.

2.2 Sign language should not be regarded as a remedial or 'last resort' strategy for deaf children, after they have experienced the insurmountable difficulty in improving their speech only to be branded as a failure at the end, not to mention the fact that they may have already passed the critical periods for language acquisition jeopardizing the chance of acquiring other languages with success (Humphries et.al. 2012). In fact, all these unnecessary and inhumane strategies can be avoided if their spoken language development is supported by sign language. Language acquisition research involving deaf children has already proven beyond doubt that sign language is a natural language and has the advantage of supporting deaf children in capitalizing on the critical period effects on language. There is no evidence, and there never has been any evidence, that deaf children's learning of sign language will interfere with the learning of spoken language (Spencer and Marschark 2010). Therefore, adequate provisions established by the government are necessary to ensure deaf children's maximal access to linguistic input through sign language in their early language development. Parents should be informed of the available

approaches and procedures for making decisions. This should be facilitated and secured with clearly stated language rehabilitation and education policies by the government.

3. The Role of Sign Language in Deaf Education

3.1 As stated by the Education Bureau (2010a) “[t]he aim of special education in Hong Kong is to provide children with special needs with education to help them develop their potential to the full”, students should be given provisions that can effectively remove their barriers to learning and develop their strengths (Education Bureau, 2010b). Also, Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg (2011) emphasize that Deaf individuals should be viewed as “SEEING” persons when the definition is based on their strengths, not weaknesses. As a visual language fully accessible to deaf children without barriers, the acquisition of sign language has proved to be effective in assisting them in developing a solid language foundation for future academic learning and literacy skills development. Therefore, the role of sign language in educating deaf children should be clearly stated in the HK’s education policies and appropriate services and programmes for teacher training should be developed to support deaf children’s education.

3.2 Given the diverse needs of students, “teachers can no longer adopt one single teaching approach for all students, nor can they expect all students to attain the same academic standard” (Education Bureau, 2010b, p.1). There should not be only “one solution for all deaf students”. Education options have to be made available to deaf infants since birth if early intervention is regarded as a necessity. The provision of sign language as part of early intervention does not mean that the role of spoken language should be downplayed. Quite on the contrary, speech training should be encouraged as far and early as possible too to secure bilingual development in both a sign language and a spoken language. Also, parents and teachers should be educated about the limitations facing their deaf child, for them to be realistic enough when raising the child bilingually.

4. Sign Language Support in Different Educational Settings

4.1 According to the Article 24 (2b) and (3c) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, all deaf and hard-of-hearing children should have the right to “access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others”, they should receive education that is “delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual” (United Nations, 2006). To respond to these recommendations, it is high time the Government provided sign language support in deaf education, in both special settings and mainstream settings in Hong Kong at all levels.

4.2 As a natural language with a full-fledged grammar, sign language should be used as an additional medium of instruction, alongside with spoken language, for deaf children in both preschool and school-aged settings.

4.3 As recommended by the United Nations, the government should “allocate more resources equivalent to the services provided for children with disabilities in order to ensure that they are able to develop to their full potential” (2012, p.9). The system of providing a Learning Support Grant (LSG), (i.e. an annual subsidy of HK\$10,000 for one student or HK\$20,000 to school if intensive support is required) adopted since 2004 should be reviewed subject to the rate of inflation and according to the needs of children with different disabilities. In fact, the government has been giving additional resources to support Braille service to children with visual impairment; with the same token, additional resources such as sign language support should be available for deaf children.

5. Parental Guidance

5.1 Parents should be explained explicitly the pros and cons of the different options of deaf education. Considering that there are long-standing misconceptions about sign language among parents and professionals in Hong Kong, public education is necessary to achieve an intelligent understanding of the role of sign language in language development and education of deaf children.

6. Training for Teachers

6.1 Deaf education is not simply special needs education or integrated education. Specific knowledge and competency should be required for a registered teacher for the deaf. Therefore, as in other countries, teachers for the deaf should be trained in a separate programme and awarded with special qualifications.

6.2 As mentioned in the Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities proposed, all teachers for the deaf should be proficient in sign language (United Convention, 2007), which means a sign language qualification requirement should be set for teachers or professionals involved in Deaf education who may be educational psychologists, audiologists and language pathologists.

6.3 Besides acquiring sign language skills, teachers for the deaf should learn about deaf identity, deaf culture and deaf awareness preferably taught by deaf adults, in order to develop a positive, non-deficit-oriented attitude about deafness.

6.4 A system of educational interpreters should be developed for in-class support of deaf students. The role of interpreters should not be restricted to sign interpretation, but also educational support.

7. Training for Deaf Teachers

7.1 As advocated by the Organizing Committee and the British Columbia Deaf Community during the International Congress on Education of the Deaf (ICED) held in Vancouver 2010, Deaf participation and collaboration should be promoted in both special and mainstream settings having deaf children. Fluent deaf signers should be employed as teachers as far as possible, and set as deaf models for the deaf as well as hearing students in school.

7.2 Deaf adults should be provided with equal educational opportunities for training to become deaf teachers for the deaf. The government has the obligation to support sign interpretation services when deaf adults undertake these training programmes.

8. Equal Opportunities in Education

8.1 Deaf students should have equal opportunities for participating in class- and school-level activities although they are using a visual language-in these educational settings.

8.2 The contents of the curriculum, the aspired goals and educational outcomes for deaf students should be the same as hearing students.

9. Public Education

9.1 The public should be educated on the following:

- i. Sign language has the linguistic status of a natural language having an independent grammatical system. It is not neither gesture nor the signing version of a spoken language. "Sign language" is used as a general term here, but each country has its own sign language (e.g., American Sign Language, Russian Sign Language, Hong Kong Sign Language), and it is no uncommon for some countries to have more than one variety;
- ii. Sign language is the language used by the Deaf community. As a natural language, it does not adversely affect, but support, the learning of other languages, be they signed or spoken;
- iii. Deaf people have the rights to be given oral language and sign language training, and to receive education through these two languages in any educational settings (no matter special or inclusive school settings) where they find themselves.

10. Successful Experience in Deaf-Hearing Integrated Education

10.1 Since 2006, The Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong has been conducting a private programme utilizing sign bilingualism (i.e. a concept for promoting bilingualism) and co-enrolment (i.e. an education concept aiming to promote inclusive education) in deaf education as two overarching

philosophies. This additional option in deaf education is being implemented in a mainstream kindergarten and a mainstream primary school where deaf and hearing children from pre-school to P.6 study together using both sign language and oral language. The didactics are based on collaborative teaching between a hearing teacher of the subject and a deaf teacher. The programme is currently servicing over 80 deaf children, and the successful outcomes of the programme are well recognized by the school authorities, parents of both deaf and hearing children, and the general public if given the opportunity to learn about the programme as an example of inclusive deaf education. The demand for the programme is increasing as more and more parents of deaf infants are enrolled in the baby signing programme for early language support.

10.2 As the option of sign bilingualism and co-enrollment in inclusive deaf education has become increasingly prominent to complement oral education for the deaf in many countries nowadays, it's high time that the HK government caught the tide of new developments, strengthening this option locally by incorporating it into the existing system, to complement oral education for the deaf in HK. In special education, the diversity of SEN children in terms of their abilities is well recognized and options are definitely necessary in order to support them to realize their potentials to the full.

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