

Implementing a new design in parent sign language teaching: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the match between the plurilingual needs of parents of deaf/hard-of-hearing children in the Netherlands and the availability of sign language courses. The parents started to learn SLN (Sign Language of the Netherlands) to communicate with their deaf children, who were born between 1999-2014. All of the deaf children in the study use cochlear implants. The parents indicated that the old sign language parent course system, described in this article, inadequately supported their own plurilingual needs and thus indirectly those of their children. They requested revised and extended sign language courses set to a higher language level. Their aim was to sign fluently, that is, to use SLN as much as possible without hesitation. Parents' requests were continually denied and rejected by family service agencies and deaf schools with the reason that professionals were committed to providing courses in Sign Supported Dutch (SSD). As stated by other authors in regard to bilingual deaf education, SLN has been argued to be too hard for parents of deaf children to learn. Because professionals did not meet their request, the parents asked the authors of this chapter to design advanced parent course modules. This request prompted (1) the provision of a discursive understanding of how parents' communicative and plurilingual needs can be aligned with a comprehensive language framework, in this case the CEFR for A (Basic User), B (Independent User), and C (Proficient User); and (2) the foregrounding of the importance of teaching SLN to parents so they are able to become independent users, exercising autonomy in parent-child communication. This paper summarizes the historical background of Dutch parents' experiences with SLN courses and presents a sample of data collected from the newly developed WeSign4 course, including teacher assessments, the CEFR self-assessment grid, and an evaluation survey completed by signing hearing parent participants. The results showed that supporting parents' development of communicative competence in SLN has significant implications for meeting their deaf children's communicative needs. Parents reported that they were learning SLN in the same way they had learned other spoken second languages. This study is the first to investigate the correlation between applying the CEFR to parents' bimodal needs and the development of parent courses.

Key words: Common European Framework of Reference for Language, plurilingualism, parents of deaf children, sign language, specific language learning needs, second language learning

1. Introduction

Parenting a deaf or hard-of-hearing child will introduce doubts concerning expectations, perspectives, actions, and required communication and language skills. Parents of deaf and hard-of-hearing children experience higher levels of

stress (Humphries et al. 2012) because they have to make critical language choices, facilitate communication, and consider whether the language at home will be bimodal or monolingual (Schermer 2012). Many parents request advice and support from professionals because they want to make sure they are making the best choices for their child. The opinions of professionals, especially during the early years of language acquisition, are highly influential (Humphries et al. 2015).

Information from professionals is not always consistent with what is observed in the deaf child's language acquisition at school. In the fall of 2011, six mothers based in The Hague area contacted the authors of this chapter for two reasons. These mothers observed that other children receiving bilingual education in Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN) and spoken Dutch seemed to have higher learning results compared to their own children. Some time before the initial contact with the authors, these mothers made a day visit to one of the schools run by Kentalis, which is one of four educational organizations in the Netherlands for deaf, hard-of-hearing, and deafblind children. The mothers noticed that both the deaf and hearing teacher, working together as a collaborative team in a specific class they visited, always used a high level of sign language with the pupils. Another observation was that the deaf pupils in this class received lessons at the same level as their hearing peers. These parental observations reinforce Humphries et al. (2014) and Nilsson and Schönström (2014)'s arguments for providing instruction in sign language to ensure optimal access to the school curriculum.

The parents' observations suggested that the education of deaf children can be optimized by creating access equal to that of hearing children through the use of sign language in the classroom. The six mothers were both relieved and concerned. They were relieved because they knew that the autonomy they desired as parents in ensuring proper education and raising their deaf child was possible. They were also concerned that they would not progress in their own signing to the level exhibited by teachers in the classroom they observed. Since the parent-child relationship is lifelong, it is very important that sustained and in-depth interaction can take place to ensure the quality of this relationship. Therefore, achieving a high level of sign language proficiency is crucial. As one mother pointed out to us:

Schools for deaf children should provide support so that parents can communicate with their children independently. Parents themselves make languages choices because they are primarily responsible for their

deaf children. It is not the professionals who decide. They are not the parents. Being able to communicate independently with a deaf child requires skills, including a high level of sign language proficiency. Deaf schools fulfil their task, which is delegated by the government, when they help parents become skilled in educating and raising a deaf child so that parents no longer lack expertise and can help their children better integrate into society. The fear of parents becoming skilled in sign language so that they are in a position to assess the knowledge and services of deaf schools is totally unjustified. It bears witness to dated thinking and policy. (personal communication, authors' translation, October 2011).

Another mother added, "It is time for a holistic approach where parents of deaf children can act as autonomously as possible thanks to having more skills, including sign language fluency" (personal communication, authors' translation, October 2011).

The parents in this study were motivated to successfully progress in sign language acquisition in order to communicate with their deaf children (Prinzi, 2007). Because they had already completed beginner-level parent courses 1-3 that were provided by the Dutch Sign Centre (1994, 1995, 1997) and waited a long time for additional opportunities to develop their signing skills to meet the level of their deaf children, the parents requested that the authors provide WeSign4 courses (Oyserman and de Geus 2013). The parents did not wish to repeat information from beginner-level courses in the newly designed courses. Mainly, they want to pilot the use of a different framework for learning sign language as a second language. The results of the pilot study could then be applied to the revision of the beginner level 1-3 sign courses for parents with newborn deaf children.

The parents in this study knew that the level 1-3 courses were paid for by the national health insurance system in coordination with the deaf schools in the Netherlands. The parents assumed that the deaf school Kentalis Zoetermeer would provide additional sign courses including WeSign4, but their request had been denied. The prevailing view at Kentalis Zoetermeer was that the requested advanced level courses were not necessary, citing arguments that it was too difficult for parents of deaf children to learn sign language (Knoors, 2011; Knoors and

Marschark, 2012; Mayer and Leigh, 2010). The parents then asked the authors of this study whether it was indeed too difficult or whether there were other possibilities.

For this study, we focused on two questions: 1) whether parents as second language (L2) learners of sign language are so different from other groups of learners that it is indeed too difficult to learn a sign language, and 2) what sign language proficiency level was needed in order to parent a deaf child as a skilled, autonomous sign language user.

There are significant differences between parents of deaf children and other L2 learners such as sign language interpreters. Parents' first need is to establish optimal communication with their young deaf children, whereas interpreters-in-training often have less immediate need when they start learning a signed language (Harder and Meijer 1994). A second difference between interpreters and parents' concerns kinds of responsibility towards deaf people. The interpreter's responsibility can be viewed as temporary and time-limited, while parents are everyday caretakers of deaf children. Thirdly, interpreters generally work with adult signers who are not family members (Napier 2007) while parents need to continuously nurture their relationship with their own child.

Another important difference between hearing parents of deaf children and hearing parents of hearing children is that based on the information provided by professionals, some parents are not fully assured that their deaf children will acquire spoken and written language comparable to their hearing peers. Therefore, some parents assume it will be easier to use their own language with their child (Knors 2011, Knors and Marschark 2012). However, facilitating deaf children's language acquisition in spoken and written language only is difficult. The input that a deaf child receives in the critical phase for language learning is both decisive and precious. Grosjean (2001) identified that the effects of inadequate monolingual input can be permanent if the deaf child does not demonstrate expected spoken language development. However, Calderon (2000) reported that deaf children of hearing parents with optimal early language intervention will eventually develop more language.

The second question, pertaining to the required sign language proficiency level

needed to become a skilled, autonomous sign language user turned out to be a difficult issue. Extensive review of previous studies of sign language acquisition by parents indicated that there are as yet no clear descriptors of language proficiency that demonstrate how parents can act as effective communicators with their deaf children. In her study, Young (1997) concluded that for parents the aim is not native-like proficiency, but to sign fluently as much as possible without hesitation. Parents of deaf children often search for answers to how to do this (Hoiting 2010; Dirks, Vermeij, Uilenburg and Bogaers 2013; Bruin and Nevøy 2014). Additionally, Snoddon (2014, 2015) found that existing initiatives for teaching parents sign language may be inadequate in terms of supporting learner goals and developing language proficiency.

Without clear descriptors to guide parents, we felt it was necessary to i) look at sign language courses offered in the Netherlands and ii) in cooperation with the six original mothers who requested the course investigate how to optimally support parental sign language learning. In the next section, a historical overview of sign language courses for parents will be presented. This is followed by a section outlining the exchange of thoughts about a new parent-focused pedagogy.

2. Sign Language courses for parents in The Netherlands

2.1. First steps in SLN parents' courses (1979-1994)

Interest in SLN was influenced by trends in the USA. The research of William Stokoe (1963) proved American Sign Language had fundamental language elements thereby raising the status of ASL from a so-called gestural system to a true and natural language. Dutch parents followed these developments with much interest (De Geus, M.L.C. and De Geus, D.T.M., personal communication, July 2018). After several visits to the USA and attending an international conference held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1979 that featured highly educated deaf people presenting lectures in different sign languages (Harder and Meijer 1994), Amsterdam parents of deaf children requested parent courses in Total Communication. The Total Communication courses were aligned with elements of SLN and developed by the Dutch Foundation for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children (NSDSK) and Ben Tervoort, a professor in linguistics at the University of Amsterdam and a pioneer in researching SLN. In fall 1981, an experimental parent

course started, led by Paedologic Audiologic Institute, which was a department of NSDSK. Only parents living in the Amsterdam area could access these courses, which were taught by deaf teachers and designed by hearing professionals. Evaluation of course outcomes compared this experimental group to outcomes from a control group participating in regular training programs provided by NSDSK. This comparison showed significant differences between the two groups in the quality of parent-child communication (Tervoort 1983). As a result, in cooperation with Folk College Allardsoog-Hunneschans in Bakkeveen, frequent family sessions in SLN were established (Van der Linde and Frieswijk 2013, p. 255).

Dutch schools for the deaf slowly adopted the use of sign language in their school language policies. From 1980 to 1995, most schools used Total Communication or Sign Supported Dutch (SSD). Contrary to what was taught in some of NSDSK's nationally funded parent guidance programs, SSD was insufficient in terms of supporting parents' ability to communicate and children's language development (Harder and Meijer 1994, Ter Linden and Harder 1997, Schermer 2012). Recognizing this insufficiency, a new shift began towards parent programs in SLN. The development of the first SLN parent courses built upon efforts of the NSDSK in cooperation with Guyot Deaf School in Groningen (Harder and Meijer 1994, Koninklijk Effatha Guyot Groep 1997, Ter Linden and Harder 1997, Schermer 2012). At this time, participating parents articulated hope for the possibility to reach their desired level of SLN (Koninklijk Effatha Guyot Groep 1997). However, this goal was not clearly defined. The VISTA "Signing Naturally" program (Lentz, Mikos and Smith 1988; Smith 1988) provided a source of inspiration for the parent SLN program but could not replace the need for a different language framework for parents of deaf children.

2.2. Developments in SLN parents' courses (1995-2011)

Starting in 1995, parents could choose courses in either or both SSD and SLN. These courses were available through NSDSK and deaf schools. Deaf people were trained as instructors by the Dutch Sign Centre (Schermer 2012). Level 1 of the parent SLN course consisted of six biweekly classes of 2 hours, each based on a theme, such as "school" or "a day out." Levels 1-3 of the parent courses did not have an assessment component because professionals wished to avoid evaluating parents' sign language competencies (Harder and Meijer 1994, Ter Linden and Harder 1997). The long-term goal of these courses was to increase parents' sign

language proficiency level beyond the introductory level. To date, only levels 1-4 have been developed, with no major substantive changes. Level 4 (Dutch Sign Centre 1998) is provided by some, but not all, family service agencies and deaf schools. Other thematic modules and workshops for parents are left out of consideration here.

In 2003, the Policy Nota, linked to school language choices and policy, of Koninklijk Effatha Guyot Group (KEGG), a predecessor of Kentalis, noted the importance of presenting languages such as spoken Dutch and SLN as equal in status. As the Policy Nota stated, parents have final responsibility in both raising and educating their deaf child. Furthermore, the Policy Nota emphasizes the importance of providing parents with unbiased information, conducting more research for improving optimal language input, neutralizing the longstanding oral-vs.-manual debate in teaching methods, and starting an open dialogue with parents concerning their needs (KEGG 2003). There are no further notifications or comments related to parents' courses in the policy nota (KEGG 2003). In spring 2011, we concluded in communication with the six mothers that so far, no comprehensive, updated language framework has been implemented in the beginner-level parent courses.

3. Exchange of thoughts with parents who initiated our study

The six participating parents in our study were surprised to discover that an updated language framework was not visible. They felt this should be essential in making sure learning SLN was similar to learning English as a second language. After learning several sign vocabulary lists in the old parent courses, they began to understand that they had barely learned the syntactical, semantic and morphological features of SLN. The parents started to contest Knoors (2011)' view that sign language was too difficult to learn by pointing out the lack of a clear sign language pedagogical framework had resulted in a pedagogy that emphasized vocabulary.

Without a clear language learning framework and a sound pedagogy, it became more obvious to the parents why they had difficulties in acquiring SLN. At the same time a discussion about language status started: if no clear language teaching

methodology is offered, does this mean that the language is withheld from parents? They requested advanced SLN parent courses to reach higher SLN levels, on par with interpreter training courses, but this was to no avail. The family service agencies and deaf schools were only able to provide the old beginner-level parent courses. Otherwise, the parents would have to switch to SSD, which is widely offered.

The parents in this study requested that the advanced courses beyond levels 1-3 include an appropriate language framework comparable to that of other second language courses in spoken/written languages. Learning SLN would thus be put on the same footing as learning another spoken language, such as English. Secondly, with this framework communicative language pedagogical approaches that could be used on a daily basis could be incorporated to approach the level of parenting equal to what other (hearing) children receive. These approaches include, for example, how to discuss, to explain options, to use listening behaviours and techniques, to learn question-reply turn taking, to provide an overview, and to deal with, explain, and manage conflicts with siblings. Thirdly, the main focus in the advanced parent courses is how to support deaf children in a goal-oriented manner in their continuous bimodal (SLN and Dutch) language acquisition. Therefore, hearing parents need to acquire SLN as their second language with a visuo-spatial modality (L2M2). Learning SLN has to have a clear goal: parents should be able to not only communicate with their deaf child, but also achieve parent-child pedagogical communication skills to the fullest extent possible.

After an in-depth investigation of various language frameworks, the CEFR resulted as the best match for parents' courses. The Council of Europe's ideas for developing a CEFR have existed since 1991, were officially launched in 2001, and are now available in 40 European and non-European languages (Council of Europe 2001). In the period from 2008-2013, a research team called ATERK NGT (2013), based in The Netherlands, worked on applying the CEFR to sign languages. An English version of the CEFR for sign languages can be found on the European Centre for Modern Languages website (Leeson, van den Bogaerde, Rathmann, & Haug 2016). It is important to know is that this version is focused on professional purposes, e.g., for sign language interpreters. One of the designers of the new parent courses was a consortium member of ATERK NGT. Thus, the developmental team could rely on this experience in developing new parent courses.

4. New System: Mapping the CEFR for Sign Languages

The CEFR and its benchmarks hold much promise for innovation in second language teaching and learning, as they are rooted in the concept of a language learner as a social agent who develops long-term communicative competences while achieving everyday goals (Council of Europe 2001). The CEFR makes the following provisions:

The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis (CoE, 2001: p.1).

This framework presents a comprehensive descriptive scheme of language proficiency (two fundamental proficiency aspects are mentioned: what the learner can do and how well he/she performs) and a set of common reference levels. The CEFR sets out to ensure that there is harmony between its components: i) identification of needs; ii) determination of objects; iii) definition of content; iv) selection or creation of material; v) establishment of teaching/learning programs; vi) the teaching and learning methods employed, and vii) evaluation, testing and assessment (Council of Europe 2001, 2017).

The sign language learner can develop various levels of proficiency (see Figure 1). The CEFR describes this as a ladder consisting of three general levels: the beginner level A for Basic User, the intermediate level B for Independent User, and the advanced level C for Proficient User.

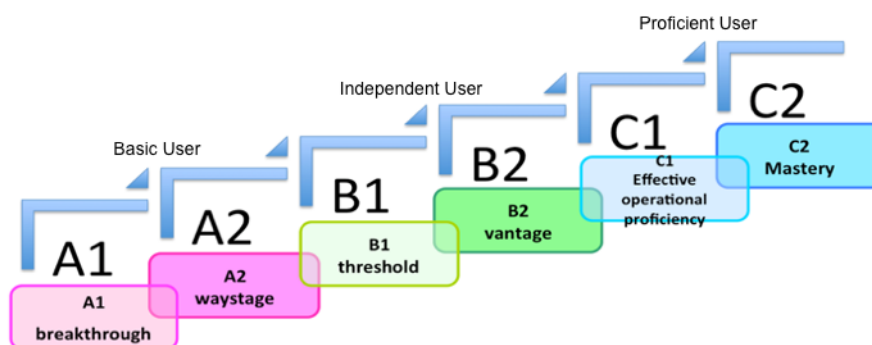


Figure 1 The Language Acquisition Level Ladder

Within each level, the learner goes through sign language acquisition exercises in three sub-areas: 1) production, 2) understanding and 3) interaction (ATERK NGT 2013; Leeson, van den Bogaerde, Rathmann and Haug 2016). Additionally, ATERK NGT pointed out that “the learner engages with native signers and the success of that is evaluated by how successful this interaction is” (ATERK NGT 2013, p. 10). The ongoing practice hours in these sub-areas focus on grammatical correctness, articulation, coherence, vocabulary and fluency, which are important for advancing up the CEFR staircase. The learner develops communication skills that are subsequently tested with the teacher as a native signer who provides directed support in the learning process. The CEFR tasks are described as can-do statements in the above mentioned three sub-areas: what you can-do in or with the target language and knowing how to do it correctly (see Leeson et al. 2016 for examples of can-do statements for sign languages). Through these can-do statements, the learner learns that he/she acquires SLN competences in a series of smaller steps. With this list of competences, parents were informed that guiding principles of the curriculum are based on plurilingual pedagogical practices. Being plurilingual and having pluricultural competences are described by the Council of Europe (2001, p. 168): “[plurilingualism] refers to the ability to use languages for the purpose of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures.”

Thus, language is a practical skill to communicate with others which one learns by doing. For this aim, purposeful action in the language is therefore central (North 2017). The CEFR is action-oriented in its approach. Tasks must therefore have a relevant context. In carrying out the task, the parent must have a goal (not just a language goal). There must be an outcome of this goal for them. They need to develop their competences by performing real-life tasks. This construction makes

the CEFR system flexible, dynamic, free to interpret and very easy to apply and adapt to any parents' needs. For parents as everyday caretakers of deaf children, there is continuity in undertaking courses. Essential in learning is the amount of guided learning hours as stated by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE). For progressing from beginner CEFR levels to level B2—an Independent User—a learner needs guided learning hours to progress. For the English language, according to ALTE guidelines, this is approximately 500-600 hours. For sign languages, the number of hours is not yet described in relation to the CEFR. So, the number of guided learning hours needed to reach all B2-level can-do statements is an open question.

It is furthermore important to note here that deaf schools are already familiar with the CEFR. Namely, Kentalis was a consortium member of ATERK NGT. The CEFR is used for assessing the SLN proficiency levels of professionals working at deaf schools. Courses such as Breakthrough (Doorbraak) and Waystage 1 and 2 (Tussenstap 1 en 2) are established with A2 as the last level to be achieved. Recent inquiries indicate that no substantive major changes have been made to implement the CEFR in parent courses levels 1-3.

The next section will describe the methodology used to collect data from parent participants.

5. Data and Methodology

To our knowledge, no previous study has investigated correlations between sign language pedagogy and development of CEFR-based courses. These correlations were addressed in the current study following three selected regional groups undertaking a CEFR-aligned course, WeSign4, that was developed by the authors of this chapter.

Our focus was on measuring outcomes associated only with WeSign4 to make sure WeSign4 worked for all parents regardless of geographical region. Not all participant groups received access to follow-up courses WeSign5-7. Thus, comparing results for WeSign4-7 was not possible. Due to extended waiting times for participants after taking levels 1-3 of the old parent course system, we could not

determine a uniform CEFR level for individual parent participants prior to taking WeSign4. Consequently, we decided to start with the hypothesis that parents would become familiar with a completely new language learning framework as measured at the end of the WeSign4 course, thus indicating that this framework should be implemented. The completion of WeSign4 is not sufficient for parents to reach CEFR level B2, Independent User. WeSign4 is only the start of a continuous learning trajectory that includes the WeSign 5-6-7 courses to reach B2 level.

This empirical mixed-methods study was guided by the following questions:

- 1) Which sign language level, according to the CEFR-framework, do parents achieve after they have finished an advanced sign language course (WeSign4) based on the action-oriented approach of supporting communicative competences?
- 2) Upon completion of the course, what do parents report concerning their communications with their deaf children in the home?
- 3) What needs did the participants express during the course?

6. Procedure and Materials

In order to investigate these questions, data collection was organized in multiple ways by using the following: 1) a WeSign4 outcome assessment by the teachers, 2) a CEFR self-assessment grid filled out by participants, and 3) an overall course evaluation form filled out by participants. These assessments were all administered during the last session of WeSign4. This procedure was repeated for the second and third group who participated in this course. Data concerning the waiting time between participants' completion of level 3 of the old parent course system and the start of WeSign4 is included in addition to the number of dropouts.

The first group in Zoetermeer started with a 15-week WeSign4 course. Classes met once a week for 2.5 hours per session in the fall and winter of 2012. WeSign4 sessions are taught by a team of two qualified deaf native signer teachers, one of whom is a SLN teacher and linguist, and the other a pedagogy specialist. This procedure was identical for the second and third groups that respectively met in Rotterdam and Utrecht. After finishing WeSign4, the participants could continue

with WeSign5, 6, and 7. Parents were recruited by the six initial mothers from within their own support networks using a snowball sampling method via a Facebook group for parents of deaf children (Stichting InfoDeSK 2017) where WeSign4 information was posted, a social network at deaf school, and through deaf children's activities.

Each new course in the series WeSign4-7 was developed in accordance with the CEFR. Themes for classes were selected and disseminated throughout WeSign4-7. Parents practiced language learning activities at home on a daily basis. This made it possible for the parent participants to reflect on the can-do statements and whether they had achieved their individual goals. The teachers explained why particular strategies in parent-child sign language communication were effective (for example, how to discuss, to describe options, to use listening behaviours and techniques, to learn question-reply turn taking, to provide an overview, to deal with explain, and manage conflicts with siblings). To this end, teachers' emphasis during class sessions on parenting communicative tools encouraged the parents to practice using practical vocabulary and sentences in the context of their daily linguistic environments. As discussed above, the content of each session was determined with respect to the goal-oriented approach of the learners.

7. Participants

The parents were divided into three groups ($N = 24$) based on geographical location who completed the WeSign4 course, including the assessments during the last session. Originally 34 parents enrolled, but 10 dropped out, as shown in Table 1. During WeSign4, 30% of participants dropped out between the first and fifth sessions. The dropout rate was the highest in the Utrecht area at 46%, or six out of 13 parents, followed by 3 out of 10 (30%) in Rotterdam and 1 out of 11 (9%) in Zoetermeer.

Table 1: Participant rates

	Zoetermeer $N = 11$	Rotterdam $N = 10$	Utrecht $N = 13$	Total $N = 34$
Started WeSign4	11 (100%)	10 (100%)	13 (100%)	34 (100%)
Dropouts	1 (9%)	3 (30%)	6 (46%)	10 (30%)

Finished WeSign4	10 (91%)	7 (70%)	7 (44%)	24 (70%)
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The reasons for discontinuation of the courses are reported in section 12 below.

8. Children of the participants

Twenty-one children (8 boys and 13 girls, all with cochlear implants) are affected by their parents' SLN learning. Eight children attended mainstream schools, nine are in a deaf school, and four are enrolled in deaf school programs for deaf children with additional disabilities (See Table 2). Parents' decisions to learn SLN appear not to be directly correlated with the type of educational program where their deaf children are enrolled.

Table 2: Numbers of deaf children attending types of program per region

Program type	Zoetermeer <i>N</i> = 11	Rotterdam <i>N</i> = 4	Utrecht <i>N</i> = 6
mainstream	4 (36%)	0 (0%)	4 (67%)
deaf school	4 (36%)	4 (100%)	1 (17%)
deaf school for children with additional disabilities	3 (27%)	0 (0%)	1 (17%)

In the next three sections of this chapter, we will describe how the assessment instruments were administered and the resulting data.

8. Step 1: Teacher assessments

The teachers assessed the parents using Low), Medium, and High subratings following the six levels of the CEFR, which allowed for scoring in 18 subcategories. The scores were then averaged to provide parents' achieved level. A descriptive CEFR-level rating was preferred instead of a numeric assessment, which can appear more static. One of the problems with the old parent courses was that they did not include assessment because professionals did not want to pressure parents

concerning their sign language competencies (Harder and Meijer 1994, Ter Linden and Harder 1997). This is solved by creating these 18 subcategories within CEFR proficiency levels that provide a more qualitative and descriptive assessment of parents' learning progress and needs.

The parent's CEFR proficiency level can be measured by checking the total number of can-do descriptors for each CEFR level we adapted, first from ATERK NGT (2013) and later from Leeson et al. (2008, 2016) in the areas of production, comprehension, and interaction. The fifteenth session of WeSign4 focused on the final assessment. Parents were divided into pairs and were assessed for approximately 40 minutes. Each assessment task was first explained in SLN, then in written Dutch so that parents were able to check their understanding of the required task. Table 3 shows an overview of the assessment tasks. The production and interaction tasks were recorded with a video camera for later assessment.

Table 3 WeSign4 assessment tasks

No.	Competence	Task description	
1	Comprehension 2 minute narrative	Participant is twice shown a short narrative film. Participant responds to questions about the narrative in writing.	
2	Production Narrative	Create a story using vocabulary from the course.	Recorded on camera
3	Comprehension vocabulary	Participant is shown a list of vocabulary items twice on video and responds to questions in writing.	
4	Interaction in pairs	Participants receive different kinds of tasks, which include role-play scenarios as parent /child. Each participant has to complete this task twice as a parent and as a child.	Recorded on camera

9. Step 2: Self-Assessment grid

During the fifteenth session of WeSign4, parents received a self-assessment grid with common reference levels as described in ATERK NGT (2013, pp. 21-28). To elaborate, each CEFR level from A1-C2 has an associated scale with the competences of production (live and recorded), comprehension (live and

recorded), and interaction (live). The parents' task was to individually complete this grid during the last twenty minutes of the fifteenth session (estimated 20 minutes), without consulting each other or their teacher. For each area, they were required to indicate their own perceptions of what they had achieved. When reviewing the categories presented, they were asked to indicate which level (Low, Medium, High) they felt they had reached. Afterwards, the participants' level was calculated through an average of the parents' self-assessments. This grid, which has been translated into 40 languages, allows one to indicate achievement of the can-do statements (Leeson 2008, ATERK NGT 2013, Leeson et al. 2016, Council of Europe, 2017). For example, a self-assessment of High A2 means that a participant believes that he/she has reached the upper level of A2 but has not yet made the transition to Low B1.

10. Step 3: Evaluation Form

To assess the content and quality of WeSign4, all parents were asked to fill out an evaluation form presented as a 5-point Likert scale, indicating their level of agreement, with 1 = I do not agree; 2 = neutral; 3 = I agree; 4 = I totally agree; 5 = not filled in/user missing (Likert 1932). The evaluation form consisted of 26 questions, including, "I'm confident that I can apply what I've learned in the course"; "I'm more confident in communicating with my child"; "The CEFR course WeSign4 was very helpful for me"; "This course is very different from earlier courses"; and three open-ended questions. To avoid bias, all participants were required to fill out the form without consulting each other or the teacher. This form did not request personal information from the participants.

The questions were organized into the following eight categories:

1. Learning process, with questions about communication, vocabulary, and application of what was learned in class.
2. Evaluating the degree of difficulty of WeSign4 content.
3. Satisfaction with the classroom facilities.
4. Satisfaction with the teacher's role and quality of instruction.
5. Satisfaction with the online video content.
6. Comparisons between the old parent courses and WeSign4.
7. Suggestions for the content of WeSign4.
8. Suitability of WeSign4 for other parents of deaf children.

Hereafter, the parents were asked to respond to three open-ended questions concerning their overall perception of WeSign4: 1) positive aspects, 2) constructive criticism, and 3) additional comments. Some responses to the 26 questions in this evaluation from parents in the Zoetermeer, Rotterdam and Utrecht regions are highlighted in the next section.

11. Results

11.1. Step 1: Teacher assessments

The results of the assessment as displayed in Figure 2 show that most parents ($N = 13$) who completed WeSign4 achieved the High A2 level representing the upper end of the A2 level, representing a strong Waystage performance for a Basic User but not Independent User (B1) of SLN. The Low B1 level, which 6 participants achieved, reflects the Threshold level, which can be seen as the start of being an Independent User. Other parents who achieved High A1 (breakthrough), Low A2, and Medium A2 (Waystage) levels are all Basic Users.

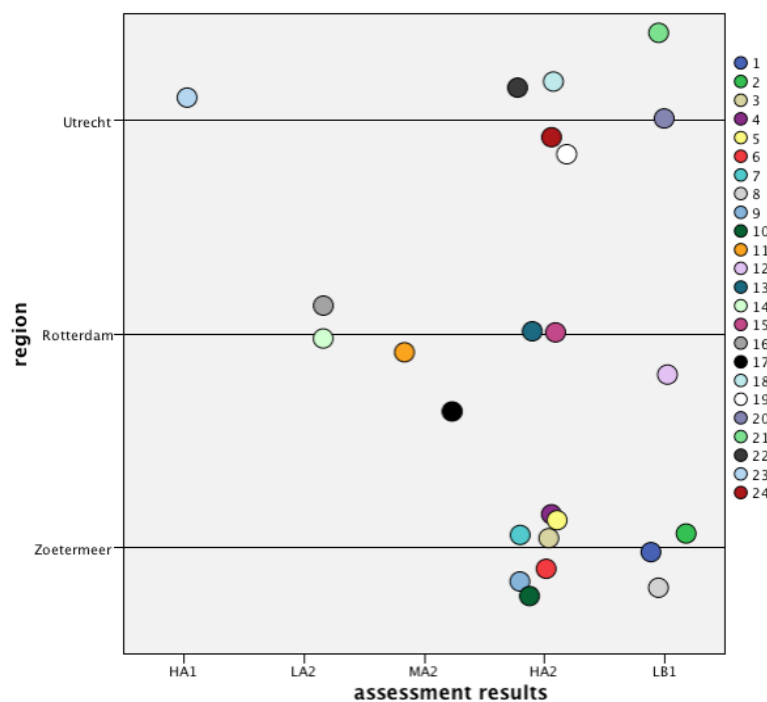


Figure 2 WeSign4 Teacher assessment level ($N = 24$)

11.2. Step 2: Self-Assessment grid

We collected self-assessment grids from 20 out of 24 parents. Four Zoetermeer-based parents did not hand in the form. For this first group in Zoetermeer, we decided that completion of the self-assessment grid was voluntary. Figure 3 shows nine parents who the teachers assessed as being High A2 level, one indicated in their self-assessment that he/she had reached High A2. Other parents rated themselves as having achieved higher levels: Low B1(1), Medium B1(4), High B1(2) and High B2(1). These are the Threshold and Vantage levels for Independent User. When analyzing the Low B1 assessments, we found there were six participants whose scores varied significantly.

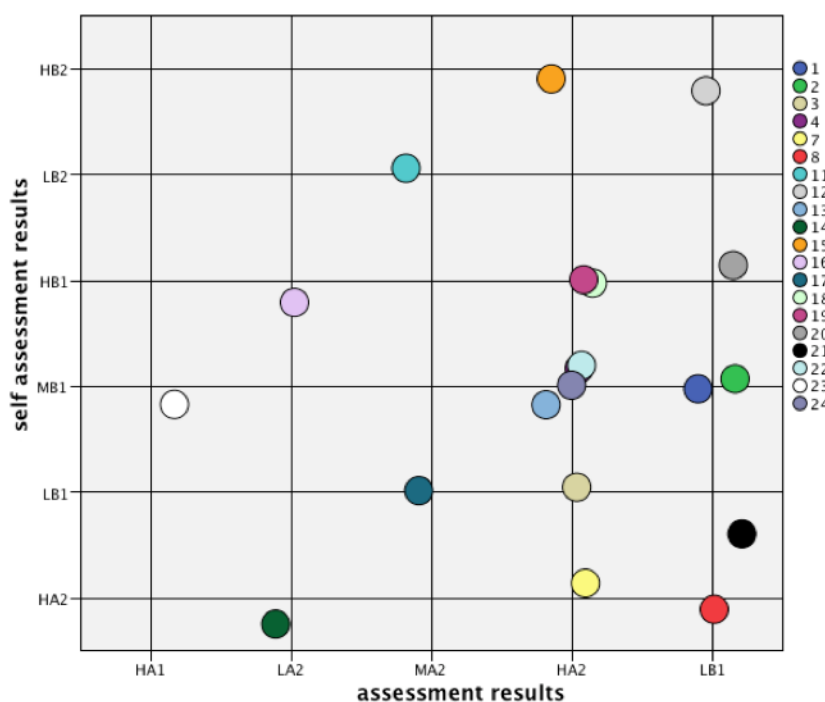


Figure 3 Results of the self-assessment grid (N = 20)

Looking at the distribution of scores, some discrepancy between parents self-reporting their acquired skills and evaluation of those skills by their teachers is visible. Most parents self-evaluated their SLN competences as being higher than the teachers' assessments of them. WeSign4 appeared to increase parents' confidence, as they stated they felt comfortable with the CEFR alignment of WeSign4 and noted that use of the self-assessment grid increased parents'

confidence with their SLN skills.

11.3. Step 3: Evaluation Form results

We collected completed evaluation forms from 22 out of 24 parents. Two parents did not hand in the form. When asked to indicate their agreement with the statement "I'm satisfied with the WeSign4 course," four parent participants checked "Agree," and 17 selected "Totally agree." The remaining respondents indicated a neutral response. Eleven parent participants indicated that they agreed with the statement, "I feel more able to communicate in depth with my child." In addition, eleven parent participants selected "Totally agree" as a response to this statement. Regarding the statement, "This course is very different from earlier courses," eight parents selected "Agree" and 14 parents chose "Totally agree." These results provide important insights into specific experiences of parents as further outlined in the next section.

12. What are parents' experiences during the CEFR-aligned courses?

The parents expressed four key experiences during the WeSign4 course. First, parents stated in the evaluation form that WeSign4 was different from the parent courses they had taken before. Secondly, all parents stated that after attending four or five sessions of WeSign4, they became aware of how to apply pedagogical strategies learned in class during their interactions with their deaf children. These moments of pedagogical awareness were explained in conversations with the teachers during class sessions. Parents reported that old parent courses did not allow for this pedagogical awareness when using SLN with their children and attributed this difference to the application of the CEFR in WeSign4. For instance, this application enabled some key components in understanding their child's world:

- Communication strategies
- Immersion/ language use
- Language modelling
- Language tuition
- Information giving

Third, the parents stated that the problem-solving approach to their acquisition of

SLN for use with their deaf children enabled the parents to be more creative and open to taking risks. Upon completion of WeSign4, parents orally reported higher levels of motivation to complete their homework assignments, as they felt empowered through the application of the pedagogical practices in communication with their deaf children. As teachers, we found that we had to structure lessons to empower parents to apply their new knowledge when interacting with their children.

Finally, conversations with parents who dropped out of the course revealed four reasons for their decision: 1) an extended waiting time following completion of earlier parent courses (see Figure 4); 2) the lack of a unified system for continuous language learning in the old courses and the new course; 3) the feeling that they were too late in learning sign language because they were so used to learning isolated signs in the old parent course system that WeSign4, based on the CEFR, felt very new; and 4) the feeling of being too late in choosing to learn sign language and thus sign language input for their deaf child because he/she hardly signed at home but used speech only and therefore experienced many problems in communication and education.

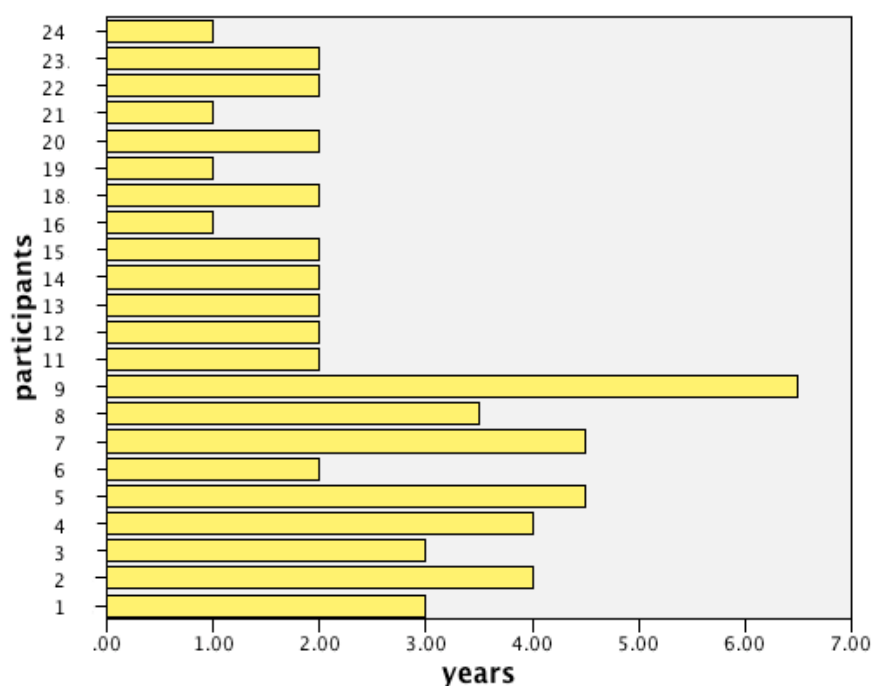


Figure 4 Waiting times as an influence in parent participant attrition

The issues raised in this section indicate the urgency of a solid and consistent

language learning framework that matches the specific needs of parents.

13. Conclusion

In undertaking this study, we assumed that it is important to recognise hearing parents of deaf children as an unique group of L2 learners with their own identity and specific action-goal oriented learning needs which differ from those of sign language interpreters. Beside the learning benefits reported in this chapter, the parents benefited from group sessions to support each other in extending their L2 identity and to share experiences, perspectives, and choices, including consequences of these choices, concerning their deaf children. Based on these findings, there is a need for separate applied parent SLN courses. Parent participants indicated that it was important for them to learn SLN as a full-fledged language so that they can act as autonomous and independent users on par with B2 Vantage level while raising and educating their deaf children. For a long time, professionals stated sign language proficiency was not possible for parents of deaf children to achieve because it was too hard for parents to learn sign language (Knoors 2011, Knoors and Marschark 2012).

Moreover, history shows that until 2011 no clear language framework was included in SLN courses for parents. What parents learned in the old courses was not always directly applicable for building parent-child relationships. The evidence-based language framework of WeSign4 allows SLN acquisition to be placed on an equal footing with other language acquisition models that use the CEFR, such as English language learning.

Since their start in 2011, the parent courses WeSign for levels 4-7 which use the CEFR as their core are still running. As shown in this chapter, due to its flexibility, the CEFR meets the specific needs of parents. While parent participants may have varied individually in learning pace and level, the CEFR can-do statements presented in each session created more awareness of language learning and provided guidance concerning the building of linguistic repertoires. The can-do statements comprise incremental steps with which to explore and build SLN skills. Instruction provided in the sessions and further practice in home situations also occurred in small increments and served to increase pedagogical awareness and parental responsibility. Further assessments show that after completion of WeSign4,

parents continue progressing to the desired B2 level of Independent User. As noted above, factors including extended waiting times for new courses and the old courses' emphasis on practicing vocabulary lists made it difficult to establish a baseline for parents' learning.

The WeSign4 course is an initial step toward the achievement of CEFR level B2. More courses (WeSign5-7) are necessary to reach this level. Dutch parents experience a lack of access to advanced SLN courses because of barriers created by family service agencies and deaf schools. These agencies and schools which receive funds from the government and health insurance systems to provide early intervention for deaf children, but these funds are not used to support advanced parent courses.

WeSign4 proved to be a catalyst in increasing parental self-confidence. The results from the self-evaluation form indicate that some parents may overestimate their SLN proficiency. As reported earlier, this may be due to increased awareness of the components of sign language accompanied by a need for more insight concerning the transition to the intermediate steps of acquiring SLN fluency. This relates to the important point regarding bimodalism, since parents are not only learning a L2 but also a second modality). We feel this awareness will be helpful to parents in maintaining motivation. In the context of the WeSign courses, parents learn that the aim is not to achieve native-like proficiency, but as much as possible to sign fluently and without hesitation; parents are observed to feel comfortable with this goal. The parents in our study reported they felt empowered by their increased fluency in sign language communication and consequently felt less pressure to produce all the signs perfectly.

In conclusion, we feel it is very important for parents to have access to courses based on a clear language framework, and that parents understand fluency is possible without mastering all sign language elements perfectly. We also feel it is important for parents to feel, that they can apply their learning to home communication with deaf children and that sign language pedagogy and improvements in sign fluency enhance the parent-child relationship.

In this study, Dutch parents of deaf children serve as a case in point. We urge teachers from other countries, as well as family service agencies, deaf schools and deaf community organisations worldwide, to take a closer look at parents' sign

language programs and consider implementation of the CEFR. In the future, there is also a need for longitudinal research regarding the acquisition of sign language by hearing parents of deaf children to develop more understanding of their specific needs L2 learners. A better understanding of hearing parents and their language practices will improve the family life of deaf children.

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