

USING THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR ITALIAN SIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: lessons from research and practice

Maria Tagarelli De Monte¹

Abstract: Starting in 2011, the adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) to sign language became a priority for many organisations in Europe. Among these, the State Institute for the Deaf worked on its adaptation for Italian Sign Language within the EU-funded SignLEF project. One year later, the joint effort of few institutions specialised in sign language education gave light to the ProSign project, funded by the European Centre for Modern Language. The findings coming from these and other projects converged towards the development of a companion volume for CEFR, published in 2018, including descriptors for sign language education. In this paper, I present an overview of the growth in the awareness of CEFR for LIS education as well as the political and cultural changes occurred since its adoption in 2011. A unique idea, research project, and design experience made by deaf and hearing professionals with the aim to inform Sign Language education, and to adapt and include it in deaf education and the workplace.

Keywords: Sign language education. Common European Framework of Reference. Italian Sign Language. European Language Portfolio.

USANDO O QUADRO EUROPEU COMUM DE REFERÊNCIA PARA O ENSINO DA LÍNGUA DE SINAIS ITALIANA: lições de pesquisa e prática

Resumo: A partir de 2011, a adaptação do Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência das línguas (QECR) para a língua de sinais tornou-se uma prioridade para muitas organizações na Europa. Entre eles, o Instituto Estadual para Surdos trabalhou em sua adaptação para a Língua de Sinais Italiana dentro do projeto SignLEF financiado pela UE. Um ano depois, o esforço conjunto de algumas instituições especializadas no ensino da língua de sinais deu luz ao projeto ProSign, financiado pelo Centro Europeu de Língua Moderna. As descobertas provenientes desses e de outros projetos convergiram para o desenvolvimento de um volume complementar para o QECR, publicado em 2018, incluindo descritores para o ensino da língua de sinais. Neste artigo, apresento uma visão geral do crescimento da conscientização do QECR para a educação da LIS, bem como as mudanças políticas e culturais ocorridas desde sua adoção em 2011. Uma ideia única, projeto de pesquisa e experiência de desenho feita por profissionais surdos e ouvintes com o objetivo de informar sobre a educação em Língua de Sinais, sua adaptação e inclusão na educação de surdos e no ambiente de trabalho.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de língua de sinais. Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência. Língua de Sinais Italiana. Portfólio Europeu de Línguas.

USO DEL MARCO COMÚN EUROPEO DE REFERENCIA PARA LA EDUCACIÓN EN LENGUA DE SEÑAS ITALIANA: lecciones de la investigación y la práctica

Resumen: A partir de 2011, la adaptación del Marco Común Europeo de Referencia de las lenguas (MCER) a la lengua de señas se convirtió en una prioridad para muchas organizaciones en Europa. Entre ellos, el Instituto Estatal para Sordos trabajó en su adaptación a la Lengua de Señas Italiana dentro del proyecto SignLEF financiado por la UE. Un año después, el esfuerzo conjunto de algunas instituciones

¹ PhD, Adjunct Professor, Istituto Statale per Sordi Roma e Università degli studi Internazionali di Roma, Itália. Email: m.t.demonte@issr.it.

especializadas en la enseñanza de la lengua de señas dio luz al proyecto ProSign, financiado por el Centro Europeo de Lenguas Modernas. Los hallazgos provenientes de estos y otros proyectos convergieron en el desarrollo de un volumen complementario para el MCER, publicado en 2018, que incluye descriptores para la educación en lengua de señas. En este documento, presento una descripción general del aumento de la concienciación sobre el MCER para la educación LIS, así como los cambios políticos y culturales ocurridos desde su adopción en 2011. Una idea única, un proyecto de investigación y una experiencia de diseño realizada por profesionales sordos y oyentes con el objetivo de informar sobre la educación de Lenguas de Señas, y su adaptación e inclusión en la educación de sordos y en el ambiente de trabajo.

Palabras clave: Educación en lengua de señas. Marco Común Europeo de Referencia. Lengua de señas italiana. Portafolio de lenguas europeas.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (2021), “it is estimated that by 2050 over 700 million people – or one in every ten people – will have disabling hearing loss”. Actually, the report published by *hear-it AISBL* (2021) counts up to 34.4 million adults having a disabling hearing loss (35 dB or greater) in the European Union. Among these, detailed statistics about the number of deaf sign language users are only available as estimations, as reported by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) which states:

[...] an estimate for the European Union is 750,000 Deaf sign language users. On average, Deaf sign language users make up about 0.1% of the whole population in any given country. This does not include people learning a sign language as a second language or children of Deaf parents or other family members. (ECML, 2021).

Thus, despite of data being fragmented and partial (see TIMMERMANS, 2005; ECML, 2021), we can assume that, when considering people using sign language (SL) as a second or third language (friends and families of the deaf, SL interpreters, professionals working with deaf signers, teachers, etc.), the numbers above may increase.

The global pandemic that hit the world in the past two years, and the massive movement of most communication and content consumption to online platforms played in favor of SL, which became more visible and appealing to people who have never considered it before. A proof of this change could be seen in the increased number of hearing students subscribing for SL classes in Italy, a registered increase of almost over 50% compared to the pre-pandemic

average². The same has happened to the number of online signed contents during lockdown, which increased in 2020 and still seem to keep growing. Formal statistics are not available yet, but there is evidence in published community reports between the end of 2020 and 2021 (TOMASUOLO, GULLI, VOLTERRA, FONTANA, 2021; WOLL, 2022).

Formal education in Italian Sign Language (LIS) is relatively young. The first experiences can be dated around 1984, from the collaboration between *native signers*³ and researchers. Just a few years later, the introduction of an educational methodology adapted from the American Sign Language (ASL) teaching was the starting point of the constant growth of interest in LIS, counting now more than 200⁴ courses in Italy. Before then, SL could be picked up in families with at least one deaf signer, or be learned informally in special schools for the Deaf that were still active in a few cities across Italy (more about this in the section: Teachers' education and deafness). The growing interest around SL and its scientific value has also attracted the attention of Italian universities, raising their attention to its study and education. As a result of the national and international movement for the adoption of SL as a language of preference for the inclusion of the deaf and hearing impaired (see Movimento LIS Subito, 2021, for an overview), Italian politicians also started paying greater attention to this language, encouraging its adoption in schools and in teachers' education. One result of these actions is the long-awaited law that recognised Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Italian Tactile Sign Language (LIST) as languages of the Republic of Italy, as well as the professionalism of SL interpreters (Decreto Sostegni, art. 34ter, May 19th, 2021).

As the law passed, round tables were held to learn more about how to apply it at the best interest for deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing people. In April 2022, an implementing decree recognizes and funds the creation of academic courses for SL interpreters' training. As discussions continue and the pandemic keeps storming in Italy, there is still no chance to improve its implementation in mainstream education. At the moment I am writing this paper, deaf children typically follow the same educational path as hearing children, but they can be

² Data collected in informal conversations with the managers of academic and vocational training in Italian Sign Language, in central and northern Italy.

³ The term *native signer* refers here to deaf people using sign language for daily communication, with no formal training to its grammar.

⁴ Technical report on sign language courses in Italy, Istituto Statale per Sordi di Roma (ISSR), 2020.

assisted by a special education teacher and a communication assistant (AsaCom, more in the section: Teachers' education and deafness). Interestingly, although these educators are trained for educating individuals with communication disorders and sensory disabilities, they are not required in knowing and using SL at school. Professionals who choose to be trained in SL do so because of a personal interest towards LIS and its use in deaf education, or because they are particularly motivated towards inclusion and accessibility. With this background in mind, it is easy to understand how important it was for the deaf community to formally recognise SL as a minority language. It is also important for professionals working in SL education to have the necessary tools and methodologies to train people in SL in an accurate way, similar to the one of any spoken language. For many years SL education lacked a common reference standard, a lack that manifested in the way interpreters and school professionals were educated in SL.

Across Europe, SL is taught following different methodologies and frameworks, mostly inspired by second language teaching methodologies, considering its specific modality. While spoken language has evolved to follow the guidelines given by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2006), SL lagged behind. The main aim of CEFR is to provide a method of learning, teaching and assessment which applies to all languages in Europe (see next section). When the project in SL begun in 2011, CEFR was a well-affirmed standard for spoken language education, although it was not fully considered as a possible standard to describe SL. At that time, only France and Spain had published their attempts to adapt SL education to it, following different approaches and outcomes.

The fact that Deaf politicians⁵ started to sit in the European Parliament, and that only few interpreters would be ready for such political setting, made even more evident the need for improving the education of SLs. In schools, the will to grant greater inclusion for local and foreign deaf children in mainstream education⁶ resulted in an increasing demand by teachers to learn SL with the hope to achieve a better understanding of their student's linguistic abilities.

⁵ Dr. Ádám Kósa, Hungarian, was the first deaf politician to sit in the European Parliament in 2009. From 2014 to 2019, the Flemish Helga Stevens also sat in the EU parliament and was a candidate for presidency in 2016.

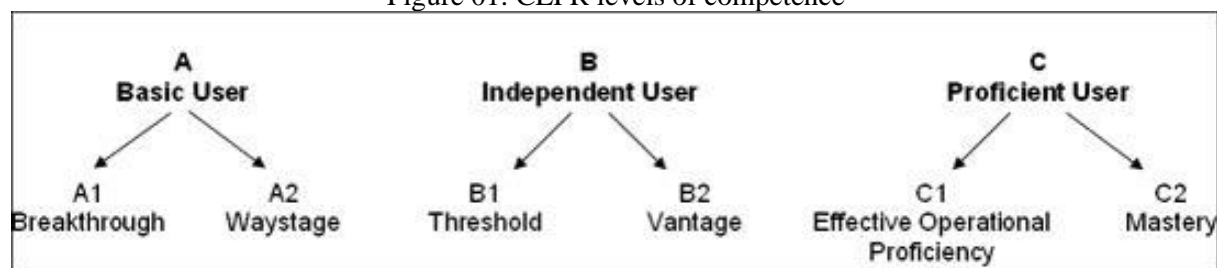
⁶ Deaf children have the right to attend mainstream education since 1977 and, since 1992, they have the right to be assisted by support teachers and, in most cases, by a communication assistant who facilitates their learning process.

In a context such as the one described, CEFR has been the natural choice to begin the search of a standard for SL education in Europe.

The Common European Framework of Reference for languages

CEFR was created by the Council of Europe as the main part of the project *Language Learning for European Citizenship* between 1989 and 1996. Since its publication, CEFR has become one of the most important frameworks for the linguistic education of professionals and students. As already reminded in Groves et al. (2013), CEFR covers the areas of language development, teaching and evaluation in Europe and is increasingly used as a reference document outside the European Union (FIGUERAS, 2012). CEFR was originally designed as a generic document to allow for standardization of assessment throughout Europe, requiring adaptation when applied to specific languages. It is organized to describe language competence as pertaining to three levels: A for basic users, B for independent users and C for proficient users. Each level measures production, comprehension, and interaction competences in both spoken and written form of language, and is divided into two sub-levels, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 01: CEFR levels of competence



Sub-levels are defined by descriptors following a *can-do* approach, meaning that they “describe what learners can do in different contexts of use” and are “relatable to the target contexts of use of the different groups of learners within the overall target population” (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2006, p. 21). The descriptors define the meaning of having achieved a specific level, in a way which is easy to understand for both teachers and learners. Second language learners can easily assess their own skills simply by focusing on their perceived ability

to act comfortably in the situations depicted by the descriptors. In time, automatic analysis tools have been developed to allow for self-assessment in a more accurate way⁷.

The growth in the quality and quantity of second language education in Europe, as well as the improvement in the methodology being used, brought the original CEFR text to its limits. Language mediation was not well defined and SL was completely excluded, despite of any effort by the EU parliament to formalise its adoption in the education of the deaf (WEIR, 2005; MUÑOZ, MUELLER, ÁLVAREZ, GAVIRIA, 2006; DE JONG, 2011; VAN DER HAAGEN, DE HAAN, 2011). These issues were covered by the recent CEFR *Companion Volume*, published in 2018 (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2018). As reported in the cover page of this volume, this updated version has been validated by several countries around the world, proving both a solid methodology for its adoption and the extent to which it is being used as a reference for second language education.

Teachers' education and deafness

In Italy, special schools for the deaf and hard-of-hearing were the norm for children with deafness from 1784 to 1971. When the law 118/1971 began to inform about how to provide public education to children with disabilities, children were slowly moved to regular public schools to learn with their hearing peers. In 1977, the law was integrated to support the classroom teacher with a teacher trained for special needs (in Italian, *insegnanti di sostegno*). Thus, the special needs teacher supports classroom teachers in the design of specific educational paths for the deaf child, should this be required, and assists the class and the child during the lessons. In 1992, other one-on-one professionals were introduced to support children with sensory disabilities: the *communication assistant* (in Italian, *assistente all'autonomia e alla comunicazione*) and the *educational operator* (in Italian, *operatore educativo per l'autonomia e la comunicazione*). While the communication assistant would support the child during the learning process, the educational operator would help in the socialisation process of the deaf child with multiple disabilities. As a professional dedicated to the deaf student, the

⁷ See Council of Europe Self-assessment grid: <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/self-assessment-grid>>. Last visit: December 8th, 2021.

communication assistant is formed to understand his/her need and to use a set of strategies to adapt the contents provided by the teachers during classes.

Despite the number of professionals available to the deaf child at school, their educational path and training in SL is still open to debate, especially that concerning the one-on-one professionals specialised in communication. While the academic training of the special needs teacher started in 1999, the communication assistant and educational operator only need to complete high school and attend vocational classes with very few indications of the topics under training. This situation obviously leads to diversified training paths and backgrounds. Moreover, SL is not mandatory since such a training context has mostly considered orally educated deaf children as the majority, and signing deaf children the minority.

The formal use of SL in school has been long debated. The need to respect the linguistic choices made by the child's family has always meant drawing a line between a formal/an informal use of SL at school. Only recently (2018) has the debate considered including SL in the training of all school teachers and professionals who support children with sensory disabilities. However, still, nothing has been done concretely. As a result, SL training is mostly left to the sensitivity and judgement of the trainee, and qualified SL education is left in the hands of schools and universities who choose to provide a high-profile training. Considering the importance of these professionals in the scholastic life of a deaf child, it is important to move to a deeper consideration of his/her needs. Among these needs, improving SL education for any professional working with signing deaf people is necessary.

Sign language education in Italy

LIS education for hearing adults is mainly based on an adaptation of Smith's et al. *Signing naturally* methodology (SMITH, LENTZ, MIKOS, 1989), translated to Italian as *Metodo Vista*. Adapted for LIS by some of the first researchers in SL education in Italy, Metodo Vista was first published in 1997, and is still in use in most Italian schools of LIS (SILIS, MPDF, 1997; 2000; 2003). Before Metodo Vista, formal education in LIS was rare, or left to unstructured, tailor-made educational solutions, often leading to very different degrees of competence. Structured in three levels, Metodo Vista allows moving from basic everyday conversations (Level 1) to more complex discourses (Level 3), mostly focusing on sentence and discourse

structure as well as on the appropriate use of hand shapes, classifiers, space, body movements and constructed actions. Classes that are based on Metodo Vista are structured to have a theoretical part on deafness and deaf culture, normally delivered by hearing teachers, and a practical, signed part led by Deaf teachers.

In some cases, theoretical teachers of LIS are selected among academics or researchers in the field of deafness, deaf education, or linguistics. In other cases, professional interpreters are also involved, providing lessons in Deaf-hearing interaction, Deaf education, SL grammar, and so on. Deaf teachers of SL practice are trained in courses that are held by national or local associations for the Deaf (the most important is the *Ente Nazionale Sordi – ENS*). Most of them are native signers from signing families or people who have learned SL very early in life. Once completed, candidate SL teachers are trained as interns in SL classes held by senior colleagues. Normally, they progress through levels as they grow in experience, thus landing to a third level only after having covered the first and second level for at least two-three rounds of teaching. Classes regularly count a maximum of 25-30 students. Theoretical classes of LIS typically count at least 15 hours of teaching on deaf cognition and literacy in spoken language. However, the increased need to bring SL education closer to that of second language led to reduce the number of hours dedicated to deafness as a special need, in favor of SL literacy and deaf culture.

Similarly to what had happened to CEFR, Metodo Vista started to suffer the limits of time and of improving the quantity and quality of SL classes. With the increase of social media use for communication and information about LIS and SLs, students are less “naïve” to the signs they meet in class, yet confused by the excess of and, often, contradictory information. Questions that were not answered by the books would then be asked to the teacher, who were not always prepared to respond.

With regards the structure of the course, each level would take one year of preparation, with lessons structured in 2-3 hours per week, twice a week. This structure would result in students easily forgetting the contents of previous lessons, thus requiring a part of the lesson to repeat and highlight past ones as an act of reinforcement. Course advancement would be slowed by such repetitions, creating delays in the development of students’ signing skills, especially in fluency and self-awareness. To improve and accelerate SL acquisition, especially when considering the needs of hearing parents of deaf children, teachers, and the D/deaf, SL classes

were recently re-structured to include intensive exposure to the language, with classes running three hours a day, four times a week. Students would be able to complete the three levels of SL education in about 18 months and with higher rates of competences. As the interest towards SL increased, the intensive class solution became the preferred one.

Given the chance to critically reflect on SL education within the Lifelong Learning Program Project *SignLEF* (see next section), the outcomes of the existing courses were compared to CEFR levels. It was then noticed that there was a gap between the description of CEFR competences and what students were able to do after completing the three levels of *Metodo Vista*. Figure 2 shows this comparison simplified, although a perfect overlapping between the framework and the methodology is not possible, given the differences in the methodological approach. After completing the first level, students would be starting the A1-Waystage level of CEFR, reaching the A2 level only after completing the second level. Third level would be the equivalent of the B1 level of CEFR, and an entry to its B2 Vantage level.

Figure 02: Competence levels of Metodo Vista and CEFR for spoken language



The completion of the three LIS levels is the access point to SL interpreting courses, and many students were experiencing major difficulties in their education and professional experience, given the existing gap between their signing and speaking competences. Although the results of this comparison were not encouraging, the comparison itself led the way to a deeper understanding of the competence meaning in CEFR and motivated the improvement of the methodology in use. Some institutions, such as ISSR, started to adapt their LIS classes to

meet CEFR's expectation. Others came up with a fourth LIS level, working mostly on increasing the sign vocabulary and improving skills in SL pragmatics.

Action research for adapting CEFR to SL education

The experience reported here started in 2011, seven years before the publication of the Companion Volume, in a time when there were very few attempts to adapt CEFR for SL. The Lifelong Learning Program Project SignLEF was carried out from 2011 to 2014 by the University of Barcelona (Spain) as the leading partner, and the State Institute for the Deaf in Rome (Italy) and the University of Klagenfurt (Austria) as its partners⁸. From the very beginning of this project, the study of the existing methodologies in SL teaching demonstrated that only *Metodo c'è*⁹ referred to CEFR with a high quality standard. Developed in collaboration with an experienced Deaf teacher, this method was mainly used in northern Italy and in a mixed modality: in classroom and in distance-based training. CEFR descriptors were followed and no change was reported regarding their adaptation. There were mainly video contents, with very short references to the methodology in use. These videos, along with the ones produced for *Metodo Vista*, comprised the base for developing the project outcomes.

The goal of the SignLEF project was to test CEFR's suitability as a standard for SL education and to design and produce materials for classroom-based settings. The team working towards this goal consisted of hearing and deaf professionals: the project manager, administration and one researcher were hearing, skilled in SL; the hearing researcher teamed with three deaf researchers and four professional Deaf teachers of SL, with varying degrees of competence. The team was completed with two video and graphic technicians, both Deaf, who occasionally participated in discussions about their SL experience. Using an approach inspired by *Action Research* (LEWIN, 1946), the team would meet weekly for four hours during the lifetime of the project (36 months). During the meetings, notes and short videos were taken to keep track of the project's development progress. Moreover, training needs were satisfied when

⁸ More information on the project can be found on <<http://signlef.aau.at/en>>. Last visit: December 8th, 2021.

⁹ *Metodo c'è* or *LIS c'è* was developed by Cooperativa Alba and Claudio Baj in 2009. It was made by a set of CDs that students would use at home to study and improve their signing skills, which would be refined in classroom settings with Deaf teachers. The application of this methodology claimed to reduce training time from one year to four months. The CDs are no longer produced and Baj has participated in the construction of a recent manual based on CEFR (TROVATO, 2020).

appearing through the information exchange among the team members themselves and/or through the organisation of seminars open to SL teachers.

Since the CEFR was largely unknown for its application to SL education, a lot of time was dedicated to training people who would use it as a standard for language assessment and a reference of linguistic competence. In this period, the project collaborators also worked in training candidate Deaf teachers about the CEFR and its characteristics. Training while learning more about the CEFR was an excellent way to collect feedback on a possibly high-impact project. This was collected and used in the weekly meetings within the research group. As the ECML *ProSign*¹⁰ project started to produce its outcomes, findings were compared and integrated to the ones of the SignLEF in a virtuous cycle of knowledge and methodology sharing. In 2012, ProSign involved many European countries and institutions for the Deaf, thus reaching a larger public for greater application.

Communication within the group was done in LIS, making it easier to pass information in a rapid and effective way (e.g., clearing frequent misunderstandings, spotting possible areas of knowledge that could have been different among teachers). SL use helped building trust and value among the members and proved to be as effective as spoken language in managing research content. Halfway through the project, meetings were recorded, thus a “diary” was kept of the topics discussed and of the ideas that the group liked to implement. This choice of recording (instead of taking notes) reinforced the idea that the best way to improve SL teachers’ skills was to train directly in SL.

Discussing the standard

As already explained, the CEFR was mainly designed for spoken language, and the process of adapting it to SL education required the discussion of many critical topics, especially with respect to creating a reference tool that would respect SL and its community. Certain topics required special attention as they were not adaptable to SL education. In the following, I describe two specific issues:

¹⁰ Information about the ProSign and its outcomes can be found at: <<https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2012-2015/ProSign/tabid/1752/Default.aspx>>. Last visit: December 8th, 2021.

a. The reference context of CEFR is the language spoken in a specific country, where the student would go and exercise his/her abilities. SL identifies a linguistic community that is hardly located in a specific place; rather, it is scattered on a large territory. Thus, what is the best context for SL learning and what should we acknowledge as important to teach?

b. Higher level of SL competence (C2, proficiency) is hardly described in literature. Thus, how do we define a proficient SL user and what are the linguistic abilities that s/he should manifest?

a. Signing contexts and SL writing

The first question that the team faced was “Is a standard designed for spoken language fully adaptable to the case of a SL?” All CEFR indicators related to the use of language *in context* and most examples referred to spoken language use in a foreign country or by a person coming from a different cultural background. It took some time for the team to consider the signing community as the context and to think of examples of SL use in the A (basic), B (independent), or C (proficient) levels. For instance, basic competence has been considered what is needed to hold a basic conversation in a Deaf association or club, and a proficient one that of a professional speaker in a signed conference, where knowledge of signing styles, appropriate signs and linguistic register are necessary.

Another matter discussed was the awareness of existing SL variants or dialects that can incommode reciprocal comprehension. For example, teachers in Rome would only teach in the local variant, leaving the discussion about existing regional signs for the same meaning only to later stages of learning. However, the increase of online signed videos exposed students to sign variations, which often led them to some confusion that was not always possible to solve in the classroom (as aforementioned). During the SignLEF project (and even after its completion), SL variants were made noticeable at the first level of the course, allowing students to think about SL as a natural language, in a more flexible way. The methodology followed motivated students to conduct individual search for synonyms, to identify meanings and to include those signs that would find online, hence resulting in a lexical enrichment for both learners and teachers.

Comparing the general descriptors as they were adapted for other SL frameworks, specifically for French Sign Language (LSF) and Spanish Sign Language (LSE), we had the

opportunity to highlight areas of competence that needed special attention. One of these addressed the topic of what to consider as a written form of SL. As it is well known, there are attempts made to answer this question, mostly related to SL description for linguistic research purposes (see HANKE, 2004; SUTTON-SPENCE, WOLL, 1999). For instance, *Sign Writing*, an adapted form of what Valerie Sutton invented for dancing in 1972, is now suggested as the written form for SLs (DI RENZO, LAMANO, LUCIOLI, et al., 2011). However, despite the benefits of using notation systems for research purposes (such as Sign Writing), these have not entered in the daily communication of the deaf signers. Thus, for the purposes of this project, we have adopted the same approach used for LSF. That is, we considered recorded videos as a “written” form of SL (CONSEIL DE L’EUROPE, 2002; LEESON, GREHAN, 2010). This position is also supported by the current extensive video communication and exchange chat among signers (deaf and hearing), and by the fact that video use is influencing SL in a way similar to the one writing impacted spoken language (for the influence of writing on oral languages see: ONG, 1982; HALLIDAY, 1985; 1989).

b. Defining the C2 competence level in signing

The C2 level descriptor defines the competence of a mother tongue language speaker as follows:

Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments, and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations. (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2018).

In our group there was a common agreement about who could be defined as a C2 signer. Initially, we conveyed around interpreters. In order to do their job in the best possible way, SL interpreters need to show competence in the content described by the C2 descriptor. However, further reflections led to the conclusion that most interpreters would still refer to the Deaf community to check and enrich their lexical and signing abilities, eventually “contracting” for new signs in case there were none. For instance, in cases where a specific word could not be translated by a single sign, discussions over finding the best fit between the semantics of that

word and the corresponding sign(s) would be the preferred method to be used. Although this is a common strategy among signers (both deaf and hearing), the fact that hearing interpreters would refer to Deaf signers to revise their signing, made it evident that these were the best referents to define a C2 signing level.

Understandings of the identity of the reference signers, allowed us to identify at least three - probably four - living generations of Deaf signers, who had very different SL training and context use.

The generational identification I refer to is specific to Italy and may differ from other European countries. It is identifiable by considering carefully the different educational settings in which Deaf people were exposed through time, and in which, subsequently, SL use was, more or less, culturally motivated:

1. The first generation of signers can be identified in senior Deaf people who studied in special schools in the first half of the past century. These people are now over their 50s and may have a linguistic competence which is limited to everyday use, due to the fact that SL use in front of hearing people was forbidden and was socially unacceptable. Consequently, many senior Deaf people prefer speaking to hearing interlocutors and signing to their Deaf peers. Thus, the school they attended to in their early years most likely influenced their signing style.
2. The second generation of Deaf signers are those people who attended public schools in the years between 1971 (the year of the law that allowed students with disability to attend general education) and 1992 (the year of the law about specialised teachers to attend students with special needs in general education). As already mentioned, this was the period when the educational path of deaf children moved from special to general schools, and specialised educators were trained to support their learning. It is reasonable to suppose that Deaf people, now in their 40s, have varying degrees of competence in spoken and/or SL, due to the experimental educational phase during which they attended school and learned to sign, speak and write.
3. The third generation of Deaf signers were welcomed by professionals who were trained to attend them and were prepared to use SL and other strategies where needed.

4. A fourth generation of signers is identified by those Deaf children who are born in the era of the Internet, Web 2.0 and mobile communication, during which information is available at any time, in any language, and formal education is assisted by specialised professionals with Higher Education (HE) degrees.

In line with the above, we assume that younger generations may have higher linguistic skills, including speaking, writing and signing. However, given the high rate of orally educated deaf people who were never exposed to SL, and the “signs kill speech” prevailing idea, the assumption is that these younger generations may also have varying degrees of signing competence. Consequently, we decided to focus on the skills of the second generation signers, the Deaf signers attending academic education and children of Deaf families, who could better discuss about the C2 competence. The necessary resources and the competence level have thus been defined through interviews with the participants in the project and in the occasional encounters with Deaf signers with HE degrees.

In our 2014 adaptation, the global scale for the C2 level has thus been defined as following:

Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or **seen**. Can summarize information from different spoken, written and **signed** sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely **in sign language**, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.

In the 2016 version of the *Sign languages and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Common Reference Level Descriptors*, Leeson, van den Bogaerde, Rathmann, and Haug report:

Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices. (LEESON et al., 2016, p. 09).

Adapting existing methodology to CEFR

The SignLEF project produced the first version of a manual for teachers and students, and two CDs, one for the teacher, and one for the student. The CDs provide examples of SL classroom-based education for the training of teachers, and content for students to exercise their skills while progressing the CEFR'S competence levels. Another product of the project is the website, where an overview of the contents produced for each level is available (Figure 3).

Figure 03: Outcomes of the SignLEF project



Didactic units were based on the structure of Metodo Vista with the addition of *cultural windows* for teachers' to use as Deaf models. Also, modules were dedicated to non-manual communication following CEFR's descriptors. In fact, the introductory modules are dedicated to the development of non-manual skills, with exercises focusing on the learner's improvement of his/her visual and gestural skills.

The methodology developed by the SignLEF project was tested in ten students, who attended a five week mini-course with classes of three hours, four times a week. At the end of the mini-course, they were tested for their skills in SL production and comprehension. Production was tested in two phases. In the first phase, students were required to film themselves while signing their personal introduction. In the second phase, they were asked to select a topic from a given set to be used in their interaction with the commission. Comprehension was tested by asking students to watch three times a short video that fit their understanding level. The videos for the test were no longer than three minutes and involved a short storytelling told by a teacher of the mini-course in order for the learner to be familiar with

the signing style and phrase construction. Watching the videos three times ensured that students had enough time to: (i) parse the video for understanding its contents; (ii) double check his/her understanding before the test begins; and (iii) memorise those video parts that were considered important.

After viewing the video, students participated in an interview with the commission, which was composed by their teacher of the mini-course and an external one. Both teachers asked simple questions about the video content to test students' understanding of it. Although there were no prescribed number of questions, each teacher was expected to ask at least one question. In fact, teachers continued the interview until they had a clear indication of each student's achieved comprehension level and ability¹¹ to understand the questions asked.

Compared to other students who had attended the same number of hours, students from this experimental course demonstrated higher non-manual skills and independence in signing. Furthermore, they were accustomed to the use of video in both taking notes and searching for further resources, abilities that resulted in greater signed interaction with their teachers.

Lessons to learn and teach

Few years after the end of the project, CEFR as a standard for SL education was spread across Europe and many Deaf SL teachers started to use it as a reference for linguistic education. Since 2015, it is also used in academic SL teaching in few universities in Italy. A great part of this diffusion is due to the outcomes of the ProSign project and the recent publication of the CEFR Companion Volume in 2018. The experience gained from the SignLEF project is summarised in Table 2.

Working on the adaptation of a standard for spoken language for describing SL competence, has also affected Deaf signers in comparing their natural language with spoken language. In a context of majority-minority language, having the possibility of such a comparison, deaf students take greater responsibility on their language learning process, being able to affirm their skills when relating to people from the "majority".

¹¹ In a way, we tested students' *interaction ability*; the ability to understand the question asked by the teacher and to reply accordingly. The interaction ability is recently introduced as a parameter in the Companion Volume (2018). However, at the time of the test, it just seemed natural for SL teachers to test their students SL use.

Table 02: Before and after the SignLEF project

BEFORE	AFTER – SIGNLEF
Gestural and visual components are taught gradually in a 3-level course. Special focus on non-manuals is given in the last year of the course.	Gestural and visual components need to be addressed in preliminary activity, before starting formal education in LIS.
Students learn passively and classroom interaction is limited to the interpretation of images and/or comprehension of SL videos.	Didactic materials are conceived to promote greater student involvement in classroom interaction activities.
Learning about deaf culture is left to theoretical lessons or students' personal interest.	Deaf culture is part of the methodology and the teacher is a representative of his/her culture.
Videos used for comprehension are not necessarily linked in any sequential order.	Videos used for comprehension are linked to a story, and stimulate learner's motivation and curiosity as he/she moves through the levels.
Lexicon is organised per topic and is not specified per level.	Lexicon is organised per level and the same topics can return with further detail, according to the level of reference.

Another lesson learned from this project refers to the application of Action Research methodologies for managing successful hearing - Deaf professional teams, relying mainly on:

- (i) the involvement of Deaf collaborators from the very beginning of the project;
- (ii) SL use for all communication without mediation;
- (iii) agreed timed meetings during the lifetime of the project. Fixed weekly meetings resulted in a low percentage of meeting absences and in a great participant concentration during the meetings;
- (iv) critical content evaluation and use of structured methodologies in relation to time management, delays in learning, and possible learning difficulties experienced by both students and teachers; and on
- (v) re-structuring courses by integrating existing methodology with new content, signs and online resources.

Advancement in formal SL description has allowed to cover part of the issues worked in the SignLEF project, like the description of prosody, the depiction of higher level competence,

and the description of SL formal features as is recently done in the edited work by Branchini and Mantovan (2020).

As I have already discussed, the fact that there was no formal SL recognition made it hard to define the best standard to refer to (also see De Monte, 2014a; 2014b). The first law recognizing LIS as a language of the Italian republic passed on May 19th, 2021. As I write this article, round tables are held by the government, involving institutions and associations who are being called to contribute so as to build the framework for the future management of SL education in Italy. Despite the fact that deaf education is not yet under the spotlight, the government has finally taken action towards SL and its training, which will hopefully lead to better professional education.

In the year 2020, universities were invited to align their local academic programs to the Dublin descriptors¹², hence to international qualification frameworks. Upscaling the description of SL to European standards is a necessary step for the improvement of the international recognition of academic SL studies and of the professional skills required from people working with deaf individuals.

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¹² More about this on: <http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Dublin_Descriptors>. Last visit: December 8th, 2021.

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