

# The Vidéographix Project

## Understanding written text when you are deaf

The Association Française pour la Lecture (AFL) (the French Reading Association) has a particular interest for the way in which reading is acquired, not only by pupils who can hear (the hearing) but also by deaf. For several years now (about 15 years), some members of the Association have studied the way deaf pupils learn to read.

### **What is the situation in France as far as deaf people and reading is concerned?**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, teaching methods used to use Sign Language as a way of communicating and learning for deaf pupils. (Deaf people could become poets, teachers or lawyers and therefore had a good grasp of the French language). However, during the Milan Congress in 1880, which was attended mainly by teachers who were not deaf and who came from different countries, it was decided that only lip reading and speech would be used and that Sign Language would be banned from schools. This Congress had enormous consequences on the teaching methods that were at times resented as being like a punishment, or a time of suffering or even a means of oppression on the part of the teachers who could hear (even now, deaf adults remember having had their hands tied behind their backs in order not to use Sign Language). These consequences had a great impact, especially as far as the teaching of reading was concerned, since words and sounds were used to teach reading and by definition the deaf cannot hear them. As a result, some of them could pronounce words but did not understand their meanings. Also, reading could not be associated with pleasure and some deaf people did not see the point in learning to read (although reading is the best way to communicate with those who can hear and to extract information from their environment).

In the 1998 Gillot Report (Rapport Gillot) it was established that 80% of the deaf population was illiterate.

Since then, the situation has evolved. Little by little, Sign Language has made a come back in schools and parents have been allowed to choose the language that they wish for to educate and teach their children. Nowadays, different educational methods and languages exist side by side. Depending on the schools, methods can vary greatly; some use lip reading and speech, others Signed French or Cued Speech or Sign Language or a mix of different languages (which could then be compared to a sort of Pidgin English). For some, the aim is to acquire written and oral French and for others to master Sign Language and written French.

AFL has worked with the latter and has come to the conclusion that as with the hearing, it is necessary to give the deaf a direct access to reading (which consists of linking the written code to the meaning straightaway), as opposed

to an indirect access (where the written word is uttered to access its meaning) because the written word is a language for the eyes and not for the ears. Sign language is their natural language and constitutes the best way of communicating in order to learn about their environment and as a result, acquiring overall essential knowledge. In a situation where people are communicating, there is always about 80% of the contents that are known or familiar and 20% that belong to the unknown and remain to be discovered. The situation is identical as far as reading is concerned. Also, Sign Language is then becoming the language to talk about the written word in the same way as those who can hear use speech to describe how the written word works.

## **The Project and its objectives**

AFL has developed software to learn and improve reading. One of the programs called Idéographix was created in different foreign languages and has been used with deaf pupils, this is why it has seemed necessary to introduce videotapes using Sign Language for deaf pupils.

This project consists in the creation of a tool that uses French Sign Language (as the first language for deaf people) to talk about and understand the written word, to be able to analyse and comment on the written work and all its different components (e.g. the layout of a text, the paragraphs, the sentences, the syntax, the words, etc) so using Sign Language to talk about the written work in the same way as people who can hear, use speech to do it. In addition to this, a network will allow the exchange of information about the written word (for deaf pupils) as well as the exchange of teaching methods and tools (for those teachers who have deaf pupils). The Vidéographix Project is based on its work and experience with the deaf community in order to fulfil its needs.

Its aim is to enable deaf people to become independent and become experts as far as the written work is concerned. The idea is that it will be used not only by pupils but also by students, people who are in employment or anyone who uses Sign Language but has problems with the written aspect of the language.

People will be able to contribute to the software and add their own video tools or those coming from the exchange network. It can therefore be envisaged that in the end, it will be used in different countries and in different languages. Sign language is not an international language, even if there is a common form of Sign Language used during meetings where there are deaf people of various nationalities.

For more information or if you want to share your views and experiences about the deaf in your country, you can email us at : [afl@lecture.org](mailto:afl@lecture.org)