# From Policy to Practice: Making Sign Language Work in Teaching and Learning for Deaf Learners
# A South African Deaf Perspective


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# The question we must answer

OPENING

**What changes for a Deaf learner when a language is recognised on paper but not fully available in the classroom?**

# South Africa: a language-rights context

CONTEXT

- South African Sign Language (SASL) is a central part of Deaf identity, communication and education.
- SASL was constitutionally recognised as South Africa’s 12th official language in 2023.
- Recognition creates an important legal and symbolic foundation but implementation determines educational reality.
- The Deaf community must be a partner, decision-maker and evaluator of implementation.

# Policy is the beginning, not the destination

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE




- If any link is weak, the learner experiences language exclusion.
- Success should be measured by what Deaf learners can understand, produce, participate in and achieve.

# What does the Deaf learner experience?

THE LEARNER PERSPECTIVE

- Early and sustained access to a natural sign language.
- Teachers who can teach (not merely communicate in sign language).
- A curriculum that is genuinely accessible through SASL.
- Assessment that allows learners to demonstrate knowledge in an appropriate language.
- Deaf peers, Deaf role models and a positive Deaf identity.
- Families and schools that understand language rights rather than treating signing as an accommodation.

# The classroom must become a language-rich SASL environment

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Teach concepts directly in SASL wherever possible.
- Use visual pedagogy: demonstration, modelling, diagrams, signed explanations, captions and accessible digital media.
- Build subject-specific SASL vocabulary rather than relying on ad hoc fingerspelling.
- Make classroom interaction two-way: learners must be able to ask, challenge, discuss and explain.
- Use written and spoken languages as additional resources not as substitutes for accessible sign-language teaching.

# Teachers are the implementation engine

PEOPLE

- SASL proficiency must be treated as a professional teaching competence.
- Teacher education programmes need stronger preparation for bilingual/bicultural Deaf education.
- Recruit and retain Deaf teachers and Deaf education leaders.
- Provide sustained professional development, not once-off sign-language workshops.
- Where interpreters are used, define roles clearly and protect direct access to the teacher and curriculum.

# Deaf teachers: from representation to leadership

PEOPLE

**As Deaf people we must not only be recipients of Deaf education policy, we must be architects of it.**

Nothing about Deaf learners without Deaf people.

# Curriculum: access is more than translation

CURRICULUM

- A translated lesson is not automatically a culturally or linguistically effective lesson.
- Develop SASL terminology and discourse for all learning areas.
- Create high-quality signed learning materials with Deaf educators and subject specialists.
- Build Deaf perspectives into relevant curriculum content.
- Ensure materials are accessible offline and online, including captions, transcripts and visual supports.

# Assessment: test knowledge, not language barriers

ASSESSMENT

- Allow Deaf learners to demonstrate conceptual knowledge through SASL where appropriate.
- Separate assessment of subject knowledge from assessment of a second/additional written language.
- Develop valid protocols for signed responses, recordings, rubrics and moderation.
- Train teachers and assessors in fair bilingual assessment.
- Use assessment evidence to improve teaching, not simply to rank learners.

# Families and early language access

THE FOUNDATION

- Language deprivation is an educational risk, not a reason to delay access to sign language.
- Families need timely, respectful information about Deaf children and sign language.
- Parents should be supported to learn and use SASL with their children.
- Early childhood services should connect families with Deaf adults, Deaf organisations and appropriate educational pathways.
- The goal is a child who enters school with language, not a child who first encounters a full language at school.

# Technology: build a SASL knowledge ecosystem

DIGITAL ACCESS

- Create searchable digital libraries of SASL educational content.
- Develop subject-specific signed terminology and concept resources.
- Use video as a first-class language medium, not merely as a translation afterthought.
- Make platforms accessible on low-bandwidth and mobile devices.
- Use Deaf-led quality assurance for digital language resources.

# What schools need to change

SCHOOL-LEVEL PRACTICE

- Adopt a whole-school language plan with clear SASL outcomes.
- Audit teacher language competence, classroom access and learning materials.
- Create regular opportunities for Deaf learners to interact academically and socially in SASL.
- Track learner progress using meaningful language and learning indicators.
- Build partnerships with Deaf organisations, Deaf professionals and universities.

# What governments and systems must do

SYSTEM-LEVEL ACTION

- Fund implementation, not only policy development.
- Set measurable SASL teacher-training and staffing targets.
- Invest in Deaf teacher pipelines, interpreter development and specialist expertise.
- Support SASL curriculum resources, assessment frameworks and research.
- Include Deaf people in governance, monitoring and evaluation.
- Publish implementation indicators so progress can be seen and challenged.

# A practical implementation scorecard

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

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|---|---|
| **Policy** | Is SASL clearly embedded in education policy and plans? |
| **People** | Do we have SASL-proficient teachers, Deaf teachers and trained leaders? |
| **Resources** | Can learners access high-quality signed curriculum materials? |
| **Practice** | Is SASL actually used for teaching, interaction and assessment? |
| **Outcomes** | Are Deaf learners achieving, participating and progressing? |
| **Accountability** | Can Deaf people see, influence and evaluate implementation? |

# Five priorities for South Africa

A CALL TO ACTION

1. Make SASL proficiency a core capability across Deaf education.
2. Accelerate the recruitment, preparation and leadership of Deaf teachers.
3. Build a national ecosystem of SASL curriculum and assessment resources.
4. Strengthen early language access and family support.
5. Put Deaf people at the centre of implementation, monitoring and accountability.

# What can the international Deaf community do?

COLLECTIVE ACTION

- Share evidence and practical models across Deaf communities and countries.
- Strengthen Deaf-led research, knowledge production and professional networks.
- Advocate for sign languages as languages of instruction, not only languages of access.
- Challenge token consultation: demand meaningful Deaf participation in decisions.
- Measure success by Deaf learners' language, learning, agency, participation and life opportunities.

# From recognition to real learning

**A sign language works in education when Deaf learners can use it to learn, think, question, create, belong and succeed.**

Policy opens the door. Practice determines what happens inside.

**Nothing about Deaf learners without Deaf people.**