



## **Signs2Go: a project for deaf signers, by deaf signers**

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### **Abstract**

*Signs2Go is a KA2 Languages project (2009-2010). Our target group: deaf people who use a sign language as their first language. Our objective: to develop a website where deaf signers can learn British Sign Language as a second sign language.*

*In Europe, the sign languages of deaf people are recognized as equal languages in the community. Sign languages are an important part of Europe's multilingual diversity. Based on manual-gestural codes rather than sound, they are as rich as spoken languages in grammatical structures, syntaxes and lexicons. Broadly speaking, each spoken language has a counterpart sign language. It is estimated that there are over 800.000 sign language users in the EU [1].*

*Little is known about the first sign language acquisition of deaf people in Europe; even less is known about their acquisition of a second sign language. Yet deaf people travel and study abroad, and participate in international conferences and meetings. The UK probably has the largest number of foreign deaf students in the EU. We know that deaf people from across the EU learn British Sign Language (BSL). We just don't know how. There are courses and websites to teach BSL to hearing people. None of these however were developed for, or are accessible to deaf people from other countries.*

*In the Signs2Go project we will actively explore the full potential of ICT to enable deaf sign language users to participate in international projects and to learn a foreign sign language.*

### **1. The Signs2Go consortium**

Partners in the Signs2Go consortium are the University of Central Lancashire (Preston, UK), Pragma (Hoensbroek, NL) in cooperation with 1-2-Communicate (Arnhem, NL), Hochschule MD-SDL-Stendal (Magdeburg, DE), Siena School for Liberal Arts (Siena, IT), and the Møller Kompetansesenter (Trondheim, NO).

Our target group are deaf sign language users. We want to develop a foreign language course that is attractive and effective for this target group. To do this, we must involve deaf signers from the very start of the project. Each organisation in the consortium is therefore represented by a hearing and a deaf person. In the consortium, deaf and hearing colleagues have equal rights, equal responsibilities.

It is quite easy to write and say this. In practice, we find that working together in an international team of hearing and deaf professionals is a major challenge. In the consortium, we have 5 spoken languages, 5 sign languages. Several of the deaf colleagues cannot read or write English. As a consortium, we do not have a shared language: signed, spoken or written. We would like to use interpreters and translators for all our activities, but we don't have the funds to do this. As it is, our consortium is a living and struggling example of the need for all partners to be able to use a shared language.

During international meetings, we have International Sign Interpreters who interpret from spoken English to International Sign, and vice versa. We organize our meetings in a workshop format. One day for discussions, two days for hands-on activities such as filming.



Fig.1. Signer in the studio in Trondheim

In between meetings, the 'readers' in the consortium use written English and email; the 'signers' use International Sign and videoconferencing systems (ooVoo and Breeze). We have an ooVoo account that allows for 6 signers to be on-line, together. It is not perfect, but the video-conferencing tools and the International Sign interpreters during international meetings make it possible for the deaf signers to participate in all consortium discussions.

Ask any deaf or hard of hearing person: the worst thing is a hearing person who tell you that what was just said was not important, that the joke everyone is laughing about, really wasn't that funny and doesn't need to be repeated, or that whatever people were upset about, has already been resolved. Maybe it was not important, maybe it wasn't really funny, but the deaf or hard of hearing colleagues would like to decide this, for themselves. No matter how trivial the discussion, they do not want to be left out. Thanks to International Sign interpreters and the video conferencing tools, the deaf colleagues now can be kept up to date, can be involved in the decisions, can fully participate in project, and can even take the lead. Now, it's the 'readers' who sometimes feel left out, because we don't get all the information from the video-meetings. If our project is successful, this will be a temporary problem. By the end of the project, we will all be able to use BSL as our 'lingua franca'. And maybe by that time, ooVoo and Breeze will have developed into the next generation, as well. The current video-conferencing systems were developed for 'talking heads', not for signers. Sign language users need more space on screen: from the top of the head to the waist. Especially with 6 signers on-line, the video-windows of the signers are too small.. They need high resolution and fast transmission. When we want to discuss a video or a design, we want to be able to use two monitors: one for the signers, one for the shared screen.

## 2. The objectives of the project

Our objective is to develop a methodology and a website to teach foreign sign languages to sign language users. We want to do this in a way that takes the specific needs, strengths and preferences of deaf sign language users into account.

Learning a foreign language by e-learning is difficult. Even more difficult for our target group, because they have little or no experience with e-learning. Many cannot read or write, not even the national language. Many have bad memories of learning foreign languages in school, and are 'reluctant' learners, at best. Many have learned their first sign language informally from peers, without any formal instruction. They are competent sign language users, but have no knowledge – or awareness- of the linguistic, pragmatic and cultural aspects of their first and often only language.

Our first requirement therefore is to make a website that is attractive to the target group. From the very start, they must know that this website is different. This website was made for and by deaf people. All information is in sign language. All navigation is visual. There is no written text.

During the first consortium meeting, we looked at sign language websites, CDs and DVDs. The deaf colleagues had very strong feelings about what they do or don't like, what they consider 'deaf friendly' or not. We translated these feelings into concrete requirements for the Signs2Go website.

Our second requirement is to get the students actively engaged in the website, from the start. They must want to come back to the website to explore and use what is there, to study BSL. We decided against formal teaching of vocabulary and grammar. Instead, we chose for immersion: we want to show the visitors 'real BSL', used by real signers, about real topics that are interesting to the target group. The message: "If you want to understand what these people are signing, then you'll have to learn BSL. This website will help you." We brainstormed about scripts: to follow some foreign deaf people on their first visit to the UK and to film their interactions with British deaf people in the pub, in the deaf club, in a restaurant. Or: to film a soap in easy BSL. Unfortunately, we didn't have the budget for any of this. Fortunately, we were very lucky to get permission to use materials from the Wicked tv-series, for our BSL course. Wicked is a documentary programme for deaf young people in the UK: two deaf interviewers travel across the UK to interview interesting deaf people 'on location'. Real BSL, with attractive content, recorded professionally. To engage the students, we will show them Wicked. Our promise: use our website, and you will learn BSL to communicate with interesting people like the ones that you see in these videos.

Our third requirement: an effective methodology for teaching BSL as a foreign language. We asked the foreign deaf colleagues and foreign deaf students in Preston, what the differences are between their national sign languages and BSL. They all mentioned the two-handed fingerspelling – most other countries use one-handed fingerspelling. They also mentioned vocabulary: BSL signs are different. We asked deaf foreign signers how they had learned BSL: most had learned by doing, by trial and error, by communicating with BSL users. We looked for comparative research, to find the differences and commonalities between sign languages. We couldn't find any. We looked at BSL courses for hearing people, but what is most difficult for hearing people to learn, comes naturally to deaf signers: the use of a visual-gestural code and space instead of sound and time. We then started to make a list of BSL grammar and vocabulary that we would have to teach – and quickly lost the interest of the deaf colleagues. This was too much a 'hearing' approach: to make lists, to teach grammar, to try and pin down a living, feeling language.

So we asked the deaf colleagues, how much they could understand of BSL. They told us: 0%. We recorded several clips of a BSL signer and asked the deaf colleagues how much they understood: 70 – 80%. Partly this is because the BSL signer that we filmed for these videos, is a very good signer. Partly this is because deaf sign language users are masters at communication. They often have to, and can communicate under the most unfavourable circumstances: by lipreading, in sign language with people who are not good signers, or with people who use a foreign sign language. Most sign language users can and will guess the gist of a message, even if they understand only a very small percentage of the signs or the words. We decided to use this strength of our target group as our main approach: we will challenge the deaf students to guess the meaning of BSL, then help them become aware of the differences between BSL and their national sign language.

### **3. The Signs2Go website**

At the moment, we have a website with general information about the project: [www.signs2go.eu](http://www.signs2go.eu).

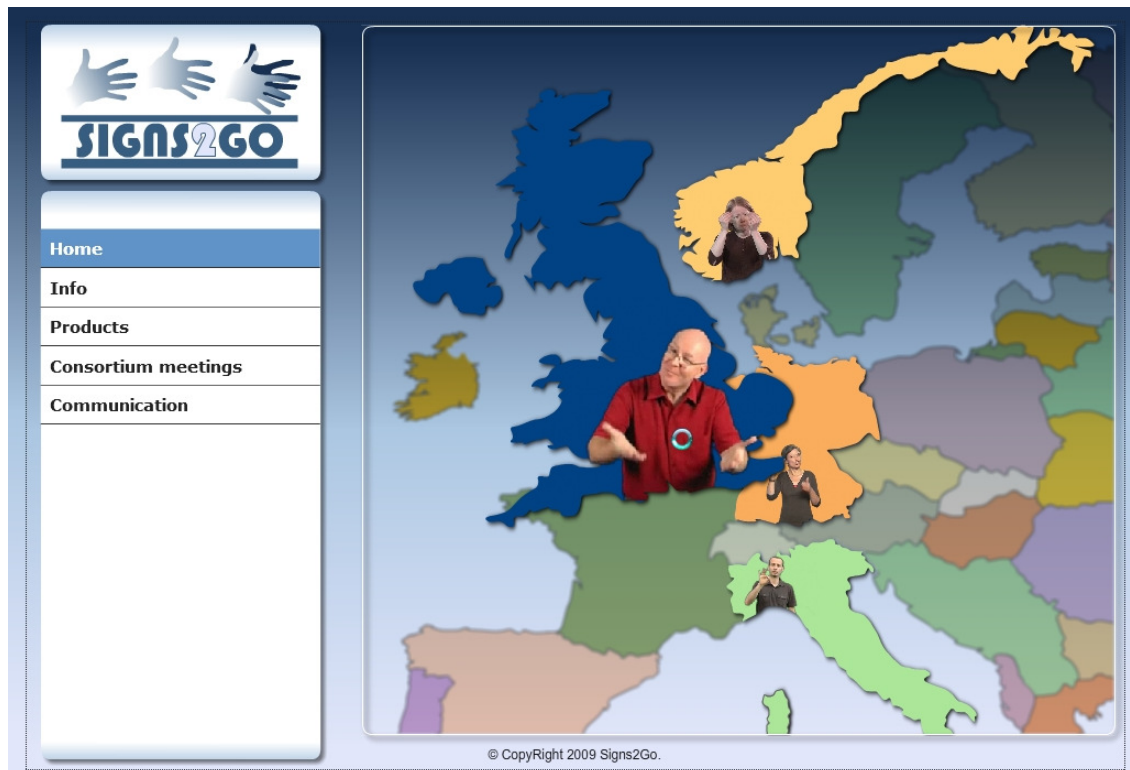


Fig.2. The Signs2Go temporary website

The main message is in the sign languages of the partners. Click on a signer / country, and this signer will come forward signing some general information about the project. Some of the other information on the website is in text only, because we don't have the resources for sign language translations.

We will soon replace this temporary website with the e-learning website. The e-learning website will not use an e-learning platform. We decided against the development of an open system or platform that can be used for many sign languages. A multi-user, multi-language platform will ask for compromises that we were not willing to make. Instead, we decided to develop the best possible website, as a demonstration and showcase of what is possible. Later, we can take the most effective and most attractive features of this website and try to incorporate them in a more open system.

The e-learning website will be a stand-alone website. Students can use the website when and where they want. On this website, students will not be able to interact with 'live' BSL teachers or BSL users. The partners simply don't have the budget for this. Instead, we will add links to existing BSL websites and videoblogs of BSL users.

The project started in January 2009. At this point, we have done our research and we have developed a blueprint for a pilot unit. We have recently filmed the explanations for this pilot unit, and are in the process of editing and coding the films. In November and December, we plan to evaluate the pilot unit with the target group, in our countries.



Fig.3. The interface for the pilot unit

In figure 3, a screen print of the pilot unit. In the middle of the screen, the student will see the “Wicked” clips that were made by BSLB ([www.bslbt.co.uk/wicked](http://www.bslbt.co.uk/wicked)). These were not filmed by us, but we received permission to use these materials on our website.

As you can see in figure 3, the Wicked clips have subtitles; in the final version, there will be no subtitles. In the Wicked clip, the students will see the two British deaf interviewers interviewing deaf people in the UK, using BSL.

Each clip will be about 5/10 minutes long. We will divide each Wicked clip into 20-30 sections of one ‘sentence’ or one ‘turn’ in the conversation. We will add two explanations to each section of the clip: 1. an explanation by the BSL signer (Clark Denmark in the red shirt, on the left), and 2. an explanation by a national sign language teacher. In this example: Sabine Fries from Germany. Click on a signer, and he or she will ‘grow’ to cover approximately ½ of the screen, to sign an explanation in sign language. Click on a flag and Sabine will be replaced by a teacher signing in the sign language of that country.

Clark will sign in easy BSL – he will give cultural and linguistic pointers and background information. For instance: “Did you just see how she signed ‘100 miles’? This is the London dialect. In other areas, people will use the signs ‘100’ or ‘100’.” The national teacher will explain what is signed in that section of the video, will compare the BSL that is used to what is common in the national sign language, and will teach vocabulary. For instance: “in German Sign Language, we sign ‘100’, in BSL you sign ‘100’ or ‘100’.

Because we divide the clips into very short sections of one sentence or one turn in the conversation, these explanations can be short. The user can watch a section, then watch Clark Denmark to get background information, then play the Wicked section again and again. Or the student can watch the national teacher, then watch the section of the Wicked clip.

Our approach is innovative; as far as we know no-one has done anything like this before, not even for spoken languages. After sometimes heated discussions, we have made a number of assumptions or hypotheses that we will test with the pilot unit:

- Should the national teacher *translate* the language used by the BSL signers, or *explain* the language that is used? Originally, we decided for translations: we wanted a direct link between each BSL sentence and the translation of that sentence in German Sign Language, Norwegian Sign Language, etc. This would require the student to actively compare the two



- sign languages, to find – and remember – the differences. We feared that most students would not do this; their main interest would be the content of the interviews. Once they'd seen the translation, they would no longer be interested in watching the BSL signers: it's boring to see the same information, twice. So for the pilot unit, we've decided to add *explanations* instead of *translations*: the teachers help the students see the relevant BSL features, they demonstrate these and they explain the differences between BSL and the national sign languages. But they do not 'give away' the content of the interview.
- Should we have a BSL teacher AND a national teacher? Or only one teacher – and if one: which one? For the pilot unit, we decided to have both. The national teacher explains the BSL in the national sign language. The BSL teacher, Clark Denmark, adds information in BSL from the perspective of a native BSL user. Clark signs an 'easy' BSL, that is slower and easier to understand than the language that is used in the Wicked video-clips. Students who might become discouraged because they understand 0% of the BSL in the Wicked clips, will hopefully be able to understand Clark's BSL. And can use him as a 'stepping stone' to the more advanced BSL in the Wicked clip. True beginners can start with the national teacher, then try to understand Clark's 'easy' BSL, then try to understand the Wicked clips. More advanced students can watch the Wicked clips and maybe only use Clark, and/or the national teacher as back-up systems.
  - Students will be in full control of what they see and do. There is no fixed order of presentations. Students can first watch all the Wicked clip, then watch the BSL teacher, then the national teacher. Or they can watch one Wicked section, watch the national teacher, then the BSL teacher, before they go on to the next section. We have chosen to give the student full control because that is how you learn best. But we know there is a risk that (some) students will just browse, or skip over anything they don't like or understand.

Ultimately, the website will have 10 units consisting of one Wicked clip, with 20-30 short explanations by the BSL teacher and the national teacher. In addition, we will have interactive exercises. Here, students can do multiple choice activities to learn BSL fingerspelling and to test how well they understand BSL signs and sentences. We will also include webcam-activities, where students can record themselves, and compare their own BSL signing with a BSL model.

Will it work? Will we be successful? Watch this space: [www.signs2go.eu](http://www.signs2go.eu) !

## References

- [1] Krausneker, Verena, 2008  
The protection and promotion of sign languages and the rights of their users in council of Europe member states: needs analysis. Council of Europe, [www.coe.int/dg3/disability](http://www.coe.int/dg3/disability)