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Co-enrolment of Hearing, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Pupils in a Mainstream School The Bilingual Classes of Sainte-Marie in Namur (Belgium)

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1 Introduction

In 2000, a bilingual program for deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) pupils was created within a mainstream school in Namur that had only welcomed hearing pupils until that time. The parents of a deaf child were the motivational force behind the creation of this setting. Taking advantage of a decree that allowed schools in the French-speaking part of Belgium to organise teaching by immersion in a language other than French, they wished to make it possible for groups of DHH children to be taught in sign language (SL) and in spoken language (SpL), and to be provided with a level of schooling similar to that offered to their hearing peers. Although the parents were unaware of the fact, the fundamental principles of the setting they were implementing match the features of what Kirchner described in 1994 as a “co-enrolment” setting (Antia and Metz, 2014).

This chapter first describes the context in which this setting emerged and the way it combines the principles of bilingualism, co-teaching, and inclusion. Then, it presents in more detail three aspects that receive particular attention from the staff in order to ensure that DHH pupils can benefit efficiently from this bilingual and inclusive setting. The first aspect concerns the required adaptation of the pedagogic approach according to the variety of linguistic backgrounds of DHH pupils. The second, in line with Swanwick (2016), is related to the importance for teachers to explicitly establish links between the SL and the SpL in order to support the learning process in a bilingual perspective. And the third aspect concerns the respective roles of bilingual teachers and interpreters in such a setting, the former being responsible for the education of DHH students and the latter being at the service for the linguistic inclusion of DHH students within the school community.

2 Context

The bilingual setting operating in the school Sainte-Marie in Namur originated from the wish of the parents of a deaf child that their child be provided with a level of schooling similar to that offered to hearing children in an ordinary school, with all information made accessible to him despite his severe hearing loss. A decree approved in 1998 by the government of the French Community of Belgium had allowed schools to organise instruction by immersion in a language other than French. Thanks to the efforts of the Deaf Association (FFSB) and the Association of Parents of Deaf Children (APEDAF), French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB) was recognised as one of the languages offered in immersion by this decree.

Relying on this legal framework, the parents created a non-profit association, *École et Surdit *, and started looking for an ordinary school that would welcome the project. The Sainte-Marie school, in the centre of Namur, agreed to take on the challenge. Until then, only hearing students were enrolled in the school: around 600 for the 9 class levels of elementary school, i.e., pre-school and primary school (children aged between 2.5 and 12), and around 1000 pupils distributed over the 6 levels of secondary school (young pupils between 12 and 18 years old).

In September 2000, the first bilingual class opened, at the first level of elementary school (children aged 2.5 to 3.5): a bilingual teacher joined the ordinary teacher in her class to teach the small group of DHH pupils, to ensure they were included in the class and benefitted from the same curriculum as their hearing peers. Until 2015, following the progress of the older pupils until the end of secondary school, one additional class has been opened each year replicating the functioning of the first class. At the time of writing, 50 DHH students have been co-enrolled in the programme offered at Sainte-Marie in Namur. The curriculum that is offered to them is identical to the one offered to the hearing pupils of the school and of all mainstream schools in *F d ration Wallonie-Bruxelles*. The degree DHH students obtain at the end of secondary school in this setting legally gives them equal access to higher education and university.

3 Principles: bilingualism, co-teaching, and inclusion

1 The so called “D cret immersion” (Immersion decree), on teaching by linguistic immersion, has been approved by the *Communaut  fran aise de Belgique* on 13 July 1998 and published in the *Moniteur Belge* on 28 August 1998.

In order to reach the dual objectives of offering DHH pupils a level of education equivalent to that of hearing pupils and of making all information and communication accessible to all, teaching is based on the principle of bilingualism. The fact is that, on the one hand, LSFb, like all sign languages (SLs), has no written tradition and, on the other hand, French is only partly accessible to DHH students. For some it is only accessible in its written form, and for others it is accessible in its written form and in a varying proportion of its spoken form. Therefore, LSFb and French are impossible to separate in class, where oral and written language constantly intertwine (see below). Bilingualism determines the primary communication mode used in the class. LSFb is the language of face-to-face communication, whereas French is the language used for all written purposes, i.e. on the blackboard, in texts and all documents on paper. But in pre-school (children aged 2.5 to 6), namely before the acquisition of reading and writing, specific bilingual activities are organised on a regular basis for DHH pupils in LSFb and in oral French completed by cued speech² (Leybaert and LaSasso, 2010). These bilingual activities serve various objectives: providing immersion in spoken French made visually accessible, helping pupils distinguish between the two languages and instil bilingualism in their consciousness, creating interest in French through fun activities, and giving them access to the phonology of the French language for the purpose of supporting their literacy development. Indeed, bilingualism is also the objective teachers have for each DHH student at the end of the secondary school. The idea is to ensure that students acquire equal ease and fluency in the two languages, even though each individual will probably have a greater affinity for one of the two. It is worth underlining that this requirement does not apply for the hearing pupils of the class: they are taught and evaluated on the same skills but only in French. This stems from the fact that when the director of the Sainte-Marie school welcomed the bilingual project, the initiators had been careful not to cause upheavals in the existing functioning of the school, because of the ground-breaking nature of the project. The idea of organising bilingual education both for hearing and DHH pupils of the class would have been too revolutionary to be accepted by the director, the teaching staff, and even the parents of hearing pupils. Up to the present, there have been no attempts to create compulsory SL classes for hearing pupils, even though it could have a positive impact on inclusion. Some of the hearing students naturally learn LSFb by being in contact with it and some follow the LSFb classes that are organised in the school for hearing students, but no one is obliged to do so. Hearing students are mainly looked after by the French-speaking teacher.

To be recruited, the bilingual co-teacher (hearing or deaf) must have a teaching degree (as pre-school teacher, primary school teacher, or as secondary school teacher in one of the class subjects) and have a certified UF9 level in LSFb, which corresponds to a C1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale. In addition, they must successfully pass a recruitment assessment for which they are evaluated on both their pedagogical skills and their linguistic competences in LSFb and in (at least written) French. The bilingual teacher is primarily in charge of the DHH group of pupils. Although for linguistic classes (LSFb, French and English), DHH pupils are taught separately with their bilingual teacher, in all non-linguistic classes (math, history, geography, the sciences, physical education, art education, etc.), activities are organised in inclusion, with only a few exceptions when it is pedagogically justified (see below). Co-teaching a group of hearing students in French and a group of DHH students in LSFb and French in parallel within the same classroom cannot be efficiently achieved without good coordination. The co-teachers are hierarchically equal: they have equal status, do lesson planning, execution, and evaluation together. They must take into account that the languages used may affect the logic and the path of the course construction (Duverger, 2009) for several reasons: because DHH students use eyesight to perceive interactions in LSFb, while hearing students following oral interactions keep their eyesight available for other purposes, because DHH students are developing their learning in two languages, while hearing students can do so monolingually, and because the lack of linguistic input caused by their hearing loss greatly affects the level of general awareness of DHH pupils (Convertino et al., 2014). All this means that in terms of achievements and needs, DHH and hearing pupils differ, which forces co-teachers to plan the way they will conduct the lessons and manage the differences in rhythm between the two groups.

As for non-linguistic classes, all extra-curricular activities are organised in inclusion and through co-teaching, for example, going out to a museum, a cinema or a sport centre. Each activity organised by the school (e.g. a conference, a cultural activity by an external visitor or an information session to parents) is at least interpreted in LSFb by the professional interpreters who work within the school and are hired by *École et Surdit *, or even prepared in both languages (e.g. the class show at the school

² « Cued Speech is a system that makes use of visual information from speechreading combined with hand shapes positioned in different places around the face in order to deliver completely unambiguous information about the syllables and the phonemes of spoken language. » (Leybaert & LaSasso, 2010).

party, a singing project and performance or the poetry for Mother's and Father's Day). LSFB and deaf culture classes are offered to the hearing students at the school, which also fosters inclusion. But the DHH group remains a minority in each bilingual class (on average 15%) and even more so in the school overall (on average 3%). Since neither hearing children nor hearing teachers are required to learn SL, interpreters play an important role regarding the objective of inclusion in such a bilingual education setting. Section 5 below develops this aspect.

Due to the specific needs of DHH students, e.g. in terms of acquired knowledge, pace of learning, and the requirements of bilingualism, bilingual teachers face the difficulty of combining the principles of bilingualism and inclusion on a daily basis. Teachers have the liberty and the responsibility to make thoughtful choices when necessary in order to balance both objectives on a weekly, yearly or two-yearly cycle. They are also free to use interpreters when appropriate and relevant to the pedagogical and the inclusion objectives.

4 Pedagogical differentiation according to the variety of DHH profiles

The profiles of DHH students who are co-enrolled in the programme are as varied as they are in society. They are related to the variety of family contexts and linguistic environments, to the degree of hearing loss of each individual as well as the way communication was established with each child before entering school. Among the pupils who were included from the beginning of the programme, three main profiles have been identified. Each profile has specific needs and requires appropriate pedagogic approaches. It is therefore of high importance for a teacher to differentiate the pupils according to their profile in order to adjust their actions.

The first (and most strongly represented) profile includes pupils who face a severe delay in their linguistic development at the stage of entering school and have almost no language, neither sign nor spoken, at the age of 3. These pupils may have hearing or deaf parents, may or may not have received a cochlear implant, and may or may not wear hearing aids. The backgrounds of individual students vary greatly, but what they have in common is that they are almost unable to communicate, to follow the communication of others, or even to answer a question. Upon entering school, these pupils represent the majority of the DHH students of the programme. When they arrive, the urgent challenge for teachers is to educate them to use their gaze for communication and involve them in their first exchanges, firstly in SL to ensure the complete accessibility of the linguistic input and help them develop a first language. Their delay in acquiring a first language has more or less harmful effects on their cognitive and psychological development (Dammeyer, 2015). Teachers must be specifically aware, most notably when teaching students how to read, of the fact that these pupils are often used to not understanding and often do not even seek the meaning of phrases, texts, events, or situations. They are able to decode an entire text, be convinced they have read it, but at the same time are unable to infer any meaning from what they decoded. The experience showed that, thanks to the vigilance of the teachers and in close collaboration with the families, speech therapists, and psychologists, pupils of this profile are able to develop competences in at least one of the two languages used in the classroom.

The second profile includes pupils whose first language is LSFB, for whom French becomes a second language during the course of their education. These pupils have DHH parents and LSFB is the language of their family. They arrive at pre-school with a linguistic and cognitive development equivalent to that of their hearing peers. Because they discover the existence of French (and of SpL) at school and this language is seldom valorised in their families, the challenge of teachers with regard to pupils of this profile is to motivate them to meet the requirements and develop the desire to learn French. The bilingual activities organised in pre-school are expected to help them reach this aim and familiarise them with the phonology of the French language through cued speech to later support their acquisition of reading and writing. Indeed, as these pupils cannot learn the alphabet based on the grapheme-sound relationship, they must be guided to rely on their competences in lip-reading

3 The inclusion of DHH pupils and teachers would certainly be improved if hearing teachers were required to learn SL. This could be a worthwhile change to be tested in the forthcoming years. But at the beginning of the project, since the principle was to strictly model DHH education on what was offered to hearing pupils, the fact that hearing teachers did not master SL was an implicit guarantee that the teaching would not be adapted or skirted before having been tested by the bilingual co-teacher.

4 These difficulties seem to be specific to this being a co-enrolment setting. In contacts and exchanges organised with other education schools and settings for the deaf in Europe (in Sweden but also in France, e.g. Toulouse and Poitiers) and in Canada (Montréal), the teachers of Sainte-Marie did not see the same combinations of constraints in their colleagues' practices, because their models did not combine inclusion, bilingualism and the resulting translanguaging.

5 Because from an early age these children have not perceived the meaning of communication, they are often not used to fixing persons and interlocutors with their gaze (Delaporte, 1998). Teachers help them to progressively learn to listen with their eyes, both in SL and in SpL, to detect visual cues including facial expressions, lip movements, cued speech keys.

and in articulating mouth movements while signing. Teachers are encouraged to make explicit the link between the mouth movements these pupils spontaneously do in signing, the corresponding cued speech form, the fingerspelling of the French word, and its written form. They must also be aware that their development of the French vocabulary will follow the same logic and the same pace as for French as a second language learners, and that they may support it using appropriate methods (e.g. studying morphemes, using a lot of functional reading).

The third (and the least represented) profile includes DHH pupils who have French as a first language and who develop LSFb at school only. These pupils were usually born into hearing families who had no prior knowledge about deafness. They generally get good benefit from their cochlear implant(s) or hearing aids and from their family members' habit of making their speech in French visually complete and accessible, such as the use of cued speech. Pupils representing this profile are a minority of the DHH students enrolled in the programme. They develop linguistically and cognitively without delay, they usually become fluent bilingual students when aged around 15 and show good academic skills. But the challenge they face, along with their families, is to realise and accept their hearing loss. From pre-school onwards, teachers must help both the children and their families go through this sensitive process in the best possible conditions. As French is their first language, these pupils will follow the same path as most hearing pupils with similar stages of development when it comes to the first stages of learning to read. They may experience specific difficulties related to their hearing loss and the possible incomplete perception they have of some spoken words. In those cases, a consistent use of cued speech helps disambiguate these problems and refine the phonological understanding of French for those children.

Since these profiles are usually mixed in each class, teachers are expected to differentiate their approaches and to adapt them to the needs of the different profiles of DHH pupils while teaching bilingually.

5 Bilingual pedagogy

Regardless of their linguistic profile, all DHH pupils of the programme are supported to become bilingual in LSFb and (at least) written French by the end of secondary school. To reach this objective, it is essential that both languages are considered as equally rich and respected by all parties in the school community, and notably by all teachers. But besides this minimum requirement, over the 17 years of their experience the teachers of the programme developed appropriate pedagogic processes in order to make the bilingual approach compatible with the specific needs of DHH students. The core principle of this bilingual pedagogy lies in the permanent and explicit articulation between the SL, the SpL and the concepts being taught. In line with what Swanwick (2016) describes about translanguaging in bilingual classes with DHH students, or what Coste (2003) describes regarding language alternation in the bilingual education of hearing students, teachers of the programme at Sainte-Marie are used to teaching all concepts by presenting them in two languages and by making explicit the relation between both ways of explaining, using, and defining them. The students are trained to re-use concepts in both languages and to develop metalinguistic awareness about the correspondences between the linguistic structures they use in each language: in LSFb, in written French and, for those who are able to, in spoken French (Ghesquière et al., 2015).

However, such a bilingual approach cannot be confused with a setting in which pupils would be immersed alternatively in one and then the other language and expected to build by themselves any relation between both linguistic systems. In the setting described here, it is the teacher's responsibility to compare languages and to train pupils' metalinguistic skills. This means that a bilingual teacher, in addition to having good competences in LSFb and in French (written French at least), must be able to switch easily from one language to the other, and even have contrastive linguistic competences. Unfortunately, in their efforts to alternate and compare languages, teachers still face a tremendous lack of scientific knowledge about the best practices of co-enrolment settings, the pedagogic adaptations they require, and about the linguistic description of LSFb and its comparison with French. Such knowledge could provide valuable pedagogical support. In this respect, the partnership between the school programme and the LSFb laboratory of the University of Namur is of high importance, even though quickly making up the lack of knowledge regarding the LSFb-French comparison would require enormous investment in research, which regrettably remains currently unrealistic.

6 Bilingual teachers and interpreters

As mentioned above, the requirements of the bilingual pedagogy, combined with the specific needs and rhythm of DHH pupils mean that teachers are not at any one time able to ensure simultaneously

that the pupils develop their bilingual competence and that they are rightly included in the class activities and interactions. In order to make bilingualism and inclusion as compatible as possible as often as possible, teachers are encouraged to make relevant use of the interpreters that are involved in the programme.

Outside the classroom, interpreters ensure communication within the school community and between the variety of actors it includes, in all situations that involve hearing and DHH actors meeting: the director, teachers, educators, psycho-medical service personnel, and parents. Interpreters are also essential for DHH teachers to participate in the life of the educational team at a school-wide level for pedagogic consultations or for coordination between co-teachers, and during meetings with parents. But besides that, interpreters may be called upon within the classroom to act as pedagogic support. This is particularly relevant when co-teachers want students to be involved in discussions or debates, or when they elicit exchanges between students, as in teamwork, oral presentations, or collective discussions.

However, within the classroom, interpreters remain in the background of the pedagogical relationship. In compliance with the ethical principles defining their profession, namely fidelity of content transmission, neutrality, and confidentiality, the role of interpreters cannot be confused with the role of the bilingual teacher, as described previously. Indeed, it is out of the scope of the interpreter's action to correct the linguistic production of a pupil in LSF, to comment on the difference between a structure in LSF and its counterpart in French, or to ensure the student's understanding. Likewise, it is also out of the interpreter's mandate to intervene on the attitude of a student, or to discuss pedagogic choices made by the speaking teacher. In the same way, an interpreter is not expected to discuss with parents about what has happened in class or to discuss the situation of one student with colleagues.

In such an inclusive and bilingual setting, the roles of interpreters and teachers are complementary. Interpreters are at the service of teachers, students, the school, parents, and the educational mission of school in general. They are primarily actors in favour of inclusion and equity. In that vein, the position of the interpreters that DHH students meet at school is representative of the professional interpretation services they will use outside the school.

7 Conclusion

Following general schooling is a great challenge for all DHH students and remains more demanding than for hearing learners. The bilingual and inclusive programme offered at Sainte-Marie in Namur is certainly not a solution to all the challenges faced by DHH students and their teachers. At the present time, we do not have an overview of the success of the academic education of DHH pupils and their social inclusion in Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, and consequently no means to evaluate the benefits of the setting offered at Sainte-Marie. Nevertheless, this setting attempts to offer a coherent proposal that does not avoid the difficulties, but takes into account the implications of hearing loss, the variety of DHH student profiles, and the urgency for DHH young adults to be better included in society. From our experience, the most important requirements for a successful inclusive approach such as the one implemented in Sainte-Marie relate to the equal consideration of both languages by all staff members and in all teaching situations (lessons, evaluations, cultural activities, etc.), to the quality of the collaboration between co-teachers, to the linguistic and pedagogic support of the teachers, to the fair compliance with the curriculum designed for hearing students, and finally to the support from the school directors and teaching staff. The main remaining challenges concern improving the training of teachers and developing scientific and pedagogic support for their difficult task.

⁵ The proportion of DHH teachers within the school is of 10 out of a total of 150 hearing teachers.

⁶ Hearing and DHH co-teachers both develop abilities to adapt to each other and can discuss directly most everyday issues. They call upon an interpreter when it comes to collaborate for a more consistent work.

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