

# EMPOWERING MARGINALISED CULTURE: THE INSTITUTION OF SOUTH AFRICAN SIGN LANGUAGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to describe the state of South African Sign Language (SASL) at the University of the Free State (UFS). It provides background to the development of SASL, the development of Deaf education, the teaching of sign language and sign language interpreting at the UFS, research and community development. SASL is one of the languages offered at the UFS. The University has been involved with ground-breaking research to implement a training course on all levels of tertiary education. Students can complete a degree in sign language and also do postgraduate studies in sign language and sign language interpreting. This article aims to indicate how teaching of SASL as an official language empowers marginalised culture.*

**Key words:** South African Sign Language, Deaf Culture, Sign Language interpreting

## 1. INTRODUCTION

South African Sign Language (SASL) is one of the languages offered in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (UFS). The others are Afrikaans, Biblical Hebrew, Classical Greek, Dutch, English, French, German, Latin and Sesotho. Languages are grouped into departments because of their developmental history and for management reasons. SASL developed with *Interpreting* at the University and therefore forms part of the Department of Afroasiatic Studies, Sign Language and Language Practice. SASL is offered on all levels. Three full-time teaching staff members, three contracted teaching staff members, three research assistants and about 200 students are involved.

The aim of this paper is to describe the present state of SASL at the UFS in the light of the developmental history of SASL at this institution. The paper is organised as follows: The first section provides an overview of the developmental history of SASL in general and also at the University. It is followed by a section on the present state of teaching of sign language and of sign language interpreting, research by the University, and sign language interpreting as part of providing a service to Deaf students.

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## **2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

### **2.1 South African Sign Language (SASL)**

South African Sign Language (SASL) is a “visual-gestural” language created and used by Deaf<sup>2</sup> South Africans to communicate with one another. It is a language which, as opposed to a spoken language, is perceived visually and not aurally (Akach & Morgan, 1999:68). SASL is a fully fledged natural human language, equivalent in all ways to every other human language (DEAFSA, 1996a). Aarons and Akach (2002a:127-128) indicate that sign languages have phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels of representation. The distinguishing feature of signed languages is that they are made through the medium of space, not sound, and that they use the hands, face, head and upper torso for their realisation. There is no universal signed language. Earlier research on SASL by Akach (1997) investigated and indicated the properties of sign language and its linguistic structure.

The status of SASL has been elevated by the stipulations contained in the Constitution of South Africa. Chapter 1 Section 6(5)(a) states that:

“A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must

- (a) promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of
  - i. all official languages;
  - ii. the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
  - iii. sign language.”

### **2.2 Users of SASL**

The Deaf Federation of South Africa (DEAFSA, 1996a) indicates that approximately 600 000 South Africans use a sign language in their daily lives of whom the vast majority are deaf. This refers specifically to Deaf people who are identified as sharing the Deaf culture. According to Akach and Morgan (1999:70) there was no detailed linguistic analysis, which gave rise to the misperception that there are many different sign languages in South Africa as a result of variation at the lexical level. It has been observed that variation in vocabulary does not prevent coherent communication among the Deaf. Deaf people all over the country watch the same signers on television shows, which will also contribute to the standardisation of SASL across regions and ethnic groups.

### **2.3 Deaf Education**

The history of the signed language used in South Africa is closely linked to the development of schools for the Deaf.

<sup>2</sup> The international convention in the literature on Deafness uses the capital “D”, “Deaf”, to refer to people who have audiological loss and regard themselves as members of the signing Deaf community.

Signed language developed where there were communities of Deaf people who used their hands and faces in order to communicate. The most natural places for this to have happened were residential schools for the Deaf. The history of sign language in South Africa is deeply intertwined with the history of apartheid schooling and its complicated language policies. Aarons and Akach (2002a:130-131) provide a guiding generalisation: schools for the white Deaf insisted on oralism, while schools for the other races allowed some measure of manualism (a mixture of speech and some signs).

Until the 1980's the official medium of instruction at all the Deaf schools in South Africa was the mother tongue, although in the case of Deaf children, it was not clear what this was. Additionally, the schools were instructed to integrate the Paget-Gorman signing system with mother tongue speech. Later, English or Afrikaans was brought in as the official medium of instruction in schools for the black Deaf, with the added feature of the Paget-Gorman signs. Most of the schools for the African Deaf were vastly underresourced, underfunded and understaffed. Although these Deaf children received an atrocious general education, an unexpected benefit of the neglect was the development of strong centres of natural signed-language use (Aarons & Akach, 2002a:133-134).

Currently, the educational system used for the Deaf in South Africa is not on a satisfactory level. Although SASL is recognised as the communication medium of the Deaf, it is still not utilised as the one and only medium of instruction in schools for the Deaf. Most teachers still use oralism, total communication or a "broken" sign language (Akach, Demey, Matabane, Van Herreweghe & Vermeerbergen, 2006). A lack of trained interpreters in classes is also a reality where no sign language is used. This has resulted in the fact that subjects are on standard grade level, or only categorised in N-courses without any choice to take subjects on a higher grade level. Teaching through the medium of SASL is investigated in contrast to traditional training.

## **2.4 SASL at the University of the Free State**

### **2.4.1 Initiatives by DEAFSA (1994-1998)**

Up to and including 1996, SASL was almost non-existent in the public communicative domain. As mentioned in Section 2.1 the new government and constitution provided for the development of SASL in the communicative domain. SASL, however, was already developed and used within the Deaf community and was already being used in the communicative domain, but not recognised by the non-Deaf community. Although the SA Schools Act 1996 captured SASL as an official language for educational purposes, mechanisms were not in place to implement this Act. This is where the universities in South Africa would need to address the impasse.

DEAFSA was founded in 1994 and took over from the SA National Council for the Deaf (an entity that worked on behalf of Deaf people and not with them). In employing new staff and with SASL being at the top of the agenda, a sign language expert, Mr Philemon Akach, was employed as Director of Sign Language and Interpreting Development (DSLID). The main duty of this position was to popularise SASL in all spheres of life, e.g. schools for the Deaf, tertiary institutions, visual media and in the general society. According to Akach *et al.* (2006) DEAFSA mainly focused on policy decision in four key areas, namely SASL and interpreting services, education and training, provincial development and early identification and intervention.

There was still doubt as to whether SASL was a language and if so, could it be taught as a school subject and used as medium of instruction. To this end, DSLID was called upon to organise the development and circulation of a sign language curriculum for sign language as a school subject for grade 0-12 learners, a curriculum for sign language as second language and a curriculum for a sign language university course. The DSLID presented workshops at secondary and tertiary level for the Deaf. During that period the allocation of funds to universities was cut, and therefore most were weary of accepting new courses.

#### 2.4.2 Sign Language as a project within the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment, UFS (1999-2002)

The Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment (ULFE) was largely involved in the empowerment of South Africa's eleven official languages. The ULFE initiated the training of interpreters for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and subsequently continued with the training of interpreters and further research as its core business. In 1998 an application was submitted to the authorities of the UFS to introduce SASL as a subject on all levels. The motivation for this was the shortage in Sign Language interpreters, the articles in the Constitution on the empowerment of SASL, and the right to be taught in the language of his/her choice (Chapter 1, Articles 6(5)(a), 29, 30 & 31). There was a demand from the Education Department for SASL training for their advisors and teachers who worked at the schools for Deaf learners. There was also a need for SASL interpreters to assist with the teaching of Deaf persons at tertiary institutions. No equipment was needed. The only requirement was the appointment of a lecturer in SASL. The lecturer could be contracted and the application was approved.

Mr Philemon Akach was appointed as senior lecturer in SASL at the ULFE in January 1999. In the cutting of funding mentioned above, the ULFE had the advantage of having access to external funding to finance the position. The funds came from a joint project with the Association of People with Disabilities (APD) in Bloemfontein. The ULFE also received funding from the Flemish government.

The course commenced in January 1999 with 36 students. The enrollment and throughput rate for these years are indicated in Table 1 and Table 2. These tables reflect the number of students until 2002 when the SASL section of the unit moved to an academic department. The division into two tables is necessitated by the introduction of the programme system from January 2001. It changed from a course system to a four module system with the introduction of the programme system of teaching and learning at the University of the Free State in January 2001. The average enrollment of first year students varies between 19 and 58 and the pass rate between 78.61% and 92.11%. The average enrollment of second year students increases from 10 to 30 students with an average pass rate which varies between 92.31% and 100% per year. The average enrollment of third year students increases from 4 to 8 students with an average pass rate which varies between 75% and 100%.

Table 1 Sign Language Modules, Pass rate: 1999-2002

FIRST YEAR	2002			2001			2000			1999			Total Enrolled	Avg.
	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed		
GBT 115	x	x	x	x	x	x	21	18	85.71	36	29	80.56	57	28.5
GBT 125	x	x	x	x	x	x	17	17	100	20	20	100	37	18.5
<b>TOTAL</b>							38	35	92.11	56	49	87.5		
<b>avg</b>							19			28				
SECOND YEAR	2002			2001			2000			1999			Total Enrolled	Avg.
	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed		
GBT 215	x	x	x	14	13	92.86	11	11	100	x	x	x	25	12.5
GBT 225	x	x	x	12	11	91.67	10	10	100	x	x	x	22	11
<b>TOTAL</b>				26	24	92.31	21	21	100					
<b>avg</b>				13			10.5							

THIRD YEAR	2002			2001			2000			1999			Total	Avg.
MODULE	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	
GBT 315	8	8	100	4	3	75	x	x	x	x	x	x	12	6
GBT 325	8	8	100	4	3	75	x	x	x	x	x	x	12	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	16	16	100	8	6	75								
<b>avg</b>	8			4										
<b>TOTAL</b>														

Table 2 Sign Language undergraduate modules, Pass rate: 2001-2002

FIRST YEAR	2002			2001			TOTAL	avg
MODULE	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	enrolled	
GBT 112	51	43	84.31	63	56	88.89	114	57
GBT 122	36	27	75	53	47	88.68	89	44.5
GBT 132	50	41	82	63	52	82.54	113	56.5
GBT 142	36	25	69.44	54	48	88.89	90	45
<b>TOTAL</b>	173	136	78.61	233	203	87.12		
<b>avg</b>	43.25			58.25				
SECOND YEAR	2002			2001			TOTAL	avg
MODULE	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	enrolled	
GBT 212	31	28	90.32	x	x	x	31	31
GBT 222	29	28	96.55	x	x	x	29	29
GBT 232	31	29	93.55	x	x	x	31	31
GBT 242	29	29	100	x	x	x	29	29
<b>TOTAL</b>	120	114	95					
<b>avg</b>	30							

THIRD YEAR	2002			2001				
MODULE	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	Enrolled	Passed	% passed	TOTAL enrolled	avg
GBT 312	x	x	x	x	x	x		
GBT 322	x	x	x	x	x	x		
GBT 332	x	x	x	x	x	x		
GBT 342	x	x	x	x	x	x		
<b>TOTAL</b>								
<b>avg</b>								
<b>TOTAL</b>	293			233				

#### 2.4.3 Sign Language as part of an Academic Department (2003- )

The Unit's recognition of SASL and its establishment cannot be underscored enough. However, it was not an academic department as such and could not host a course that was purely academic. The SASL course, with the recommendation of the Faculty of Humanities, moved to the Department of Afroasiatic Studies, Sign Language and Language Practice (ASL).

The enrollment for this period is indicated in Table 3. It shows how the total enrollment figures have grown from 285 in 2003 to 566 in 2006, but also how it dropped to a figure below that of 2005 in 2007. A survey needs to be done to determine the factors contributing to the drop in student numbers. The drop was mainly in the first year figure which dropped from an average of 103 in 2006 to 73 in 2007. One reason may be the new tariff structure where students had to pay extra for additional modules. Most of the students in Sign Language is from the medical sciences and education and must take Sign Language as additional modules. According to Table 3 the average enrollment of second year students stabilised on approximately 31 students per year and the third year on 6 to 10 students per year. The average pass rate of first year students are between 74% and 81.6%. For second year students it varies between 84.1% and 96.2% and for third year students between 88.1% and 100%.

Table 3 Sign Language undergraduate modules, Pass rate: 2003-2007

FIRST YEAR	2007			2006			2005			2004			2003			TOTAL	avg
MODULE	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%		
GBT 112	91	73	80.2	120	85	70.8	103	84	81.6	65	59	90.8	53	41	77.4	432	86.4
GBT 122	68	55	80.9	93	70	76.1	92	76	82.6	53	43	81.1	38	33	86.8	344	68.8
GBT 132	78	66	84.6	108	70	64.8	84	62	73.8	61	45	73.8	51	38	74.5	382	76.4
GBT 142	56	45	80.4	91	80	87.9	80	59	73.8	55	34	61.8	34	28	82.4	316	63.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>239</b>	<b>81.6</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>74.0</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>78.3</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>77.4</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>79.6</b>		
<b>Avg</b>	<b>73.25</b>			<b>103</b>			<b>89.75</b>			<b>58.5</b>			<b>44</b>				
SECOND YEAR	2007			2006			2005			2004			2003			TOTAL	avg
MODULE	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%		
GBT 212	38	34	89.5	39	36	92.3	21	17	81.0	25	23	92	16	14	87.5	139	27.8
GBT 222	34	30	88.2	35	33	94.3	18	14	77.8	24	21	87.5	11	11	100	122	24.5
GBT 232	23	23	100	29	27	93.1	16	14	87.5	26	17	65.4	14	14	100	108	21.6
GBT 242	31	26	83.9	25	25	100	14	13	92.9	24	21	87.5	11	11	100	105	21
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>89.7</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>94.5</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>84.1</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>82.8</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>96.2</b>		
<b>Avg</b>	<b>31.5</b>			<b>32</b>			<b>17.25</b>			<b>24.75</b>			<b>13</b>				
THIRD YEAR	2007			2006			2005			2004			2003			TOTAL	avg
MODULE	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%	Enroll	Pass	%		
GBT 312	13	12	92.3	7	7	100	15	14	93.3	7	7	100	15	15	100	57	11.4
GBT 322	12	10	83.3	7	7	100	13	12	92.3	7	7	100	14	14	100	53	10.6
GBT 332	9	7	77.8	5	5	100	13	13	100	7	7	100	14	14	100	48	9.6
GBT 342	8	8	100	7	5	71.4	13	13	100	7	7	100	14	14	100	49	9.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>88.1</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>92.3</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>96.3</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>		
<b>Avg</b>	<b>10.5</b>			<b>6.5</b>			<b>13.5</b>			<b>7</b>			<b>14.25</b>				
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>461</b>			<b>566</b>			<b>482</b>			<b>361</b>			<b>285</b>				

### 3. TEACHING OF SIGN LANGUAGE AT THE UFS

#### 3.1 Communicative Approach

According to Akach, Aarons and Matabane (2007b) different approaches to second language teaching were studied before designing the curriculum. The UFS decided to adapt a communicative approach to the teaching of SASL. The communicative approach focuses on the “functions” or communicative purposes of people's everyday interaction. The functions that help students establish and maintain a social relationship is also emphasised. The course introduces the polite, informal register of SASL in the first level. It begins with personal information and moves to impersonal; from naming things that are present to talking about things not present; from concrete things to abstract ideas. Students learn grammar in the context of communicative activities. Role-play situations, which predict everyday deaf-hearing encounters, are used to contextualise and give meaning to the function.



The teaching philosophy has the following principles in mind:

- Students learn languages best when language is presented in context;
- Students retain languages best when activities are meaningful and experiential; and
- Students develop comprehension skills more quickly than expressive skills.

Lessons are designed to be presented in SASL, avoiding the use of voice, written English or glosses, and teachers are encouraged to always sign slightly beyond what they think is the students' expressive ability (Akach, Aarons & Matabane, 2007b).

## **3.2 Courses**

### **3.2.1 Undergraduate courses**

SASL can be taken as a major, which means a student can take SASL as part of a degree course, e.g. BA Language Practice or BA Language Studies. It can also be taken as part of a minor or an extra subject or for any degree that requires language credits. The subjects in the first year include the following: Basic Grammar and Language Acquisition; Basic Linguistics; Sentence Structure and Situational Dialogue; and Deaf Culture. The second year subjects include two modules of Advanced Grammar and Language Acquisition; Advanced Linguistics (word and sentence structure); and Deaf Culture and History (pathologic viewpoint vs. the cultural viewpoint). The third year subjects include two modules on Advanced Grammar and Discourse; Linguistics of Sign Language; and Deaf Culture and Empowerment. It is considered that a more advanced integration of Linguistics and Sign Language could be of value for the students in Sign Language.

### **3.2.2 Postgraduate courses**

SASL can also be taken at postgraduate level i.e. BA Honours Language Study and MA Language Study in SASL. SASL can be taken as a language combination with another spoken language in pursuing a BA Honours or Postgraduate Diploma, as well as an MA degree in Language Practice (Interpreting).

### **3.2.3 Short courses**

Short courses of a week long were run since the inception of SASL at the ULFE. The trend of learning a completely new language in a week was discouraged when SASL was included in an academic department at the UFS.

In line with South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) requirements, a completely new curriculum was developed in the department to cater for those who wanted to follow a short course. A short course, offered over a year, was then developed. In this course, learners follow a two hour per week course for the whole academic year. The learners in this type of course get the same curriculum offered to regular university students. They are subjected to the same assessment procedures (June and November examinations). Since this course is accredited, the learners can use the credits earned to enter a higher or advanced level of the SASL course.

### **3.3. Assessment**

SASL students are assessed continuously through term tests and June and November examinations. A video camera is used to record their expressive skills (from the script) that the assessors mark as they would mark written scripts. Their receptive skills are assessed by the learners observing (listening with their eyes) and writing in spoken language what they perceived or understood the signed stimuli meant. This is marked in the traditional way. It could also be of value to develop a system to involve members of the community in the assessment of students during the training of sign language students and sign language interpreters as they have first-hand experience of the language.

### **3.4. Development of textbooks**

It is not an easy feat to start a language course for a marginalised and underdeveloped language such as SASL. The UFS started by using books from countries such as the UK and USA that had developed SL courses over the years. The UFS settled on the teaching grammar textbook, *Signing Naturally*, published by Dawn Sign Press. The UFS followed the thematic structure of the book, but used SASL. The UFS eventually, with a colleague teaching at the University of Stellenbosch at the time, and now teaching at New South Wales University in Sidney, Australia, requested Dawn Sign Press for copyright to adapt their book, which was granted in August 2002.

*Signing Naturally* is a curriculum guide to teachers of SASL. The UFS embarked on the adaptation of the book. Sign Language then still was part of the ULFE and received seed money from the then Director, Prof. Theodore du Plessis, to kick-start the project. It is a multi-media teaching grammar book, with a video/DVD to accompany it (Akach, Aarons & Matabane, 2007b). The textbook was completed in 2003, but there was no publishing house in South Africa ready to invest in a publication of this kind. The UFS settled for in-house publishing (photocopying) and called the document a study guide, as is the trend at the University. In 2006 ASL received funds for this project from the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) to publish the first sets of books and video/DVD's (Akach, Aarons & Matabane, 2007a; 2007b; 2007c).

The greatest concern with such a textbook is the fact that it is only available in one of the sign language variations in the country, while almost 12 variations are used. On the other hand this is playing an important role in the fight towards standardisation of SL and the possibility of constitutionalising SL as a twelfth official language.

#### **4. TEACHING OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING**

##### **4.1 Sign language interpreting in South Africa**

As interpreting emerged out of a need for different language communities to communicate with each other, so sign language/spoken language interpreting developed from the same need. According to Akach (2006) the golden thread that underpins sign language interpreting, is training. The need for sign language interpreters emerged with the establishment of associations for the Deaf. The training of interpreters in Africa took the course of learning the National Sign Language. Only some people were trained, while others became interpreters by being employees of the fledgling associations for the Deaf. The majority of interpreters were teachers who were taught Signed Exact English (SEE), which they were taught with the aim of teaching the deaf learners to be literate in English and not to interpret.

The majority of Deaf people in South Africa were marginalised due to the apartheid history of the country and sign language interpreting was never developed or promoted (Lotriet, 1998). Up to 1997 there had been no formal training of Sign Language interpreters in South Africa. Apart from a few interpreters (less than five), who were trained in other countries, there were no trained sign language interpreters in the country (South African National Council for the Deaf, 1995). Deaf people are obliged to make use of the sign language skills of children of Deaf adults (CODAs) to act as interpreters. These people are not trained interpreters and are also not skilled in interpreting from spoken to sign and to do voice-overs. They are also not familiar with the ethics and code of conduct of interpreting (Ceronio, 1997).

Another problem is that in the African communities in South Africa there are almost no CODAs who know sign language as a first language, as hearing family members often raise the children of Deaf parents (DEAFSA, 1996b). According to Akach and Morgan (1999:72-74) sign language interpreting is the single most important window through which the Deaf community can have access to all that is taken for granted by the hearing society. Besides the stipulations of South Africa's Constitution, the policy paper of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) issued in 1993 had to be taken cognizance of. It states that:

*We recommend that the WFD call for the right of all individuals to have access to high quality interpreting between the spoken language of the hearing community and the sign language of the deaf community. This in turn requires the establishment of qualified interpreter training programs and the establishment of mechanisms in every country for making professional interpreters widely available to deaf individuals (WFD, 1993).*

As people become more aware of sign language and the rights of the Deaf as a minority language group, the interest in sign language interpreting is growing and an even greater need for interpreter training is created. Members of the Deaf community are also participating increasingly in political and cultural activities that concern the hearing community as well. This implies that there is a greater demand for sign language interpreters (Lotriet, 1998).

#### **4.2 Training of Sign Language interpreters**

In this regard, DEAFSA, has fought for the recognition of SASL (Akach & Morgan, 1999:74). DEAFSA initiated a pilot training course in collaboration with the ULFE at the UFS.

#### **4.3 Pilot training course**

DEAFSA and the ULFE launched a four-week interpreting training course in 1997 (Akach & Morgan, 1999:74). The course was attended by 21 interpreters. It covered the theory of translation and interpreting, general community interpreting techniques, as well as sign language structure, linguistics, and SASL enhancement. As a result of the course's success, the Flemish government offered financial assistance to DEAFSA in the Free State to expand the course. Part of the contract was to offer a course in the teaching of sign language. One of the shortcomings of the SASL interpreting course was the lack of persons with competence in SASL. According to Lotriet (1998), experience gained from the pilot course indicates that a few issues should be taken into account when designing a training course:

- Trainees have to be screened to determine linguistic competence and interpreting experience before attending the course;
  - The duration of the course should be determined by the trainees' level of knowledge and experience and should preferably run for at least a year;
  - Separate sign language training is strongly suggested to make the practical interpreting courses more effective;
  - Not all trainees have the required aptitude to be trained as conference interpreters; and
  - Training courses for trainers should be developed.
- As mentioned in Section 2, the course in SASL/spoken language interpreting training started in 1999 on the campus of the UFS in cooperation with DEAFSA.

It was at the end of these courses that the ULFE saw a need to include SASL as one of the languages on the campus to be empowered. Lotriet and Ceronio (1999:246) proposed a model that sign language training form part of sign language interpreting training. Opportunities for learning sign language in South Africa are limited and interested individuals with the cognitive ability to become sign language interpreters should be given the chance to learn sign language.

## **5. RESEARCH**

### **5.1. Projects**

In addition to the development of textbooks in collaboration with PANSALB, the following projects have also been undertaken.

#### **5.1.1 SASL-English Bilingual Education at Bartimea School for the Deaf, Thaba Nchu**

As a result of the homelands policy, a number of additional schools for the African Deaf were established in the rest of the country, divided according to the spoken language of each ethnic group and in line with the Bantustan separate development policy. In 1962, the Dutch Reformed Church set up Bartimea School at Thaba Nchu for Tswana and Southern Sotho 'speakers' (Aarons & Akach, 2002a). The UFS launched a project at Bartimea School in 2002 with the aim to implement SASL as a medium of instruction. The project started off with grades one, two and three, and later also included the grade R teacher, when grade 2 and 3 teachers showed less interest in the goal of the project.

The aims of the project were ongoing training for the teachers in SASL, as well as team-teaching with an adult Deaf assistant. Workshops were held on curriculum training for teachers, the use of SASL in the classroom, the structure of SASL, and on the upgrading of English language skills. Another aim of this project was research. The form of research undertaken was action research, with ongoing formative education. The project has gained a secure foothold in the school. Several of the hearing teachers are already confident enough to continue on their own, using project methodology and signed language as a medium of instruction. The learners also refer to SASL as a language and spoken language as a language. They do not mix the two as the teachers had previously done by signing in the English word order structure. One of the major concerns and constraints of this project is, however, that the initial teachers who started with this project were able to move up with the learners from grade to grade. From Grade 4, the learners rotate between teachers for the various subjects. These teachers do not sign well and this could be problematic for the learners.

### 5.1.2 UFS-Belgium Cross-Linguistic Research Project

Myriam Vermeerbergen, Mieke Van Herreweghe, Philemon Akach and Emily Matabane (2007) joined forces in a cross-linguistic study on the constituent order in Flemish Sign Language (VGT) and South African Sign Language (SASL). The project included a survey of the sociolinguistic situation of SASL and its community/communities and a cross-linguistic study of morpho-syntactic features of both sign languages. The study reported on a comparison of word order issues, and more specifically on the order of the verb and its arguments into unrelated sign languages.

## 5.2 Other research

Prof. Debra Aarons, the ASL's research fellow from Australia, is among others involved with research on SASL grammar funded by PANSALB, for the development of textbooks, manuals and DVD's/video's (Akach, Aarons & Matabane, 2007a; 2007b; 2007c). Myriam Vermeerbergen from Belgium has strong ties with ASL and has spent some six months in the department, working with SASL personnel. As mentioned in Section 5.1 she was also involved in the cross-linguistic study between SASL and Flemish Sign Language. Other research at both the ULFE and ASL include among others Debra Aarons and Philemon Akach's (2002b) research on the concept of Inclusive Education. They show how the interpretation of this concept might be problematic when applied to Deaf learners. They present international and national policy statements on Inclusive Education and how these policies cannot be applied in a straightforward way in the education of Deaf learners. In this article they claim that the barrier to educational needs of Deaf learners is language and not physical disability.

Philemon Akach and Johan Lubbe's (2003) comparative research on the giving of personal names in spoken languages and signed languages utilised data from two Deaf communities to investigate the principles operant in the giving of personal names and to demonstrate similarities and differences as compared with those operant in spoken-language communities. Akach's (2004) study on the phonological base analysis of SASL outlined similarities between American Sign Language and SASL. The analysis was on the sequential phenomenon found in the production of individual signs, segmental phonetic transcription systems, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic contrast in SASL signs, various types of phonological processes, and an overview of the major types of phonological aspects of SASL's rich system of morphological processes. Akach (2005a) looked at the colonisation of sign languages and its effect on sign language interpreters. He described colonisation in Africa and specifically Southern Africa and its effects on spoken and sign languages.

As mentioned in Section 1, Akach (2005b) did an empirical study on parents' attitude towards sign language as a medium of instruction in schools of the deaf. The study was conducted with 210 parents from two schools, namely Thiboloha School at Qwaqwa and Bartimea School at Thaba Nchu. The research of Lotriet (1998) also needs to be mentioned. She was involved with the first training of interpreters at the University and has played a significant role in the implementation of a course in interpreter training. Research by Lotriet and Ceronio (1999:246) also proposed a model that sign language training form part of sign language interpreting training. Research of students in interpreting include among others that of Ronell Ceronio (1997). She did research on the first SASL interpreter training at the University.

Nicolene de Klerk (2004) highlighted the plight of deaf education. As the oral/manual controversy continues to play a pivotal role in deaf education, the medium of instruction for the deaf pre-school child was addressed as possible criteria for determining school readiness skills and ultimately academic success translating into the acquisition of literacy skills. Another significant research study is that of Susan Lombaard (see Lombaard, 2006; Lombaard & Naudé, 2007). The research aims to prove that biblical texts in SASL are more accessible than written or printed biblical texts for Deaf born South Africans who use sign language as their first language. The results proved that the signed parts of the Bible were more accessible for culturally Deaf people than the written counterparts. Conclusions can also been drawn from the study that a Bible in Sign Language is needed for use in the Deaf community of South Africa.

## **6. SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING – COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND SERVICE PROVIDING FOR DEAF STUDENTS**

Sign Language training at ASL is more than just a course. It has led to involvement in the Deaf Community on various levels, including DEAFSA and their campaigns, such as Deaf Awareness Week, a church for Deaf people in Bloemfontein, and active involvement with the Provincial Association of South African Sign Language Interpreters (PASALSI) to ensure the profession of sign language interpreters. Another crucial role of ALS is its involvement with rendering services to Deaf students on campus. Deaf persons who want to enroll as students at the UFS can be accommodated. Deaf persons obtain matric without matric exemption, which is a pre-requisite for admission to any university. Due to this fact, the UFS started a bridging course to fill the gap between the secondary school system and that of the University. If students pass this bridging course, they are accepted as students at the UFS. The Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT) in Bloemfontein, as well as UNISA, recognise this bridging course. This course is the *Career Preparation Programme (CPP)* and runs over one academic year. Students are credited for subjects successfully completed through this programme.

Students have a choice between Economics and Management Sciences, Humanities, Sciences, etc. The UFS is one of two South African universities that utilise SASL interpreting in classes. This was the initiative of the Unit for Students with Disabilities at the UFS in 2005. The Unit addresses issues of access as they provide mobility to students who are blind, chair bound, etc. They organise special exams for students who face any sort of challenge, e.g. neuro, sensory, visual, epilepsy, etc. In 2005, the UFS started with the first Deaf student attending classes with an SASL interpreter. Currently seven students are sharing this privilege. Only one SASL interpreter is qualified and acts as a full-time interpreter. Two interpreters are currently in training and assist in interpreting in classes as part of their mentorship. Owing to this facility, more students applied to the UFS. The CUT does not have interpreting services, although there is a dire need, as Deaf students study at the institution without interpreters. The UFS and the CUT are working together to establish a system where the two institutions could share the same pool of interpreters between them.

Some problems do exist:

- Although government offers bursaries to Deaf students, this money does not include any remuneration for interpreters. Interpreters have to be paid from the budget of the Unit of Disabilities. If more and more students decide to study at the UFS, it will become a big financial restraint on the Unit of Disabilities.
- Another problem is that the UFS top management does not recognise SASL interpreting as a separate profession – thus, no money is budgeted for this facility.

We fervently hope that, since the university has addressed multilingualism by offering interpreting services for meetings, teaching and hostel management in English and Afrikaans through the Department of Afroasiatic Studies, Sign Language and Language Practice, SASL-spoken language interpreters will come under the same ambit.

## **7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES**

The teaching of SASL has the same status as the teaching of other languages at the UFS, with courses on all levels. It is housed in an academic department and SASL is involved in research and community service activities. The teaching of interpreting is done within the Programme of Language Practice. According to the department's academic planning, a more integrated approach will be followed in the teaching of Sign Language as of 2010. All eight credit modules will be combined into 16 credit modules and in each module will be a combination of Linguistics, Sign Language Acquisition and Deaf Culture. Students will also undergo training in SASL interpreting in their third year.



SASL has been offered over the past ten years and is settled in the ASL since 2003. The department has embarked on Total Quality Management and SASL will be part of it. This will ensure quality in SASL teaching and research.

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