



Report on the DeafSign Workshop 2025: Results from Working Groups

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Introduction

The *DeafSign* Workshop 2025, organized under the ECML Programme 2024–2027 (“Language education at the heart of democracy”), provided an essential forum for examining access to sign language learning opportunities across Europe. The workshop addressed three groups: deaf learners with refugee and immigration backgrounds, deaf children and their hearing families, and heritage signers.

While each group faces specific challenges, deaf learners with refugee and immigration backgrounds remain the most marginalized, experiencing compounded effects of displacement, disrupted education, linguistic discontinuity, and systemic invisibility. Deaf children and their hearing families often lack balanced information about early communication choices, leading to late access to sign language. Heritage signers require structured pathways to consolidate and expand their language skills.

Over two days, the workshop combined consideration of empirical findings from a European survey (204 responses from 32 Council of Europe member states) with active debate and policy discussion. The event sought to establish the foundations for stronger legal and institutional frameworks, inclusive pedagogies, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)-aligned resources, and innovative digital solutions. Central throughout was the emphasis on mediation, plurilingual and pluricultural competences, which the Council of Europe regards as crucial for democratic and inclusive education.

1. Day One: Deaf Learners with Refugee and Immigration Backgrounds

1.1. Survey I: Data and Analysis

Between September 2024 and April 2025, our first *DeafSign* Survey secured 204 responses from 32 countries. Respondents included Deaf associations, NGOs, interpreter and teacher organizations, universities, and migration authorities.

The survey revealed systemic inequities:

- Deaf refugees and immigrants lack reliable access to sign language classes, testing, and funding.

- Their plurilingual repertoires—spanning home signs, regional sign languages, International Sign, and spoken languages—are rarely acknowledged.
- Geographic disparities are stark: Northern and Western Europe have partial structures in place to provide support to these learners, while Southern and Eastern Europe often lack provision altogether.
- Legal recognition of sign languages remains symbolic in many states, with no enforceable rights for these learners.

1.2. Workshop Discussions

Working groups stressed that the absence of multilingual and multimodal information leaves refugee and immigrant learners at risk of isolation. Tailored pathways are required, reflecting the intersection of language, migration status, gender, disability, and trauma.

Participants emphasized:

- **Mediation:** enabling communication across signed, spoken, and written languages.
- **Plurilingualism:** valuing learners' full repertoires, including International Sign and home sign systems.
- **Pluricultural competences:** supporting learners' cultural identities and fostering integration into new communities.

Deaf-led organizations were identified as indispensable partners in developing sustainable solutions.

1.3. Good Practice Examples

- **Icelandic Deaf Association:** direct cooperation with government to support Ukrainian deaf refugees, offering accessible sign language learning opportunities.
- **Switzerland (DIMA):** comprehensive CEFR-aligned sign language curriculum for deaf learners, including refugees.
- **Spain (CNLSE):** national centre for sign language standardization with Deaf professionals at its core.
- **Austria (equalizent):** specialized materials and training for deaf migrants.
- **Spread the Sign:** a 15-country online platform providing plurilingual sign language glossaries.

1.4. Recommendations

Six recommendations emerged:

1. **Legal and Policy Frameworks:** explicitly secure rights of deaf learners with refugee and immigration backgrounds to sign language learning opportunities.
2. **Institutional Access and Information:** ensure multilingual, multimodal resources (video, websites, written guides).
3. **Recognition of Diversity:** tailor education to diverse linguistic repertoires and intersectional identities.

4. **CEFR-Based Resources:** develop curricula, materials, and assessments aligned with CEFR, with sustainable funding.
5. **Deaf-Led Involvement:** systematically involve Deaf associations and professionals, including refugees.
6. **Digital Literacy:** integrate digital competences into curricula, ensuring access to inclusive platforms and training.

2. Day Two: Deaf Children and Their Hearing Families, and Heritage Signers

Day Two focused on deaf children and their hearing families and heritage signers. The discussions revealed how medical models still dominate family guidance at diagnosis, sidelining sign language and Deaf cultural resources. Families often face unbalanced advice, leading to delayed or absent access to sign language learning opportunities. Heritage signers remain underserved, with little recognition in policy or provision.

2.1. Some Examples of Parental Information and Early Support

- **Iceland:** interdisciplinary teams meet parents immediately after diagnosis, providing research-based, balanced information that includes reference to sign language.
- **Romania:** medical services dominate, strongly promoting cochlear implantation; NGOs provide limited additional guidance.
- **Austria (Kinderhände):** bilingual-bimodal playgroups for children aged 6 months–7 years; financial sustainability is a challenge.
- **Bulgaria:** following from the adoption of the Bulgarian Sign Language Act, the Ministry developed preschool/primary guides and is preparing family resources and Deaf instructor training.
- **Ireland:** the Irish Sign Language (ISL) Act (2017) provides for an ISL tuition scheme to deliver free ISL classes to parents, siblings, grandparents, and guardians of Deaf children. However, limited supply of teachers and lack of any standardised early-years curriculum are challenges.

2.2. Some Examples of Legal and Policy Frameworks

- **Iceland (2009 law):** guarantees rights of deaf and deafblind children to sign language.
- **Finland (new law):** mandates sign language provision, recognizing three signed languages in schools.
- **Spain (Murcia region):** regional sign language curriculum for schools.
- **Croatia (2015 law on HZJ):** guarantees choice between communication systems.
- **Cyprus, Denmark, Lithuania, Poland:** recognize sign language, but implementation is inconsistent or oralist in focus.

2.3. Some Examples of Curricula and Teaching

- **Finland:** comprehensive curriculum integrating Deaf culture and minority perspectives.
- **Spain:** CEFR-based LSE resources (A1–B2) and virtual courses.
- **Belgium, Germany, Cyprus, Croatia:** apps and websites for families; access often delayed.

2.4. Teacher Training and Qualifications

- Shortage of qualified Deaf teachers across all countries.
- Some positive examples (Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Cyprus, Ireland) but still too few.
- Poland: minimal requirements (e.g., 200 signs to teach SL).
- Denmark, Belgium, Holland: dominated by hearing teachers.
- Urgent need for standardized CEFR-linked certification (\geq B2 level) and career pathways for Deaf educators.

2.5. Research, Communication, and Family Support

- Research evidence is needed to show cognitive/social benefits of early sign language exposure.
- Information should be available in multiple media (video, TV, print, digital).
- Deaf staff should be systematically employed in family support services.
- Parent programmes must have long-term, sustained funding, and not be provided via short-term projects.

2.6. Good Practice Examples

- **Finland:** VIKKE resources on children's SL development; sign language library.
- **Spain:** CEFR-based LSE framework and university-led virtual courses.
- **Cyprus:** App created by deaf students for a basic SL glossary.
- **Croatia:** Online portals providing information for families.
- **Germany (BAG-SIGN):** grammar-focused SL resources.

2.7. Recommendations

1. Provide balanced, complete information (including Deaf role models) at the point of diagnosis.
2. Employ Deaf professionals in family information services.
3. Disseminate information across multiple media formats.
4. Expand research on the benefits of early sign language exposure.
5. Standardize teacher certification (CEFR-based).
6. Engage Deaf organizations, heritage signers, and families in digital literacy and resource creation.

3. Cross-Cutting Priorities

Across both days, several shared themes emerged:

- Laws must explicitly name sign language rights and ensure enforcement.
- Legislation must be evaluated regularly to ensure that the intended impact is occurring in practice.
- Governments, not NGOs alone, must guarantee institutional access to information.
- CEFR provides a shared European framework but requires further development for sign languages.

- Mediation, plurilingualism, and pluricultural competences must be central to curricula.
- Education must address learners holistically, combining language, identity, mental health, and digital participation.
- Deaf-led organizations are indispensable actors in policy design and delivery.

4. Conclusion and Evaluation

The *DeafSign Workshop 2025* confirmed that Europe is failing to provide equitable sign language learning opportunities for deaf learners with refugee and immigration backgrounds, deaf children and their hearing families, and heritage signers. Legal recognition remains largely disconnected from implementation.

However, good practice models—Iceland’s cross-professional family support, Finland’s comprehensive curricula, Bulgaria’s Ministry-led initiatives, Spain’s CEFR frameworks, Austria’s NGO-driven programs—prove that inclusive systems are achievable.

The path forward requires:

- Embedding sign language rights into enforceable law and ensuring regular reviews of the impact of such legislation in partnership with Deaf communities.
- Ensuring institutional access and multilingual information.
- Developing CEFR-based curricula, resources, and teacher training.
- Mandating Deaf-led involvement.
- Expanding digital literacy.

Above all, access to sign language learning opportunities must be understood as part of building a democratic culture—one that values mediation across languages and cultures, embraces plurilingual repertoires, and fosters pluricultural inclusion. Only then can Europe ensure that deaf learners in all their diversity are not left at the margins but fully included in education and society.