

The Bilingualism and Biculturalism of the Deaf*

This chapter contains three parts. In the first, what it means to be bilingual in sign language and the oral (majority) language is explained and similarities with hearing bilinguals and differences are discussed. The second part examines the biculturalism of Deaf people: like hearing biculturals, they take part, to varying degrees, in the life of two worlds (the Deaf world and the hearing world), they adapt their attitudes, behaviors, languages, etc., to both worlds, and they combine and blend aspects of the two. The decisional process they go through in choosing a cultural identity is then discussed and the difficulties met by some groups are examined. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Deaf child and why it is so important for him/her to be able to grow up bilingual in sign language and the oral language. The role of both languages is pointed out and it is argued that pursuing solely an oral approach puts the child at risk cognitively, linguistically, and personally.

13.1 The Deaf bilingual

It is only in recent years that the bilingualism of the Deaf has started to be studied (on this topic, see, among others, Ann 2001; Battison 1978; Bernstein *et al.* 1985; Bishop and Hicks 2005; Davis 1989; Grosjean 1986, 1992, 1996; Kannapel 1974; Kettrick and Hatfield 1986; Lee 1983; Lucas 1989; Lucas and Valli 1992; Stokoe 1969). The bilingualism present in the Deaf community, also called bimodal bilingualism, is a form of minority language bilingualism in which the members of the community acquire and use both the minority language (sign language) and the majority language in its written form and sometimes in its

* This chapter was written specifically for the book and is influenced by several papers I have written on the bilingualism and biculturalism of the Deaf. See the Appendix for references.

<i>Modality</i>	Oral language		Sign language	
	Production	Perception	Production	Perception
<i>Spoken</i>	Speaking	Listening Lip reading (+/- cued speech)	XXXXXXX	XXXXXX
<i>Written</i>	Writing	Reading	Writing sign language	Reading sign language
<i>Sign</i>	Producing a signed version	Perceiving a signed version	Signing	Perceiving Signing
<i>Finger spelling</i>	Producing and perceiving finger spelling			

FIGURE 13.1 The languages, skills, and modalities involved in the bilingualism of the Deaf

spoken or even signed form. (We will use the labels “sign language”, and “majority language” or “oral language” throughout as we do not want to restrict ourselves to the case of one language pair, e.g. American Sign Language (ASL) or British Sign Language (BSL) and English; French Sign Language (FSL; LSF) and French; etc.) Sign language bilingualism can, of course, also involve the knowledge and use of two or more different sign languages but this form of bilingualism is less common in the Deaf community and has been the object of fewer studies. Given the definition of bilingualism used throughout this book, notably in Chapter 2, most Deaf people who sign and who use the majority language (even if only in its written form) in their everyday lives are indeed bilingual.

13.1.1 Similarities with hearing bilinguals

Deaf bilinguals share many similarities with hearing bilinguals. First, they are very diverse. Depending on their degree of hearing loss, the onset of deafness (prelingually or postlingually), the language(s) used in childhood, their education, their occupation, their social networks, etc., they have developed different knowledge and use of their languages (sign language and the majority language), as well as a diversity in the skills concerned (production and perception) in the various language modalities involved (spoken, written, signed, etc.). Figure 13.1 presents the languages, skills, and modalities present in sign-oral language bilingualism. Thus, in the spoken modality, we find the production of the oral language (speaking) and its perception (listening, lip reading); of

	Oral language		Sign language	
<i>Modality</i>	Production	Perception	Production	Perception
<i>Spoken</i>			XXXXXX	XXXXXX
<i>Written</i>				
<i>Sign</i>				
<i>Finger spelling</i>				

FIGURE 13.2 The configuration of a Deaf bilingual who is dominant in sign language

course, there is no spoken version of sign language, hence the crosses in Figure 13.1. In the written modality, we find writing and reading the oral language (in its written form), as well as writing and reading sign language (see recent efforts to allow sign language to be written such as Valerie Sutton’s SignWriting). In the sign modality, we have the production of signs (signing) and the perception of signs (perceiving signs)—these correspond to the two right-hand cells in the figure—as well as the production and perception of signed versions of the oral language (left-hand cells) which include “manually coded systems” (e.g. Seeing Essential English in the USA, Sign Supported English in the UK) as well as pidgin sign language (PSE), the sort of language used by hearing people who have not fully mastered the true sign language of the Deaf. Finally, finger spelling concerns both languages (oral language and sign language) since it finds its source in the oral language (it is a visual representation of the spelling of the oral language) but it is also integrated in various ways into sign language. Were we to assess different Deaf people’s competencies according to this table, we would find a lot of diversity. Figures 13.2 and 13.3 show just two possible configurations. The degree of knowledge and use in a language skill is shown by the degree of shading in a cell; the lighter the shading, the less knowledge and use, the darker the shading, the more knowledge and use. Thus, in Figure 13.2, we have represented the configuration of a Deaf bilingual who is dominant in sign language (both the real sign language of the community and the PSE version used by and with hearing people). The person has fairly good knowledge (and use) of the oral language in its written form but less so of the same language in its spoken form. On the other hand, the Deaf bilingual represented in Figure 13.3 is dominant in the oral language (note the rather dark shading for the spoken and

<i>Modality</i>	Oral language		Sign language	
	Production	Perception	Production	Perception
<i>Spoken</i>			XXXXXX	XXXXXX
<i>Written</i>				
<i>Sign</i>				
<i>Finger spelling</i>				

FIGURE 13.3 The configuration of a Deaf bilingual who is dominant in the oral language

written modalities) whereas his/her knowledge and use of sign language is slightly less developed. In both cases, we have active sign-oral language bilinguals but with different configurations. We should note that the diversity found in Deaf bilinguals is no different in its extent to that found in hearing bilinguals with two or more oral languages; they too are very diverse in their knowledge and use of their languages.

A second similarity with hearing bilinguals is that most Deaf bilinguals do not judge themselves to be bilingual. In some countries, some Deaf people may not be aware that sign language is different from the majority language, and in general many Deaf do not think they are bilingual because they do not fully master all the skills that accompany the oral language (or, at times, the sign language). This is a well-known phenomenon found among many bilinguals, be they hearing or Deaf, who have a tendency to evaluate their language competencies as inadequate. Some criticize their mastery of language skills, others strive their hardest to reach monolingual norms, others still hide their knowledge of their “weaker” language, and most simply do not perceive themselves as being bilingual even though they use two (or more) languages regularly.

A third similarity between Deaf and hearing bilinguals is that both are governed by the complementarity principle (see Chapter 3). They use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Some domains are covered by both languages but others are specific to a language.

Finally, like hearing bilinguals, Deaf bilinguals find themselves in their everyday lives at various points along the language mode continuum. When they are communicating with monolinguals, they restrict themselves to just one language and are therefore in a monolingual mode. They deactivate the other language and remain, as best they can,

within the confines of the language being used (for example, a written form of the majority language). At other times, Deaf bilinguals find themselves in a bilingual mode, that is with other bilinguals who share to some extent their two languages—sign language and the majority language—and with whom they can mix their languages. Here, depending on such factors as their knowledge of the two languages, the person(s) being addressed, the situation, the topic, the function of the interaction, etc., they choose a base language—usually a form of sign language (the natural sign language of the community or a signed version of the spoken language). Then, according to various momentary needs, and by means of signing, finger spelling, mouthing, etc., they bring in the other language in the form of code-switches or borrowings. The result has been called contact signing (Lucas and Valli 1992).

13.1.2 Differences with hearing bilinguals

Although the bilingualism of the Deaf shares many characteristics with that of hearing people, a number of aspects are specific to the Deaf group. First, until recently there has been little recognition of Deaf people's bilingual status. They are still seen by many as monolingual in the majority language whereas in fact many are bilingual in that language and in sign. It is only in the last 40 years or so that sign language has been recognized as a language in an increasing number of countries, allowing thereby the recognition of the bilingual status of Deaf bilinguals. Second, Deaf bilinguals, because of their hearing loss, will remain bilingual throughout their lives and from generation to generation. They have a need for sign language as a means of communication among themselves (and with some hearing people) but also of the majority language for life outside the Deaf community (extended family, work, etc.). This maintenance of bilingualism is not always found with other minority groups who, over the years, can shift to a form of monolingualism (either in the majority language, the minority language, or in some other form of language).

A third difference, again due to hearing loss, is that certain language skills in the majority language may never be fully acquired by Deaf bilinguals. The skill that immediately comes to mind is speaking. Many Deaf people either do not speak very well (despite numerous hours spent practicing this skill) or refuse to use their voice because of the negative feedback they have received from hearing people. A fourth difference concerns language mode. Although movement takes place along the language mode continuum, Deaf bilinguals rarely find

themselves at the monolingual signing end. Thus, unless they are communicating with a monolingual member of the majority language (via the written modality, for example), they will most often be with other bilinguals and will thus be in a bilingual language mode. The final difference is that the patterns of language knowledge and use appear to be somewhat different, and probably more complex, than in spoken language bilingualism. When a sign language bilingual uses sign language with one interlocutor, a form of signed spoken language with another, a mixture of the two with a third, a form of simultaneous communication (sign and speech) with a fourth, etc., the diverse behaviors are the result of a number of complex factors:

1. The bilingual's actual knowledge of the sign language and of the majority language. This competence, in terms of linguistic rules and lexical knowledge, can often be characterized in terms of how prototypical it is.
2. The channels of production: manual (sign, finger spelling), oral (speech, mouthing with or without voice), written, etc. Some of these channels are more appropriate to one of the two languages (speech or writing for the majority language) but others, such as the sign modality, can be used, to some extent at least, for one or the other language. How these modalities are combined during the interaction is of particular interest.
3. The presence of the other language in a bilingual language mode. As we saw above, either one language is chosen as the base language and the other language is called in at various points in time or a third system emerges that combines the two languages (what Lucas and Valli, 1992 call contact signing). In both cases, the languages can interact in a sequential manner (as in code-switching) or in a simultaneous manner (signing and mouthing) and can involve various modalities. Recently, Emmorey *et al.* (2003) have shown that, when in a bilingual mode, bilingual speakers who are fluent in sign language and the oral language (in their case, ASL and English), rarely code-switch, that is stop talking and switch to signing. Instead, most code-blend, that is produce signs simultaneously with English words. For example, when uttering the word "jump", they also make the corresponding sign. Nouns and verbs are the most involved in blends and the vast majority are found to be semantically equivalent in the two languages (as in the above example).

13.2 The Deaf bicultural

We noted in Chapter 12 that biculturalism has been studied far less than bilingualism and this is true also in the domain of Deafness. Several works have dealt with Deaf culture (see Padden and Humphries 1988 for the United States; Ladd 2003 for England; Delaporte 2002 for France), but they have concentrated on what it means to be a member of a Deaf community and less on the Deaf who are also members of the hearing world. And yet, Deaf biculturals are numerous since they live in, and interact with, both worlds.

13.2.1 *The biculturalism of the Deaf*

In Chapter 12, we used three traits to characterize biculturals:

1. They take part, to varying degrees, in the life of two or more cultures.
2. They adapt, at least in part, their attitudes, behaviors, values, languages, etc., to these cultures.
3. They combine and blend aspects of the cultures involved. Certain characteristics (attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors, etc.) come from the one or the other culture whereas other characteristics are blends based on these cultures.

There is little doubt that many Deaf people meet these three criteria: they live in two or more cultures (their family, friends, colleagues, etc. are either members of the Deaf community or of the hearing world); they adapt, at least in part, to these cultures; and they blend aspects of these cultures. Of course, such factors as deafness in the family, age of onset of deafness, degree of hearing loss, type of education, etc., may lead some Deaf people to have fewer contacts with the hearing world while others have more (their bicultural dominance can thus differ), but it is nevertheless true that most Deaf people are not only bilingual but also bicultural.

As Ladd (2003: 225) writes, even if Deaf communities have developed *bona fide* cultures, their existence inside majority cultures, together with the large numbers of Deaf people being brought up within hearing families, has led to some degree of biculturalism. A small study by Salamin (2003) in the French speaking part of Switzerland confirms this. She interviewed sixteen Deaf people, all members of the Deaf community, and found that 75 percent of them have been in continuous contact with the hearing world since their childhood and that they share their

time between the two worlds: family, work, sport, and some friends belong to the hearing world whereas other friends, associations, and some family members belong to the Deaf world. Of course, most Deaf people are Deaf dominant biculturals in that they identify primarily with the Deaf community. In Salamin's study, for example, 50 percent of the respondents indicated that the Deaf world occupied most of their time, 25 percent indicated both worlds, and the rest indicated the hearing world.

The bicultural Deaf become very adept at adapting to the two worlds. Delaporte (2002) gives an interesting example taken from French Deaf culture (it is probably no different in other Deaf cultures). When meeting hearing people, the Deaf will adapt to hearing norms. They will shake their hand, instead of greeting them with a gesture; they will introduce themselves simply, and not refer to their life history (parents, schooling, etc.) as they would with other Deaf people; to attract their attention, they will not touch them as they would do with other Deaf; they will keep a greater physical distance between them than they would with other Deaf, and they will not fixate them for too long; and, when leaving, they will shorten the farewells. According to Salamin (2003), 75 percent of the Deaf she interviewed stated that they had no difficulties adapting behavior such as this to the group with which they are interacting.

We should point out two differences between the biculturalism of the Deaf and of the hearing. First, many Deaf still acculturate into the Deaf culture—what will often become their dominant culture—relatively late (in adolescence, even adulthood). Their first years are mainly spent in the hearing world (recall that 90 percent of the Deaf have hearing parents). This is different to what normally happens in the hearing world where acculturation takes place early into the bicultural's dominant culture and then into the second culture. A second difference relates to dominance. Most Deaf biculturals are usually dominant in one culture, the Deaf culture, whereas hearing biculturals vary as to their dominance (culture A, culture B, or a balance between the two cultures).

13.2.2 Identity and biculturalism in the Deaf

We saw in Chapter 12 that biculturals choose to identify and belong to one culture only (culture A or culture B), to neither culture, or to both cultures. We also saw that it is this latter possibility which is the optimal solution for them as it truly reflects their bicultural entity. This

choice between alternatives is also true of Deaf people. During the long, and sometimes arduous, process involved, Deaf people have to take into account a number of factors such as their type and degree of deafness, their ties with their family, their education, their network of friends, their competence in sign language and in the oral (majority) language, their acceptance or not by the two worlds, their own identity needs, etc. They finally arrive at a decision: to identify with just one of the two cultures, to identify with neither, or to identify with both. For example, Salamin (2003), in her study, found that a little more than half of those interviewed (56 percent) identified with both worlds whereas 38 percent identified with the Deaf world only; the rest felt they were “in-between”.

The decisional process involved in choosing a cultural identity is complex and, unfortunately, not everyone manages to finally identify with the two worlds. Here are a few examples. Hard-of-hearing people usually have ties with both worlds but often feel rejected by one of the two worlds—and sometimes by both. Some decide to identify solely with the Deaf world; they learn sign language and they cut off the ties they have with their hearing past. Others do not feel welcome in the Deaf world, despite the effort they make to learn sign language and to acculturate into this world; hence they finally choose to live in the hearing world only. Others feel estranged from both worlds and manage as best they can. Another example concerns the oral deaf who discover the Deaf world and sign language later on in life. They too become bicultural but it is often done by rejecting their hearing past and taking refuge in the Deaf world. How many have symbolically switched off their hearing aids or their implants in order to mark their new identity? And yet, given their past, they ought to be able to identify with both worlds, even if they now prefer the world of the Deaf. A third example concerns the late deaf who have to make a real effort to learn sign language and integrate themselves into the Deaf world. But they are too often categorized as oral deaf by other Deaf and hence marginalized. A last example concerns a number of hearing people involved with Deafness. Among these, we find the hearing children of Deaf parents, sign-speech interpreters, signing parents of Deaf children, signing friends of the Deaf, etc. Even though they are objectively members of both the hearing and of the Deaf world (see the three biculturalism criteria given above), many hesitate to identify themselves overtly with Deaf culture. And yet, they too should be able to claim their membership in both the hearing and the Deaf world.

This said, things are slowly changing. The final word is given to Emerton (1996), a Deaf sociologist, who writes that Deaf people are far more heterogeneous than they were before. He claims that no longer can one categorize people as hearing or deaf, oral or manual. He continues by stating (1996: 143, 144), “People who grew up in the ‘oral tradition’ now sign openly without embarrassment. Hard-of-hearing people no longer have to pretend that they are either hearing or deaf. . . . Many deaf people today are, as a result of their upbringing, a blend of two cultures and they choose to participate in both worlds. They are bicultural. The new social identity of Deaf people is now or will soon be a bicultural identity. . . . The bicultural deaf (or hearing) needs to be able to move back and forth between these groups with a minimum of interference and without the concomitant discomforts of marginality”.

13.3 The Deaf child¹

At the time of writing this book, few Deaf children in the world receive a bilingual upbringing from their earliest years on. Most are brought up “oral” although some few do come into contact with sign language in their youth or adolescence, usually by unofficial means (e.g. contact with other Deaf children). Many attain adulthood without having been given the chance of mastering both sign language and the majority language. In the following section, we will explain why it is so important for Deaf children to be able to grow up bilingual in sign language and the oral language.

13.3.1 *Why Deaf children need to be bilingual*

There is widespread agreement among parents, caretakers, language pathologists, and educators that language is central to Deaf children’s lives, and more precisely that:

- Deaf children should have complete access to language as early as possible. This said, not all agree unfortunately on how to give language to children: some advocate a strictly oral approach aided with hearing aids and implants whereas others defend a bilingual

¹ This section is based in part on the short paper I wrote, “The right of the deaf child to grow up bilingual” which appeared in four publications in English: *Deaf Worlds*, 1999, 15 (2): 29–31; *WFD NEWS*, 2000, 13 (1): 14–15; *The Endeavor*, 2000, 1: 28–31; *Sign Language Studies*, 2001, 1 (2): 110–14. It has also been translated into some thirty different languages and has been published in numerous countries around the world.

approach (sign and speech) in which sign language plays an important role in the early years of the Deaf child (see below).

- Deaf children should develop ties and communicate fully with their parents and family members as soon as possible. Language is central when establishing and solidifying social and personal ties between children and their parents. Deaf children must be able to communicate with them by means of a natural language as soon, and as fully, as possible. It is with language that much of the parent–child affective bonding takes place.
- Deaf children need to develop a number of cognitive abilities in infancy. Again language is central here. It is through language that children develop cognitive abilities that are critical to their personal development. Among these we find various types of reasoning, abstracting, memorizing, etc. The absence of language can have major negative consequences on children’s cognitive development.
- Deaf children must acquire world knowledge, and this is done in large part through language. As they communicate with parents, caretakers, and family members, information about the world will be processed and exchanged. It is this knowledge, in turn, which serves as a basis for the activities that take place in school. It is also world knowledge which facilitates language comprehension; there is no real language understanding without the support of this knowledge.
- Deaf children should be able to communicate fully with the surrounding world. Like hearing children, they must be able to communicate with those who are part of their lives (parents, brothers and sisters, peers, teachers, various adults, etc.). Communication must take place at an optimal rate of information in a language that is appropriate to the interlocutor and the situation.
- Finally, for some (including this author), Deaf children should be allowed to acculturate into two worlds, the world of the hearing and the world of the Deaf. Through language, they must progressively become members of both the hearing and of the Deaf world. They should be able to identify, at least in part, with the hearing world which is almost always the world of their parents and family members (90 percent of deaf children have hearing parents). But they should also come into contact as early as possible with the world of the Deaf, their other world. It is important that Deaf children feel comfortable in these two worlds and that they be able to identify with each as much as possible.

Despite these agreed upon goals (with the exception of the last one which some do not agree with), bilingualism and biculturalism have not usually been the route followed by those involved in nurturing and educating Deaf children. The reasons for this are of two kinds: misunderstandings concerning bilingualism and sign language, and the lack of acceptance of certain realities by many professionals working with the Deaf, most notably members of the medical world.

Misunderstandings concerning bilingualism are many. First, we still find the outdated view that bilingualism is the near-perfect mastery of two or more languages (see Chapter 2). And yet, we now know that bilingualism is simply the regular use of two or more languages and that fluency is rarely equivalent in the bilingual's languages. Second, it is still thought that bilingualism is a rare phenomenon even though we now know that half the world's population (or even more) is bilingual. Third, there is still the idea that bilingualism has negative consequences on the linguistic and cognitive development of children. And yet, there is very real evidence that the brain is made to be multilingual; instead of being a problem, bilingualism in children is a linguistic and social enrichment.

The misunderstandings concerning sign language are also numerous. For example, despite all the research done on the subject in the last forty years (in the United States, England, Scandinavia, etc.), some still think that sign language is not a real language. And yet, it has been shown, over and over again, that sign language has all the linguistic characteristics of a human language. Another myth is that sign language will hinder the development of the oral language in Deaf children. As we will see below, the reverse is true; it helps the acquisition of the oral language, directly and indirectly, in addition to being a natural means of communication for the Deaf child. Finally, it has been maintained by some that if one defends sign language, one must be opposed to the oral language. In fact, most of those who defend sign language want the Deaf child to also acquire an oral language to the highest level of fluency.

As concerns realities that are difficult to accept, three come to mind. The first is that most Deaf people belong to two worlds: the hearing world and the Deaf world. Deaf children are destined therefore to be bilingual and bicultural. The second is that a strictly oral education often fails to meet its aims: many Deaf children do not develop their oral language sufficiently for unhindered communication with the

outside world; they often drop behind in school and do not acquire the kind of knowledge they need in adult life. The third reality is that counting solely on technological progress and oral monolingualism is gambling on the development of the Deaf child, and it is ignoring the child's need to belong to the two worlds that are his or hers, to varying degrees at least.

We will argue below that a sign language–oral language bilingualism is the only way that Deaf children will meet their many needs, that is, communicate early on with their parents, develop their cognitive abilities, acquire knowledge of the world, communicate fully with the surrounding world, and acculturate into the world of the hearing and of the Deaf. This bilingualism involves the sign language used by the Deaf community and the oral language used by the hearing majority. The latter language will be acquired in its written, and if possible, in its spoken modality. Depending on the child, the two languages will play different roles: some children will be dominant in sign language, others will be dominant in the oral language, and some will be balanced in their two languages. In addition, various types of bilingualism are possible since there are several levels of deafness and the language contact situation is itself complex (four language modalities, two production and two perception systems, etc.). This said, most deaf children will become bilingual and bicultural to varying degrees. In this sense, they will be no different from about half the world's population that lives with two or more languages. Just like other bilingual children, they will use their languages in their everyday lives and they will belong, to varying degrees, to two worlds—in this case, the hearing world and the Deaf world.

13.3.2 The role of sign language

Sign language must be the first language (or one of the first two languages) acquired by children who have severe hearing loss. It is a natural, fully developed language that ensures complete and full communication. The role it can play is of several kinds:

- As can be seen in Figure 13.4, sign language triggers the Human language capacity which then influences oral language development. (The arrows that emanate from the sign language box are much thicker than the arrows that come from the oral language box, indicating a better flow in the former case.) A well triggered Human

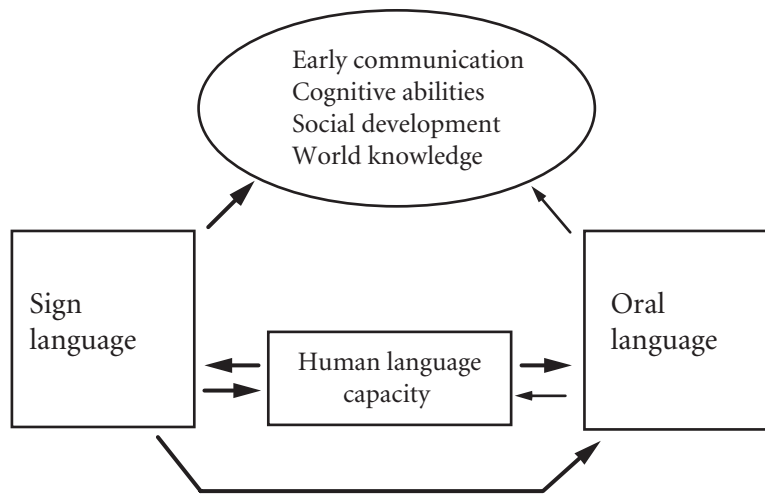


FIGURE 13.4 The strong role of sign language (shown by thicker arrows) in triggering the Deaf child's Human language capacity and hence in helping in the development of the oral language

language capacity (Chomsky's Language acquisition device or LAD) will prevent later language pathologies, if it takes place early enough. As Fischer (1998) writes, our capacity for language is innate but it must be triggered by exposure to actual language early enough. Children with severe delays in their first language acquisition (feral children, retarded children, etc.) have problems acquiring various aspects of language after the critical period, which Fischer defines as that age after which not everybody can learn particular aspects of a language, especially without explicit instruction. Since the notion of a critical period applies to any natural language, oral or sign, Fischer stresses that children or adults who acquire sign language late have more difficulties than those who acquire it early. We also know that children exposed to sign language from birth show better acquisition of the oral language: their Human language capacity has been triggered early enough and it can, in turn, help with the acquisition of the oral language.

- Sign language will allow early and full communication between Deaf children and their caretakers—and this at an optimal rate of communication. We know that, despite many years of spoken language therapy, the speech of Deaf children and adolescents is often labored, slow, and not fully intelligible. In addition, listening or lip reading is rarely optimal; it is very tiring and involves a lot

of guessing. Signing, on the other hand, allows communication to take place fully and at an optimal rate.

- Another benefit of sign language is the important role it plays in the deaf child's cognitive and social development as well as the acquisition of world (encyclopedic) knowledge. This is depicted in the top part of Figure 13.4 by a thicker arrow coming from the sign language box. Knowledge of the oral language is usually so poor that it cannot play the same role as sign language.
- Sign language will also facilitate the acquisition of the oral language, be it in its spoken or written modality. It is well known that a first language that has been acquired normally, be it oral or signed, will greatly enhance the acquisition and use of a second language. This is depicted by the arrow in the bottom part of Figure 13.4 linking sign language and the oral language directly. Sign language can be used overtly in class to clarify difficulties, explain exercises, summarize texts and stories, etc. It is also a means of communication to talk about language (metalanguage). With sign language, and through the use of "chaining" (sign–meaning–finger spelling–orthography), a link between a concept and the written language word can be made. In addition, various sign language characteristics and processes can be shown to have equivalents in the oral language (e.g. the notion of a lexical item, simple sentence structures, anaphora); discourse skills developed when signing (organizing a narrative or a story, participating in a debate, etc.) can be transferred to the written modality; and, finally, various forms of sign writing can be used to introduce children to the written representation of the oral language. We should note that Strong and Prinz (1997), among others, have found a significant positive correlation between ASL (American Sign Language) competency and English literacy levels, that is, as ASL skills increased, so did English literacy.
- A final contribution of sign language is that it allows Deaf children to acculturate into the Deaf world (one of the two worlds to which he/she belongs) as soon as contact is made with that world.

Knowing sign language is a guarantee that Deaf children will have mastered at least one language fully in their youth. As stated above, despite considerable effort on the part of Deaf children and of the professionals that surround them, and despite the use of various technological aids, it is a fact that many Deaf children have great difficulties producing

and perceiving an oral language in its spoken modality. Having to wait several years to reach a satisfactory level that might never be attained, and in the meantime denying the Deaf child access to a language that meets his/her immediate needs (sign language), is basically taking the risk that the child will fall behind in his/her development, be it linguistic, cognitive, social, or personal.

13.3.3 The role of the oral language

Being bilingual means knowing and using two or more languages. The deaf child's other language will be the oral language used by the hearing world to which he/she also belongs. This language, in its spoken and/or written modality, is the language of the child's parents, brothers and sisters, extended family, future friends, employers, etc. When those who interact with the child in everyday life do not know sign language, it is important that communication nevertheless takes place and this can only happen in the oral language. It is also this language, in its written modality mainly, that will be an important medium for the acquisition of knowledge. Much of what we learn is transmitted via writing, be it at home or more generally at school. In addition, the Deaf child's academic success and his/her future professional achievements will depend in large part on a good mastery of the oral language, in its written and, if possible, spoken modality.

In sum, it is crucial that those who take care of Deaf children (parents, educators, language pathologists, doctors) allow them to acquire two languages, the sign language of the Deaf community (as a first language when the hearing loss is severe) and the oral language of the hearing majority. It is equally important that Deaf children and adolescents be given every opportunity to learn about the cultures they belong to, that they be able to interact with these cultures, and that they be able to go through the process of choosing the culture, or preferably, the cultures, they wish to identify with. Searls and Johnston (1996), themselves Deaf and the parents of Deaf children, are of the same opinion when they write: "today we as parents want our children to experience and take advantage of both Deaf and hearing worlds" (1996: 222). To achieve this, the child must be in contact with the two communities (hearing and Deaf) and must feel the need to learn and use both languages and discover both cultures. Counting solely on the hearing culture and on an oral approach to language, because of recent technological advances, is betting on the Deaf children's future. It is

putting at risk their cognitive, linguistic, and personal development and it is negating their need to acculturate into the two worlds to which they belong. Early contact with the two languages and cultures will give them more guarantees than contact with just one language and one culture, whatever their future will be, and whichever world they choose to live in (in case it is only one of them).

