Title: SignWriting - Changes Teaching Methods In Deaf Education
Author: Stefan Wöhrmann
Organisation: Landesbildungszentrum für Hörgeschädigte in Osnabrück, Germany

Introduction: In literature written about deaf education, you will find numerous comments about how Deaf students have poor literacy levels in oral languages, even if the students have gone to school for many years. The result is, that in general, deaf pupils are way behind their hearing peers, when it comes to skills and knowledge in school. Deaf children at young ages are often unable to describe their own feelings or to reflect the behavior of other people in an adequate manner. This may cause additional risks for the social-emotional development of deaf children.

Searching for a way out of this dilemma, bilingual education concepts are finally receiving more attention in Germany. Deaf children achieve a substantial Sign Language competence within a few months, if the outside basic conditions are set in place thereafter. The acquisition of Sign Language competence can only be the first step. There is a fundamental problem that has to be solved. Deaf children do not have a chance to compare the terms of the unknown target language (foreign language = German) in systematic alignment with the terms of their strong communication system (Sign Language), if they are not provided with adequate written materials and documents.

Content: Up until now, Sign Languages were considered languages without written forms. The invention and further development of SignWriting is truly sensational. Finally there is a real way to write all of the signed languages in the world with an easy to understand, practical writing system. **Valerie Sutton** is the inventor of SignWriting. The interested reader will find more information about the history of SignWriting and links to SignWriting users on the internet. Just go to the following websites: www.signwriting.org and www.signbank.org. As a young ballet dancer, Valerie Sutton was interested in writing down dance movement, documenting the aspects of space and dynamics in a quick, exact and easy to understand way. She invented a notation system, calling it "Sutton DanceWriting". Later, she became interested in describing all kinds of body movement as well, not just dance. The general system for writing all movement is called "Sutton Movement Writing & Shorthand."
A special section of Sutton Movement Writing is used for writing the movements of signed languages. This is called "Sutton SignWriting", which became, over the years, a very effective writing system for Sign Languages.

Until now, deaf children belonged to the few linguistic minorities which could not receive books written in their everyday language – which is Sign Language – in order to find a guided way into the target language – in our case it is German. Now we can change this dramatically! We can write documents in SignWriting and can provide deaf children with training materials which facilitate the acquisition of the German spoken Language, providing substantial vocabulary and grammar. It is now a goal in this area of special education, to place the deaf child in a position where he can learn new vocabulary from spoken language, in a deeper, more profound way, by connecting these new words to the well-known signs of his everyday communication system. And that is exactly what happens, when we provide bilingual documents (Sign Language and Spoken Language). Comparing the expressed ideas written in two different languages and two different writing systems in a contrastive way is a very powerful support to understanding and acquiring the specific contents of the target language (German). This then points out, that there is specialized software for typing SignWriting documents, that works efficiently and easily. This computer program, SignWriter DOS 4.4, is available free for download on the web (www signwriting.org).

Students who are asked to transcribe or to translate the SignWriting documents into written German documents are continuously asked to proof-read their own vocabulary and thereby this reinforces their knowledge about the grammar of the target Language.

SignWriting offers the possibility to describe all the important parameters of a sign (hand shape, hand orientation, contact, direction, movement, body shifting and even facial)

sufficiently and accurately, without making excessive demands on the reader with too much detailed analysis – or memory requirements. While deaf children need quite a lot of time to learn to read and get a feeling for German written documents, they succeed in learning to read SignWriting documents relatively quickly and pretty much problem-free. In fact, many beginners who start to learn SignWriting perceive many signs that are written in SignWriting (the term "sign" in signed languages corresponds to the term "word" in spoken languages) in the beginning, like a pictogram. They understand the meaning, without even knowing anything about the spelling rules and principles that have to be learned and understood by the SignWriting scribe. Contrary to receptive meaningful reading of German written documents, the child is asked, in the case of this translation process, to remember his knowledge of names (glosses), and the use of these single terms within grammatically correct sentences. Knowledge gaps and specific uncertainties in this area are effectively uncovered.

Learning to write SignWriting is different than learning to read SignWriting, however. The writer must learn an internationally-accepted set of SignWriting symbols and SignSpelling rules. The steps of becoming a skilled SignWriting scribe can be compared with how we learn to write an oral language. The writer overcomes an initial phase in which he finds himself confronted with lots of spelling mistakes. With increasing experience the level of writing competence will rise if he is interested in support and feedback from experienced users.

While deaf signers perform German Sign Language (DGS) you will see a great deal of mouth, tongue and lip movements as if "mouthing" German words (without voice) while signing. So I realized that my written SignWriting documents could only be read fast and precisely, if I took the time and attention to write these mouth movements as a part of the different signs within my document. This information led to another important discovery. The students began to pay closer attention to lip-reading while they were communicating in sign language directly with a partner. This is a very welcome result since, as a teacher of deaf children, I am very interested in improving their lip-reading skills, which will help them later on, when communicating with other people who do not know sign language. It is not enough to be able to sign the message. In order to improve integration in the business world of the hearing majority in Germany, deaf people are much better off, if they achieve a high level of German spoken language competence.

Result: Deaf children use the SignWriting documents and the SignWriter DOS computer program in an amazingly analytical and competent way, using them as autodidactic language acquisition tools…in other words, SignWriting and SignWriter are being used to strengthen and to extend their German spoken language competence. Teaching the students beforehand to read and write the easy to understand SignWriting document serves like a pre-

training for learning to read and write German. Even very young children and children who have substantial difficulties in school with other literacy-programs for spoken languages, do not have trouble reading SignWriting documents fluently, achieving a feeling of success from a very short training period. Thus – comparable to other foreign language training courses – there is the chance to create learning materials, lists with vocabulary, exercises for grammar training and special written texts that support the language acquisition process.

Interestingly enough, I seldom focus on the benefit of the SignWriting documents on Sign Language development because this seems so obvious and natural. But of course this is true too!.

contact: www.gebaerdenschrift.de

	Stefan Wöhrmann
Birthday	03. October 1954
Birthplace	Westerloh, Germany
Marital status	married, 3 children
Education	graduate of a secondary school 1973
1973 - 1975	military service
1975 - 1981	Study of Teaching Profession for Primary and Secondary School, University of Osnabrück
1980 - 1985	Study of Psychology, University of Osnabrück.
1985	stay abroad - USA
1987 - 1991	psychologist in the field of vocational counseling
since 1991	teacher at the LBZH – Osnabrück, Germany - a facility for hearing impaired students.
1991 - 1992	Study of Teaching Profession for Special Education, University of Hamburg
1991	First contact with DEAF culture Participation in Sign Language courses German Sign Language (DGS) and Signed German (LBG)
1999	First contact with the concept of Sutton SignWriting; intense autodidactic studies
since 2000	Developer of new teaching materials using SignWriting for Deaf students in German Sign Language Creator of the German Sign Language Dictionary written in SignWriting in SignWriter DOS, with more than 10,000 entries Teacher of SignWriter DOS 4.4 and SignWriter Java 5.0, software for typing SignWriting documents Presentor of SignWriting Workshops and Courses throughout Germany and Europe Inventor of "Mundbildschrift" – a special writing system that assists Deaf students to learn to articulate speech Webmaster of a German Website about SignWriting, called GebärdenSchrift: www.gebaerdenschrift.de Typographer - Designer of True-Type (TT) Fonts for typing SignWriting symbols in publications. Designer of a 30-minute television program about SignWriting (GebärdenSchrift) in the TV series "Sehen statt Hören" Editor of the German Sign Language Online Dictionary in SignPuddle on the web, with over 1745 entries: www.SignBank.org/signpuddle/sgn-DE Author of instruction textbook "Handbuch der GebärdenSchrift" Author of article "GebaerdenSchrift Lesen Lernen" in DAS ZEICHEN Journal, University Hamburg, November nr65 2003