

# Deaf students and South African Sign Language in teacher training: Avoiding a Procrustean “BEd”<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

South African Sign Language (SASL) is the main language of learning and teaching (LoLT) of the Deaf<sup>2</sup> in South Africa. To provide education of a high standard to the Deaf, suitably qualified teachers who are proficient in SASL are needed. However, teachers at schools for the Deaf are not required to be fluent in SASL or have any specialised training or qualification in Deaf education. This problematic situation is exacerbated by misconceptions about SASL, a deficit view of its capabilities in academic contexts and generic curricula that rely on English as the LoLT in teacher training. Appropriate pedagogies must be used with Deaf students to help them develop academic literacy in SASL and English. This case study

of Deaf pre-service teacher training at the University of the Free State (UFS) uses document analysis as a research tool. The appraisal of institutional policies, plans and academic programmes aims to determine the alignment of policy and practice with the language and literacy needs of Deaf pre-service teachers.

The study identifies several principles that can enhance the inclusivity and quality of Deaf pre-service teachers’ training. At the same time, the case is argued for the further development of SASL as an academic language.

**Keywords:** deaf education, South African Sign Language, teacher training, language and education, inclusive bilingual education

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<sup>1</sup> Procrustes was a Greek mythological figure who provided a magical bed to sojourners that all could fit on. However, this meant physically shortening or lengthening the human beings through devious means (Moore, 2013, p. 98).

<sup>2</sup> The capitalisation of “Deaf” is used to refer to persons who “in addition to not perceiving auditory sounds naturally via their auditory mechanisms, function by choice as members of the community of a minority group that follow their cultural norms, values, and tradition” (Oppong et al., 2018, p. 67).

## 1. Introduction

South African Sign Language (SASL) is the main language of learning and teaching (LoLT) of the Deaf in South Africa (South African Schools Act 84 of 1996). As Ndlovu and Makwavarara (2023, p. 11) argue, “Sign Language is not only their primary means of communication, but is also the most appropriate language of education”. To ensure the right to quality education in SASL, enough qualified teachers must be trained and suitable modes of teaching should be employed, a matter that requires careful enrolment planning, resource allocation and alignment of language and educational policy with pedagogical imperatives. This case study of one institution in South Africa that provides teacher training to Deaf students is aimed at ensuring closer alignment of policy and practice with the educational needs of students. It employs a descriptive approach and uses document analysis as a research tool. By analysing and triangulating information from different sets of documents that regulate language in education, problematic areas are identified and principles suggested that would support more focused and inclusive Deaf teacher training. Before reporting the findings of the document appraisal, some contextual information about SASL as official language and school subject is necessary.

## 2. Access to education for the Deaf

SASL became an official school subject for Grades R to 3 and Grade 9 in 2015, necessitating the implementation of a full school curriculum from the following year (Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training [Umalusi], 2018, p. 9). The first group of Grade 12 learners completed their school-leaving examination in 2018. Although the number of graduating students remains extremely small, in the interests of the attainment of sustainable development goal 4 of the United Nations Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015) – to which South Africa is a signatory – providing inclusive and quality education for the Deaf is a priority. However, considerable financial resources are needed to fund schools for the Deaf and to accommodate Deaf students in university programmes (Millett, 2009). To ensure expertise and adequate resources to train teachers, access to reliable information for planning purposes is important. According to Storbeck (2023), 43 schools provided education to Deaf and hard-of-hearing (HH) learners in 2023, of which 38 used SASL as the LoLT. This differs from the information provided by the Minister of Basic Education two years earlier in response to a question from parliament on 18 May 2020. According to the Minister, only six single-medium schools were using SASL.<sup>3</sup> To complicate matters, a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/13419/>

response to a similar question on 7 December 2022 omitted SASL completely from the list of single-medium schools,<sup>4</sup> an oversight on the part of the education authorities. This confusion may be attributed to ambiguities in the national database on Special Needs Education Centres. The database of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) provides for different disabilities and special needs categories, as evident in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Example entries of schools for the Deaf extracted from the 2023 DBE Special Needs Education Centres database<sup>5</sup>

OFFICIAL INSTITUTION NAME	SPECIALISATION	LEARNERS	EDUCATORS
ST THOMAS SPECIAL SCHOOL	TECHNICAL OCCUPATIONAL	176	32
CAREL DU TOIT SPECIAL SCHOOL	SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION	70	8
FULTON SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF 500145632	HEARING IMPAIRMENT	115	25
VULEKA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF	HEARING IMPAIRMENT	289	39
KUTLWANONG SCHOOL FOR DEAF	SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION	222	36
NORTH WEST SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF	SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION	114	19
MCK SPECIAL SCHOOL	DEAF	451	47
ST VINCENT SCHOOL	DEAF	356	59
DOMINICAN SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF	DEAF	263	44

What is understood by the area of specialisation should be stated clearly and consistently per school entry. The school enrolment data provided in the database is helpful and indicates low learner-to-educator ratios of between 5:1 and 10:1, confirming the intensity of educational assistance needed for the Deaf and the high labour costs involved. With the education budget already severely constrained in South Africa, concerted efforts must be made to ensure accurate enrolment data and planning. Some other helpful statistics that can guide enrolment planning for Deaf teacher training are those in the annual DBE National Senior Certificate (NSC) Examination Reports. According to the 2021 and 2022 reports, the number of SASL examinees has quadrupled in five years, increasing from 52 in 2018 to 210 in 2022 (DBE, 2021, 2022). As a result, more SASL students qualify for university education than in previous years,

<sup>4</sup> <https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/20941/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.education.gov.za/Programmes/EMIS/EMISDownloads.aspx>

which is laudable, but this has implications for enrolment planning and the allocation of resources.

It is crucial that more Deaf students be trained as teachers since the standard of teaching provided at special needs schools is not equitable (Ngobeni, 2017). As Storbeck (2023) points out, teachers at schools for the Deaf “are not required to have any form of specialised training or qualification in Deaf education or in SASL before they are appointed” (Storbeck, 2023, p. 2). This means that there is no formal evaluation of teachers’ signing skills, which is a serious concern and indicative of inadequate educational policy and quality control measures at national and institutional levels. Furthermore, several South African schools have appointed teachers without the necessary qualifications (Hofmeyer & Draper, 2015; Nseibo et al., 2022) and the lack of training has a negative effect on learners’ educational outcomes (Ngobeni, Maimane & Rankhumise, 2020). Umalusi, the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, statutorily mandated to oversee the National Senior Certificate qualification, acknowledges that teachers lack expertise in SASL and that “some schools have teachers that are qualified in special needs education or inclusive education but with no specialisation in Deaf education or in SASL” (Umalusi, 2018, p. 13). Proper documentation of data pertaining to the number of schools teaching Deaf learners can support enrolment planning for teaching training.

Storbeck comments that the promulgation of SASL in 2023 as the 12<sup>th</sup> official language of South Africa (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2023) “can empower the national department of education to make it mandatory for teachers at schools for the Deaf to have specialist qualifications” (Storbeck, 2023, p. 2). Irrespective of whether officialisation will have the desired effect, the recent change in the status of SASL prompted the current case study on teacher training provided to Deaf students at the University of the Free State (UFS).

The next sections investigate the extent to which language and education policy and practice at the institution are synchronised to provide meaningful and differentiated teacher training. Moores (2013) cautions against a blanket approach in which a standardised curriculum is imposed that does not provide for modifications to meet the needs of students. This kind of education system can become a torturous “Procrustean Bed” in which Deaf students unfairly have to fit the full length of the system (Moores, 2013, p. 98).

### 3. Policy and planning for optimal pedagogical outcomes

Institutional language policies and plans play a pivotal role in shaping higher education and reflecting South Africa's diverse linguistic heritage. At the UFS, the institutional language and education policies and plans are aimed at increasing inclusivity and multilingualism while facilitating pedagogical access to knowledge, in accordance with Section 29(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) and Section 3(1) of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (DHET, 2020). The Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions, implemented by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), provides guidelines to develop and strengthen the use of indigenous languages as languages of learning, teaching and scholarship (DHET, 2020, p. 5). The implementation of policies and language plans can bridge linguistic gaps in educational access, ensuring more equitable opportunities for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds or cultural minority groups such as the Deaf community. This is essential to guarantee the linguistic human rights of the Deaf (Ndlovu & Makwavarara, 2023).

Language policies and plans should help students to acculturate to academe by making provision for language and literacy support where needed and should acknowledge the value of students' indigenous languages and cultural identities (Reagan et al., 2021). To this end, the UFS language policy has undergone numerous revisions to create a sense of belonging for students in response to changing sociopolitical and educational landscapes. The latest policy version (UFS, 2023) accords far more prominence to SASL. Whereas the 2016 policy mentioned only the recognition and promotion of SASL, the 2023 version advocates the preservation, advancement and promotion of SASL as an official university language (together with Sesotho, Afrikaans, IsiZulu and English), cultivating its use in all domains, including teaching and learning, as well as the development of SASL as an academic language (UFS, 2023). These are welcome but ambitious goals that require adequate resources and expertise to achieve.

Notwithstanding its commitment to multilingualism, the language policy lacks clarity. It is unclear how languages such as SASL can be intellectualised if they are not used as languages of teaching and learning at university. Another problematic aspect is the notion of how multilingualism will be "enhanced through translanguaging in the tutorial system" in the first year of study (UFS, 2023: Section 5.4), which is one way of recognising the value of students' indigenous languages and cultural identities. Nonetheless, any initiative that does not continue beyond the first year will not promote multilingualism or the academic development of languages. Moreover, the association of translanguaging with multilingualism is problematic. Both are scantily defined concepts in the policy and may even oppose one another. The policy defines

multilingualism as “a linguistic capacity that extends across more than two languages” and the “use of certain languages in a specific context and/or the combination of languages”; translanguaging is defined as a “pedagogical strategy or practice of using available linguistic repertoires to engage, collaborate, learn and understand difficult concepts using different languages” (UFS, 2023: Section 6). Scholars differ about the effectiveness of translanguaging to attain fluency and accuracy in a language, despite its trendiness in educational discourse (Ayob, 2020; Charamba, 2023; Flores, 2019; Mbirimi-Hungwe, 2023; Moodley, 2001; Ngcobo et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2014). In any case, it would not be helpful for Deaf students as they do not alternate between SASL and spoken languages when communicating. The revised language policy does not take into account the distinct features of SASL and how Deaf students’ needs and identities differ from those of hearing students.

With the increased access to higher education, student populations have diversified considerably and dealing with language in education has become more complex. As mentioned, the number of Deaf matriculants has been increasing steadily and appropriate measures must be taken to accommodate Deaf and hard of hearing (HH) university students who rely on SASL to learn. Table 2 shows how many Education students with different degrees of hearing loss have undergone teacher training at the UFS since 2007.

**Table 2:** Education students with hearing loss at the UFS 2007-2023<sup>6</sup>

		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
PhD	02 Hearing and glasses															1	1	1	3
MA	02 Have problem hearing sometimes																	1	1
	02 Hearing and glasses					1	1												2
Hons	02												1	1	1				3
	02 Hard of hearing									1	1								2
	02 Have problem hearing sometimes																1		1
	02 Hearing and glasses			1															1

<sup>6</sup> Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning.

[https://www.ufs.ac.za/supportservices/departments/directorate-for-institutional-research-and-academic-planning-\(dirap\)-home](https://www.ufs.ac.za/supportservices/departments/directorate-for-institutional-research-and-academic-planning-(dirap)-home)

Postgrad.	02 Both ears hearing aids					1	1											2		
	02 Deaf								1	1								2		
	02 Hearing and glasses				1													1		
Undergraduate	02					1	2	4	4	4	6	2	2	3		2	2	2	34	
	02 Bilateral moderate to severe												1	1				2		
	02 Deaf						1	1	1	1	1	2	3	3	4	3	3	3	26	
	02 Deaf - has a cochlear implant								1									1		
	02 Hard of hearing		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	1	22		
	02 Have problem hearing sometimes											1	1	1	1	1		5		
	02 Pfeiffer syndrome										1	1	1	1				4		
	02 Right side											1	1	1	1			4		
	02 Sign Language									1	1	1	1	1	1			1	7	
	02 Wear 2 hearing aids																1	1	2	
	09 Turner syndrome										1	1	1						3	
	Occ <sup>7</sup> .	02	1																	1
		02 Deaf											1							1
		1	1	2	2	4	6	6	8	9	12	11	14	14	11	9	10	10	130	

As evident in Table 2, there are difficulties distinguishing between categories of students with hearing loss. For proper enrolment planning, students need to be registered on the basis of the kind of support they require as this has implications for resource allocation and the provision of specialised services. Similarly to the national database for special needs education referred to earlier, we see a lack of attention to technical precision and consistency when capturing data. It is important to know how many Deaf and HH students depend on SASL to participate in classes and complete their coursework.

To give effect to the revised language policy, the UFS has developed a Language Policy Implementation Plan, scheduled to come into effect in 2024 (UFS, 2023). The current version is little more than a broad outline of matters mentioned in the revised language policy and the responsible divisions. It lacks detail and contains some anomalies. For example, only Sesotho and Isizulu are listed under action plans to be developed as academic languages although the policy also mentions SASL. Furthermore, reference is made to using the five official university languages in all areas of learning and teaching, but the actual plans have not been developed yet. How effective the revised

<sup>7</sup> Occasional studies

policy and implementation plan will be in terms of supporting Deaf students – and developing SASL further as an academic language – remains to be seen.

Apart from the institutional language policy and implementation plan, the university has a comprehensive policy that covers different kinds of support for Deaf students, namely the Policy on Universal Access and Disability Support for Students with Disabilities (UFS, 2021). Section 4.1 makes provision for the following:

- a) Individual tutor assistance;
- b) Communication access, i.e. Sign Language interpretation for tutor sessions, group discussions or meetings with lecturers;
- c) Accessible study material, i.e. Braille, E-text, or audio;
- d) Accessible transport for academic purposes; and
- e) Alternative assessment arrangements, i.e. accessible venue, amanuensis (scribe and/or reader), extra time, concessions during test and examinations, specialised equipment and computer hardware and software. (UFS, 2021, Section 4.1)

Provision is made in Section 6.10 of the policy to “make teaching methodologies and processes accessible” and to train academic staff to engage with students (UFS, 2021, Section 6.10). Specific deviations from curriculum content and alternative assessment concessions are granted through a Reasonable Accommodation Panel (RAP). This policy thus has the potential to ensure inclusive quality education for the Deaf. However, owing to inadequate awareness of the distinct nature of SASL, enough deviations and accommodations are not being applied, as the rest of the article will show.

The following section discusses policies and plans that regulate teaching and learning and examines how the language policy is being applied in the case of Deaf students undergoing teacher training.

## **4. Aligning academic and literacy support with the needs of Deaf students**

Deaf students transitioning from school to university need considerable support to navigate the complex subject content of their degree courses (Matende et al., 2021; Reagan et al., 2021). The South African school curriculum does not assist Deaf students to attain the requisite academic language and literacy for a university education in English, which is why all Deaf students are registered for the UFS academic literacy support programme. The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the university is tasked with implementing the institutional language policy and plan in tutorial and academic literacy classes. The *UFS learning and teaching strategy 2019-2024* (CTL,



2023) describes the core philosophical beliefs as “*learning-centeredness, caring, inclusiveness, flexibility and quality*” (CTL, 2023, p. 3). Academic support is founded on the notion of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework originally developed for students with disabilities. The idea is to create a “sense of belonging” by embracing diversity (CTL, 2023, p. 5) and employing hybrid forms of learning to provide for varying student needs. Quality, which was originally conceptualised by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as “fitness for purpose, value for money” (CTL, 2023, p. 6), is now associated with evidence of enhancing the “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)” (CTL, 2023, p. 7), as seen, *inter alia*, in graduate attributes, knowledge production, and curriculum responsiveness to societal needs. However, as Ndlovu and Makwavarara (2023, p. 10) point out in their study on Sign Language at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), “covert language policies do not guarantee deaf and hearing impaired students’ access to education in Sign Language or other forms of communication suitable for them.”

The UDL principles and refined understanding of the notion of quality stated above align with a differentiated approach to teaching and learning. However, personal discussions with Deaf students during individual tutorial classes revealed that lecturers do not differentiate between hearing and Deaf students in their curricula. More research is needed to determine the reasons for this as the institutional policies provide for curriculum deviations. What is missing in the language and education policies is the recognition of Deaf epistemology. Because the structure of SASL differs from that of spoken language lexically and morphosyntactically, this may affect how Deaf students organise their “thoughts and perceptions” and how these are influenced (Reagan et al., 2021, p. 44). As Reagan et al. (2021, p. 39) explain, “the nature of the deaf epistemological framework is grounded *both* in the dominance of visual over auditory input *and* in the resistance of audism and audist perspectives on deafness”, the latter reflecting a deficit view that deafness is a physical disability and that the Deaf are “inferior” physiologically to hearing people (Reagon et al., 2021, p. 40). Deaf students are allowed more time to complete assessments, as in the instance of students with physical disabilities, but this does not address the epistemological problems related to having to navigate coursework through academic English.

An alternative perspective in academic literacy education views language learning and literacy development to be “socially and culturally embedded” and foregrounds using sign language and social practices of the Deaf to support academic performance (Thompson, 2004, pp.13-14). Enabling Deaf students to use sign language for academic purposes is a linguistic human right covered by international charters and conventions to which South Africa is a signatory (Ndlovu & Makwavarara, 2023), for example the

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990) and Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). In this way, a conceptual framework is established for acculturation into academe and additive multilingualism that facilitates the learning of another language. This is supported by scholars such as Reagan et al. (2021, p. 50) who advocate for an “ethnoepistemology” that rests on the “fundamental assertion that knowledge is both individually and socially constructed, and that different groups—and especially marginalized groups—construct knowledge in ways that are significantly distinctive”. Adopting “bilingual-bicultural education programs” offer better prospects than inclusive education that immerses Deaf students in spoken rather than signed language (Reagan et al., 2021, p. 50).

Adopting a bilingual and bicultural approach has implications for Deaf education in university teacher training programmes. Curriculum developers and education planners who advocate learning-centred and inclusive approaches must ensure their practical application in specific classroom settings. Not recognising SASL as a fully-fledged language and continuing the hegemonic insistence on English for teaching and assessment purposes reflects an assimilationist stance in which the Deaf are expected to transition from SASL to English. Signed language is a visual and spatial language without written equivalents in other languages: “A linear spoken language such as English cannot merely be conveyed in a manual modality. A full translation must take place into a visual, spatial Sign Language for equivalence of meaning” (Thompson, 2004, p. 25). Without substantial content and course delivery differentiation, Deaf students have little chance of receiving helpful pedagogies. As Thompson (2004, p. 15) explains: “English literacy can only be learnt visually by deliberate exposure, suggesting that traditional methods based on modified hearing strategies may fall far short of the mark”. Deaf students cannot benefit from hearing English and miss out on reinforcement of language input (Matende et al., 2021). Learning English and other subject content requires more effort and time. Deaf students do not have equitable exposure to English and cannot be expected to do assessment tasks in the same way as hearing students (Mapepa & Magano, 2018).

At the School of Languages at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), English literacy programmes employ bilingual pedagogies in which English is taught through New Zealand Sign Language (Thompson, 2004, p. 17) rather than through interpreted English. Sign language is thus used for teaching and discussion purposes, while written English is the target language. The approach at the UFS differs: academic subjects are taught through English with simultaneous interpreting into SASL. The effectiveness hereof has not been determined, despite the ULD principle of evidence-based teaching

and learning. Deaf students may not be able to follow the lecturers, interpreters and slide presentations simultaneously and may not be given a chance to ask questions or enter into a discussion. The planned approach to use translanguaging in tutorial classes will complicate matters further as it will increase the number of codes being used and make additional demands of the SASL interpreters and Deaf/HH students.

Deaf students encounter multiple challenges in university settings. Whereas hearing students can follow the lecturer and slides while taking written notes, Deaf students cannot. Note-taking is thus considered an essential service for Deaf students (Leppo et al., 2014; Magongwa, 2012; Oppong et al., 2018). Some educational institutions provide speech-to-text services during classes. Deaf and HH students may prefer this approach to interpreting and note-taking services (see Stinson et al., 2017), but the preferences of Deaf students need to be determined. Teaching staff also need to be trained to make classes and multimodal presentations accessible and to modify subject content and curricula (Reagan et al., 2021). Further support includes the captioning of video material and adding SASL interpreting to recorded video and visual content (Mapepa & Magano, 2018). As part of school education, materials are modified for easier access by the Deaf (Umalusi, personal communication, June 8, 2022), but this practice is not applied at university, presumably because of lecturers' lack of understanding about the differences between signed and spoken languages and a disregard for Deaf epistemology.

Teaching and learning support for the Deaf at the UFS relies to a large extent on the provision of interpreting services during classes (UFS, 2021, Section 4.1). This is not always helpful to the Deaf. Glaser and Van Pletzen (2012, p. 25) found that although interpreting services have the potential to contribute to inclusive education in mainstream classrooms, signed interpreting often portrays an "impoverished form of language". Moreover, certain pedagogies obstruct the signing of the interpreters (Glaser & Van Pletzen, 2012, p. 25), foregrounding the need for both interpreters and lecturers to receive training in pedagogical approaches and language forms that benefit Deaf students. All involved in teaching endeavours with Deaf students need to understand Deaf culture and the complexities of intercultural communication to create inclusive learning spaces (see Ntsongelwa & Rivera-Sánchez, 2018).

The main academic support for first-year Deaf students centres around the provision of an academic literacy course taught by CTL staff through the medium of English. The Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS)<sup>8</sup> provides an interpreting

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<sup>8</sup> See: [https://www.ufs.ac.za/supportservices/departments/student-affairs-home/bloemfontein-campus/center-for-universal-access-and-disability-support-\(cuads\)/overview-home](https://www.ufs.ac.za/supportservices/departments/student-affairs-home/bloemfontein-campus/center-for-universal-access-and-disability-support-(cuads)/overview-home)

service for classes and other engagements between academic staff and Deaf students and arranges for extra time for tests and the provision of course materials. However, personnel at CUADS are not specialists in academic disciplines or subject-specific pedagogies for the Deaf. Similarly, although the academic literacy staff from CTL are trained to facilitate classes in English, they are not trained to work with Deaf students. Alkharji (2023) cautions that specific systems and structures need to be in place to ensure that Deaf students receive appropriate forms of support and that dedicated personnel who are specialists in Deaf education should be employed for this purpose. Reagan et al. (2021, p. 40) foreground acknowledging deafness as “essentially cultural and linguistic identity” rather than something deficit and drawing on the “life experiences of deaf people” to develop appropriate support measures (Reagan et al., 2021, p. 43).

Often the focus in academic literacy courses falls on transactional or technical skills such as writing grammatically accurate texts in English. Allowing Deaf Education students to use SASL rather than English for academic tasks would enable more time to be devoted to meaningful discussion of subject content and knowledge generation through the medium of sign language. Reagan et al. (2021, p. 49) argue that bilingual-bicultural programmes that accept deaf epistemology and foreground fluency in sign language and the “metalinguistic nature of sign language” help Deaf students to achieve academic success. After graduating, Deaf teachers will use SASL to teach their learners. Besides, the UFS has expressed a commitment to developing SASL as an academic language and that is another reason why Deaf students should be able to use SASL for coursework and assessment purposes. Exposure to subject content through interpreted language in classes does not constitute a fully bilingual or inclusive mode of education. Guiding principles that support epistemological access include enabling Deaf students to learn a spoken language such as English through sign language; making reading and writing the main modes for learning English and not spoken language; and modifying curricula and methodologies (Reagan et al., 2021, p. 49). As Akach has pointed out, Deaf education is highly complex and despite the noble efforts the UFS has taken to assist students, this may not be sufficient:

Deaf people fall victim to the patronising good intentions on the part of the hearing majority. Failure in implementation may be the result of ignorance about the nature of SL as language, but also a possible sense of helplessness in the face of a seemingly insurmountable challenge in how to change the present status quo. (Akach, 2010, p. 217)

In summary, notwithstanding the officialisation of SASL, many misconceptions about the adequacy of the language for academic purposes remain (Druchen, 2010). By

foregrounding English and ignoring the benefits of allowing Deaf students to use SASL to a much greater extent in their university training, the system reflects a deficit view of the capabilities of sign language and Deaf students' literacy in SASL, which does not help them to acculturate to academe (Lea & Street, 2006). It also reflects a pathological view of deafness as a physical disability, a stance that is unacceptable to members of the Deaf community who see themselves as “culturally and linguistically different but not as disabled” (Magongwa, 2012, p. 170). Literacy is supposed to be a tool that facilitates the equalising of societies. However, literacy is not a neutral or autonomous skill that can be delivered through a set of common teaching strategies or generic curricula, particularly where cultural minorities are concerned. An acculturation approach rather than an assimilationist stance would prioritise incorporating the experiences of Deaf students in teaching programmes rather than expecting them to transition to English (Oppong et al., 2018; Reagan et al., 2021; Thompson, 2004).

The next part of the study appraises the structure of the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme and the national policy covering the minimum requirements for qualifications in teacher education. Of particular concern to the researcher is the responsiveness of the set curriculum to the training needs of Deaf pre-service teachers in the light of the ULD principle of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and the varying quality of teaching in special needs schools across the country referred to earlier.

## 5. Accommodating Deaf students in the BEd programmes

Since the Deaf constitute an important minority and cultural group, the emphasis from a social justice perspective should always be on the quality of education rather than the number of students involved. As Magongwa (2012) cautions, school education plays a crucial role in preparing Deaf and HH learners for higher education, foregrounding the importance of quality teacher training, yet “there is no guarantee that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students will have positive academic and social experiences in either secondary or tertiary education institutions” (Magongwa, 2012, p. 171).

Universities have an obligation to prepare “sufficient language teachers” to meet the needs of South African learners, as stipulated in Section 12.5 of the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions (DHET, 2020, p. 11). The analysis of the teacher training programme available to Deaf students at the UFS shows that the curriculum needs further amendment. Teacher training programmes in South Africa are expected to comply with the stipulations of a national policy document of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) policy outlines different qualification

types, the number of learning programme credits, and language proficiency requirements (DHET, 2015). Sections 1.14 to 1.16 underscore the regulating and monitoring role of the DHET in conjunction with the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), the responsible statutory bodies for programme accreditation:

1.14 *The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* has multiple users. It is used by the DHET to evaluate teacher education qualification programmes, submitted by public universities, for approval for inclusion in their Programme and Qualifications Mix (PQM) and therefore for funding and to evaluate teacher education programmes submitted by private higher education institutions for registration, enabling them to offer the programme. It is also used by the CHE and the HEQC to inform their teacher education accreditation and quality assurance processes.

1.15 *The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* serves as a basis for the development and updating of the Criteria for the Recognition and Evaluation of Qualifications for Employment in Education policy for teachers in the schooling sector.

1.16 The policy will, through these processes, be utilised to regulate and monitor teacher education qualification programmes offered by all types of institutions. (DHET, 2015, pp. 6-7)

Despite the objectives of the MRTEQ policy, the analysis of the programme structure for the different education qualifications at the university reveals several shortcomings. This may partly be attributed to deficiencies in the MRTEQ policy, which does not make provision for the new status of SASL or the needs of Deaf students. The language proficiency requirements covered in Section 8 of the policy do not reflect the status of SASL as an official school language subject or official national language. SASL is relegated to a language suitable for conversational purposes rather than a fully-fledged academic LoLT:

8.2 All teachers who successfully complete an initial professional qualification should be proficient in the use of at least one official South African language as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT), and partially proficient (i.e. sufficient for purposes of basic conversation) in at least one other official African language, or in South African Sign Language, as language of conversational competence (LoCC). (DHET, 2015, p. 13)

We see a similar oversight in the Rulebook of the Faculty of Education at the UFS. Nowhere in the Rulebook is SASL referred to, just Sign Language [*sic*] in general.

SASL is a specific language and this needs correcting. Of the 71 entries that refer to Sign Language [*sic*], 70 concern a module in conversational Sign Language [*sic*], an introductory course that would be completely unsuitable to teach Deaf students or to teach SASL at schools: “Students in the Foundation, Intermediate, Senior and FET phases as well as PGCE programmes are required to offer one language of conversational competence from their choice of Afrikaans, Sesotho, Sign Language, and isiZulu” (UFS, 2024, p. 23).

The remaining entry that refers to Sign Language [*sic*] in the Rulebook concerns the endorsement of languages on completion of training. This is in accordance with MRTEQ whereby specific endorsements are printed on the degree certificates. These include the teaching subjects, as well as the LoLT and language of conversational competence. This is of serious concern since the degree programme does not provide fully for SASL as a teaching subject, and it is uncertain how graduating Deaf teachers are endorsed for proficiency in SASL as LoLT, or how their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of SASL has been assessed. The term PCK refers to the “blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction” (Shulman, 1987, p. 8). In MRTEQ this constitutes part of the disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge required of teachers in Sections 3.5 and 3.6 (DHET, 2015, p. 10).

The Bachelor of Education (BEd) curriculum does not provide for students to specialise in SASL (UFS, 2024, pp. iv-v). No provision is made for training Deaf students in the didactics of teaching SASL or for teaching school subjects in SASL. Furthermore, although Deaf students can do a third-year module in SASL, this level may still be too basic for students who use SASL as their first language (L1) since the SASL curriculum is aimed at beginner language learners. The omission of didactics modules is one of the contributing factors to the shortage of teachers who specialise in SASL and Deaf education. Deaf students do not receive training in bilingual pedagogies suitable for Deaf learners. This is the Procrustean “BEd” in which Deaf students have to fit the length of the existing system.

The approach differs from that of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) where the Centre for Deaf Studies in the School of Education trains Deaf teachers. Different qualifications in SASL are offered at undergraduate and postgraduate level. To teach SASL in secondary schools (Grades 8-12), students registered for the Postgraduate

Certificate in Education (PGCE) must major in SASL. The following competencies are considered essential:

- Subject (content) knowledge: a comprehensive knowledge of South African Sign Language (SASL) as a language in its own right.
- Knowledge of Deaf learners and their world: (Deaf epistemologies) knowledge of Deaf learners' experiences in everyday life, of the difficulties/barriers they experience, of their learning experiences and preferences and their identities within the Deaf Community and Culture.
- Teaching methodology (pedagogy): knowledge of, and insight into the different methods of and approaches to teaching and assessment of Deaf learners.
- Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK): the ability to select and use appropriate teaching strategies and materials to enable learners to understand the concepts and processes in the SASL curriculum and use these concepts and processes in their everyday life. (Centre for Deaf Studies, 2024: Postgraduate Certificate in Education<sup>9</sup>)

Deaf students may graduate as teachers at institutions such as the UFS, but they will not necessarily have the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) they need. This is the dilemma pointed out by scholars in Deaf education (Mapepa & Magano, 2018; Nseibo et al., 2022; Storbeck, 2023): The MRTEQ policy needs to reflect the new status of SASL and it should outline specific criteria for training teachers for schools for the Deaf. At the same time, an alternative curriculum and approach that involves colleagues from the Department of South African Sign Language and Deaf Studies at the UFS is desperately needed. Deaf education specialists would be able to provide didactics training for Deaf pre-service teachers and fulfil an advisory role in matters pertaining to instructional practices such as bilingual-bicultural approaches and curriculum content modification. The development of a supportive and comprehensive framework for inclusive quality teacher education for the Deaf would be another means of ensuring the successful alignment and implementation of policies, plans and programmes.

## 6. Conclusions

Strides have undoubtedly been made to increase Deaf persons' access to education in South Africa, but this does not imply that education is inclusive or of a high quality.

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<sup>9</sup> Available: <https://www.wits.ac.za/centre-for-deaf-studies/>



Many Deaf students continue to be marginalised despite the new status of SASL as an official language. This article has endeavoured to foreground the highly specialised nature of SASL and Deaf education. Although South Africa has adequate legislation and policies to regulate language in education policy and the UFS has the required institutional policies and plans to support Deaf pre-service teachers, this does not guarantee successful implementation. Language policy and planning for educational purposes must be founded on and include evidence-based pedagogical practices that involve the Deaf directly, or these potentially valuable instruments will remain little more than tokenism. The exploration of language and education policy, plans and programmes undertaken in this study indicates a lack of synergy between different systems and divisions that undermines quality bilingual education for the Deaf.

To address the concerns raised about the quality of Deaf education and the shortage of teachers who specialise in Deaf education and SASL, the following are proposed: acknowledging SASL as an official fully-fledged language in all spheres of education policy and planning; developing SASL as an academic language to the highest level; acknowledging and incorporating Deaf epistemology in policies and academic programmes, implementing a framework for specialised Deaf education at teacher training institutions; and ensuring curriculum and pedagogical responsiveness to the needs of the Deaf through involving the Deaf students directly.

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