

Report of the Committee on Icelandic Sign Language, 7th June 2015

Conclusion

Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM, íslenskt táknmál),¹ the one traditional minority language in Iceland, is endangered as all those who are fluent in ÍTM as their mother tongue are disappearing and there are no new recruits to take their place. The Committee on Icelandic Sign Language considers this a very serious matter and urges the government to do all in its power to turn this development around without delay.

The most important factor in maintaining the viability of a language² is that it is inherited from one generation to another. This cannot happen unless young users of the language learn it in the critical period for language acquisition. As to ÍTM, the basis is that all hard of hearing, deaf, and deaf-blind children, as well as those who are born of Deaf³ parents,⁴ shall have unhindered access to ÍTM and its community. Other important factors which decide whether a language shall live or become extinct are: (a) the range of use of the language (it is important that it is possible to use the language in all situations where it is warranted), (b) the attitude of the community toward the language, (c) the quantity and quality of data about and in the language, (d) the total number of those who understand the language and first and foremost consider it their own native language, and (e) government policy (whether the government supports and stands behind the community of language speakers, lets it go its own way, or even works against it).

According to Act no. 61/2011 the Icelandic government bears the responsibility of nurturing and supporting ÍTM. Now, only four years after passage of the act, the status of ÍTM is poor indeed.

¹ Icelandic Sign Language is abbreviated as ÍTM in Icelandic.

² The concept of language applies to both spoken and sign language.

³ In this report the concept of *Deaf* with a capital D is used in discussion of the deaf people who identify themselves with the ÍTM community and Deaf culture.

⁴ Also called *CODAs*.

Premises and discussion

Introduction

Act no. 61/2011 on the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic sign language states:

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Icelandic sign language.

Icelandic sign language is the first language of those who have to rely on it for expression and communication, and of their children. The government authorities shall nurture and support it.

All those who need to use sign language shall have the opportunity to learn and use Icelandic sign language as soon as their language acquisition process begins, or from the time when deafness, hearing impairment or deaf-blindness is diagnosed. Their immediate family members shall have the same right.

With enactment of this law the government took a large step toward improving the status of ÍTM and its users,⁵ both present and future. On the other hand, the act alone is not enough to change and improve the position of ÍTM but rather calls for changes in emphases throughout the society. The position of ÍTM was not strong when the law was enacted and changes that could have been expected as a result have come to a standstill.

In accordance with Act no. 61/2011 the Minister of Education and Culture appointed a Committee on Icelandic Sign Language, which has the role of advising the government on anything pertaining to Icelandic Sign Language and to provide government authorities with advice on matters of all types concerning Icelandic Sign Language and to support the development of Icelandic Sign Language and its use in the life of the Icelandic nation. The Committee consists of 5 members and has been allotted one million kronas to cover operating expenses. Because of the shortage of funds the Committee has neither been able to carry out nor to support research on language concerns relevant to its mission. Therefore since 2012 the Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has paid the salary of a secretary for the Committee, holding a 20% position.

⁵ Here this concept refers to language users for whom ÍTM is their first language.

From the beginning the Committee has emphasised that the government has not acted in accordance with Act no. 61/2011, among other things in terms of the language input for children. The Committee has therefore called for support from the educational institutions that specialise in education of deaf children for the educational environment that the children are offered.

In the opinion of the linguists at the Centre for Sign Language Research on ÍTM continues to be endangered, four years after enactment of the law. The main reason is that hard of hearing, deaf and deaf-blind children, as well as the children of Deaf parents, do not have an unhindered opportunity to learn ÍTM.

This report points to several of the conditions that underscore the really poor developments that ÍTM faces today and examines them, among other things, in the light of the history of the education of deaf children, both here in Iceland and elsewhere in the world.

Educational policy for deaf children

As was shown in the conclusions of the Committee, the most important factor is that a language keeps its viability by being transmitted from one generation to the next such that new speakers take over and acquire the language. A language is learned within a social context, in relation to others, and is likely the strongest force in socializing children. Ahearn (2012) has argued that learning a first language and becoming a culturally competent member of society are two facets of a single process. The process of acquiring language is deeply affected by the process of becoming competent member of society and the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through cultural values and social practises.

The parents of children who are born deaf in only a few cases know ÍTM when the children are born. Children who rely on ÍTM for communication therefore do not have unhindered access to their own family's language community. If nothing is done at this



Hjördís Anna Haraldsdóttir, teacher at the sign language department at the Hlíða School and member of the Committee on Icelandic Sign Language, writes:

From the heyday of sign language to its demise

I belong to the generation born around 1980. I went to the School for the deaf, which later became the Vesturhlíðar School. When I began schooling when I was barely a year old there was an observation department at the school called the *Red House*. That was where parents met with their children as soon as any hearing impairment was diagnosed. At that time there were 50-60 pupils in the School for the deaf, aged one through 18. The school also operated a department for continuing education that supported the deaf in attending secondary school. At that time there were no interpretation services so the school's teachers went to class with the students and interpreted for them.

On the school grounds Icelandic Sign Language was of course the language used and there people of all ages could meet. I well remember having been jealous of the older students as they sat around a table and talked and discussed anything and everything. We, the little people, were so young and had not developed to the point of being able to take part.

I experienced 1990-1994 as a heyday with all kinds of things going on on the school grounds. Of course, the number of students dropped in those years, which had a normal explanation as the largest class of 1964, a total of 35 individuals, completed school, whereas in a normal year only 1-5 deaf children are born or diagnosed. Boarding on the grounds had been stopped around 1990 and the buildings taken over to be used for other operations. They were the Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Vinahlíð home for the elderly, the oldest Deaf group, and a social centre for children and young people where all Deaf children could congregate after school.

stage there is the danger that the child will not learn the rules and culture of the language society, which means the child will suffer a critical disability. There must be schooling to ensure that these children will have a language community that is necessary for them to acquire the language they need. The effect of the school on language learning and the language development of the child and whether the child shall have to cope with disability is therefore much more pervasive than for other children, and the school policy for the education of deaf children at any time has a huge effect on the life of the children and the status of ÍTM.

The teachers should be those who mould the environment and conditions for children so that they develop and become educated. Their attitude towards the languages the children speak and their choice of language that the child has access to makes a great deal of difference as to how well the child progresses. The teachers are thus both promoters of the language and of the child's progress in life. They decide whether the student progresses from grade to grade in school and how she or he is assessed in the larger world. They keep them in or out of the school and therefore have a huge influence on the progress of the students in the labour market and throughout life. The school system has the tendency to reward those who have the power, are like the teachers and therefore speak Icelandic.

School for deaf children

Harlan Lane, professor of psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, has pointed out that after the first schools for deaf children were founded their schooling has gone through five stages of assimilation of the children to a hearing world and

towards the extermination of the world's sign languages by restricting the children's access to sign language communities.

The first stage was oralism at the end of the 19th century when the world's sign languages were banned and Deaf teachers were dismissed from the schools. The second stage was closing down a sign language community – the boarding school –and day schools were established on a large scale. This was done so that the children could be home in the environment of spoken language. The third stage was English dominance or the language of the majority by using what was called Total communication. The teacher then had to use all means to strengthen the child's learning of spoken language, among other things, the signs used in sign language. The fourth stage was the mainstreaming of deaf children in schools for hearing children. Deaf children were then distributed among hearing children in the general school environment. The fifth and last adjustment of the deaf child to a hearing world is a surgery that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers cures deafness and produces better results than using hearing aids (Lane, 1992).

Here in Iceland the school system has developed in a comparable way to that which Lane describes. The first school for deaf children was founded in Iceland in Prestbakki á Síðu and including boarding. Rev. Páll Pálsson was the children's first teacher. He taught them what was called finger language, which was the predecessor of ÍTM, and he used finger language to teach. The students learned to read and write but no emphasis was placed on speaking. There the first society of the Deaf was formed and ÍTM began to develop.

Around 1920 there was a beginning emphasis on oralism in schools for the deaf and reached a peak after 1944 when fingerlanguage was banned in teaching children. This ban continued long into the 20th century. Total communication continued to be the dominant method for teaching the children from 1980–1985. The aim of this method was to strengthen the use of Icelandic with the help of lip reading, the finger alphabet, pointing, the written language and other means. Total communication uses signs from ÍTM together with Icelandic. Teachers who use the language in this way have no idea what the effect is on the children. The research carried out by Hill (2008) on Mock Spanish in American English may be taken as a

Around 1996 everything began to change. We ourselves stood on the sidelines. Our advice was not sought and we watched how our language community was little by little torn down.

The number of students dropped, the Communication Centre was moved from the school grounds to another building, the continuing education department was abolished and the home for the elderly was closed because of operating difficulties. The elderly Deaf were removed from the sign language community to Hrafnista where they resided among the speaking community that they had no access to. The Ministry of Education and the City of Reykjavík took over running the Vesturhlíðar School. The Red House was abolished and its operations moved to a new nursery school, Sólborg, which was built north of the school grounds. At this time obligatory teaching was changed from 4-18 years to 6-16 years.

My group was the last group to graduate at the age of 18.

When I went to school the school grounds were, to me, *Sign Language Land*. All knowledge was gathered together in that place and the Icelandic Sign Language environment bloomed. I got to know older generations well enough to become acquainted with them later and I grew up with the younger generations. Additionally, at the same time the Parental and support group for parents of deaf children was strong.

The core was broken up and scattered in all directions. The children had no language community in which to nourish their language and the parents had lost their support base.

My mother told me that the Vesturhlíðar School used to be the “most expensive school”. The school system that we now operate is much more expensive, as it is expensive for children to miss out on good language acquisition and the personal strength that comes from having role models within one’s own environment.

The decisions at this time were based on the idea that we were disabled individuals rather than on the fact that we constituted a language community, though that is the basis of our learning and development.

comparison in order to understand better the effect of such usage on the language. Total communication first and foremost strengthens the position of the teachers who do not know ÍTM in their communication with the students. They are blind to the negative effects on their students and, like the effect of the use of Mock Spanish in the States, it has a humiliating effect, resulting in marginalization and playing a part in negatively stereotyping the students (Hill, 2008). The negative effect that the use of sign coupled with Icelandic had on ÍTM had a comparable effect, revising and directing its development in a negative way.

In 1991 the boarding school was shut and the children moved to their homes where the spoken language was used and thereby lost the chance to be in the ÍTM community of the boarding school. In 1996 the school director became someone who was herself Deaf and used sign language and therewith the emphasis on the ability of the teachers in ÍTM increased. Vesturhlíðar School was closed in 2002. With the closing of the school the last ÍTM community that the children had access to was abolished. Despite the fact that within the Hlíða School there is now operated an ÍTM department, there are many hard of hearing and deaf children in their own school districts who get no instruction in the use of ÍTM. In addition the teaching of ÍTM in Hlíða School is highly unsatisfactory. The fifth stage is well advanced here in Iceland as most children who are diagnosed as deaf now receive a cochlear implant and few are given the opportunity to acquire ÍTM as their native language.

ÍTM: An endangered language

The developments that have taken place in education and the language environment of deaf children, both here in Iceland and more widely, have meant that many of the world's sign languages are endangered. When a sign language community is systematically destroyed and deaf children are given cochlear implants without access to a sign language environment the number of those with sign language as their mother tongue drops markedly. This is the main reason for the status of ÍTM today. ÍTM, the only traditional minority language in Iceland, is an endangered language.

The linguists at the Centre for Sign Language Research, in collaboration with Ethnologue.com, have shown that ÍTM is one of the languages whose continued existence is substantially threatened. The reason is that ÍTM is only used in face-to-face communication between people. The range of use of the language is therefore severely limited, whereas for a language to retain its viability it must, among other things, be used in all conditions. If not used widely a language does not pass from generation to generation and very few children learn it as part of their growing up. If nothing further is done the language will be moribund within a few years. Linguists have also reported to UNESCO, in collaboration with the iSLanDS Centre in Preston, England, that ÍTM is severely threatened. The main reason is that the hard of hearing, deaf and deaf-blind children, as well as the children of Deaf parents, do not have an unhindered opportunity to learn ÍTM.

The educational policy in Iceland now is that schools should be inclusive. This policy means that the hard of hearing, deaf and deaf-blind children, as well as the children of Deaf parents, are taught in a bilingual or multilingual environment. Language acquisition in such an environment can proceed unhindered if well supported, but it has been shown that the social factors and language ideologies can get in the way of children's learning the language despite the fact that the language is used often in the child's environment (Ahearn, 2012). The opinions of the government, the school authorities, the teachers and the children themselves toward ÍTM can have momentous consequences for both the children and the language, as the history of deaf education has shown us. So far Icelandic authorities have not let any teaching

In my opinion my life has been like passing over a collapsing bridge. The ÍTM community was built up, the language blossomed and we supported each other. My generation passed over the bridge, but as we passed one after another each plank collapsed behind us. Nothing is being left for future generations of their heritage or their history, or the safety or the support that we received

When the sign language environment is discussed I am filled with regret. I remember what we had and what we have watched disappear.

As a former student in a school where Icelandic Sign Language was used to communicate and at present a teacher in a sign language department I am deeply worried about the status of the signing community and the position of children who are not learning Icelandic Sign Language. There is so much inherent in a language environment that cannot be covered in teaching.

Without a language community there will be no language acquisition. Gone will be the nuance of expression, synonyms, creation, playing with the language – the life is missing.

materials in ÍTM be produced for children with ÍTM as their first language, neither for ÍTM as a subject nor for teaching other subjects. Nowhere in Iceland is there education for sign language teachers, for those who see to teaching ÍTM as a mother tongue. This is the situation despite passage of Act no. 61/2011 and the listing of ÍTM in the National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (2013), which states that “a solid knowledge of Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM) and Icelandic is one of the mainstays of a stable education for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired” (p. 109). In order for ÍTM to be the first language of those who have to rely on it for expression and communication, and of their children. The language must be accessible within a language community where it is used by different individuals in various ways. There needs to be such a language community within the school system and recognition of the language on an equal footing with Icelandic for communication within the school. Any language that is not accessible or recognized cannot function as a mother tongue or a first language. As things are

today, children are by no means ensured enough access to a fertile and positive language community which can lead to normal language acquisition and the language development of children during the critical period for language acquisition. What is needed is a viable and accessible ÍTM language environment in both nursery and compulsory schools.

The nursery school Sólborg responded to the first report of the Committee in 2013 by changing the learning environment of the hard of hearing and deaf children. A special department was formed within the school where the children who sign ÍTM are together in the daily operations and only Deaf staff members work in this department. This change is a step in meeting the Committee’s challenge to the government to improve the language environment of the hard of hearing, deaf and deaf-blind children as well as the children of Deaf parents. But we can do better. Where ÍTM is used in the language environment of deaf children it often really means mixing Icelandic with ÍTM where not all the staff involved have enough fluency in ÍTM. There are simply no special schools anywhere in the country for deaf children where ÍTM is the language of instruction and communication and many hard of hearing, deaf and deaf-blind children never come into contact with it, either at home or at

school. Instead an effort is made to try to teach them together with other children in their own home schools. The actuality, on the other hand, is that an *inclusive school policy* is in fact excluding these children from a language and education. The school policy is at the expense of ÍTM language environment. The children are not provided instruction based on ÍTM as Act no. 61/2011 is meant to ensure.

The government's indifference affects respect for ÍTM

Linguists at the Centre for Sign Language Research feel that the community's attitude towards ÍTM is positive and neutral. The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service RÚV has daily 10-minute news bulletins. Such inserts can be expected to have a positive or neutral influence on opinions about the language. Furthermore, in recent years the quantity and quality of data about and in the language have increased, not least through the SignWiki web which is operated by the Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

The government, on the other hand, has not allotted much financial support for research on ÍTM, neither on the language itself nor on the effects that the inclusive school policy has had on the ÍTM language community. This lack of interest in ÍTM on the part of the government has resulted in an extremely serious condition for the hard of hearing, deaf and deaf-blind children, as well as the children of Deaf parents.

The reduction in numbers of ÍTM signers, and therefore of those who use ÍTM as their first language, and of younger users bears the mark of the government's neglect. New signers and young users are first and foremost the children of Deaf parents who learned the language at home. These children are not given a realistic choice of education in their native language in the school system. The respect and the status that Act no. 61/2011 should ensure the ÍTM community has not been demonstrated, least of all in the educational system. The language, among other things, is treated carelessly in that the teachers are not required to be specially trained in ÍTM in order to teach the language or to teach deaf children other courses within the school system. Thus it is clear that Icelandic and ÍTM do not have the equal footing within the educational system that both the National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (2013) and Act no. 61/2011 mandate.

If ÍTM is not taught as a first language in an ÍTM environment the number of signers and young users will continue to drop. If children do not learn the language they will not be able to make use of the services of an interpreter later in life. Today the use of ÍTM in most domains takes place by means of interpreted communication between Icelandic and ÍTM. If

children do not learn the language the result will be a considerable and rapid drop in domains where ÍTM is used, if nothing is done to stop it.

In order for ÍTM to truly stand on an equal footing with Icelandic, as Act no. 61/2011 requires, the developments that now face us must be reversed and current laws must be complied with. A special school needs to be opened for the hard of hearing, deaf, and deaf-blind children and the children of Deaf parents where ÍTM is the language of instruction, financing for research on the language and the language community should be increased, and the means and respect in all domains where Icelandic now thrives should be increased.

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