

Survey Report from the ECML Project
ProSign: Sign Languages for Professional Purposes
(2012-2015)

**The Implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference
(CEFR) for Sign Languages in Higher Education:
Results of an International Survey**

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1. Introduction

Sign languages have been recognized as indigenous to Europe by the key European institutions. The European Parliament has passed resolutions on sign languages on three occasions (1988, 1998, 2016a). The Council of Europe's (CoE) Parliamentary Assembly supported a resolution on sign languages in 2003 (Council of Europe, 2005), and the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML; an organization established under the auspices of the CoE) has supported work on sign language teaching, learning and assessment (Leeson, Van den Bogaerde, Rathmann, & Haug, 2016).

At the same time, the position of sign languages in formal academic settings is a relatively new phenomenon and continues as a work in progress in many European countries (Leeson, 2006). Universities in numerous countries offer sign language instruction primarily as part of sign language interpreter training curricula, but these curricula are quite varied (Leeson & Calles, 2013; De Wit, 2016), and approaches often appear not to be evidence based. There are many reasons for this, not least because to date, almost no empirical studies on the acquisition of sign languages as a second or foreign language (L2) by adult learners have been carried out in Europe. However, we note that work is currently underway on this front in a number of universities, e.g., Stockholm University, Hogeschool Utrecht (UUAS), Trinity College Dublin, Universität Hamburg, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, University College London, and Hochschule für Heilpädagogik (HfH). (For some preliminary studies on L2 acquisition and learning see Mirus et al. 2002; Ortega-Delgado, 2010, 2013; Kubus & Rathmann, 2013; for an overview Chen Pichler & Koulidobrova, 2015).

Despite this, there is a framework that can be drawn on: the CoE's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) offers a starting point for considering greater harmonization of teaching and assessment practices in sign language programs (Leeson, 2011). Application of CEFR can also serve as a step toward formalizing the instruction and assessment of sign language proficiency in Europe. The ProSign project (2012-15), funded by the EMCL, marks an historic step towards the identification and ratification of standardized proficiency levels for sign languages across Europe.

The CEFR is the standard framework for the teaching, learning and assessment of a spoken language as foreign/second language in Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). By considering the CEFR descriptors vis-à-vis sign languages, the opportunity arises for creating greater awareness around what is taught and why, at what levels and for what purposes, across sign language programs in Europe. CEFR also offers a framework for sign language teachers, something that has not been readily available in the past. Given these issues, the ProSign project has paved the way for development of curriculum and assessment materials.

Three major goals were identified:

1. The team drew on preliminary work hitherto undertaken in adapting the CEFR to sign languages. Generic definitions of proficiency levels for sign languages were applied, building on local definitions previously developed in Belgium (MVG, 2005), France (e.g., Kobylanski 2011), Germany (Arbeitsgruppe GeR-DGS, w/o yr), Hungary, Ireland (Leeson & Byrne-Dunne, 2009), and the

Netherlands (ATERK, 2013).

2. The team provided specifications of sign language curricula for learners of a national/regional sign language, with a particular focus on A and B levels of competency; and
3. Initially, the team set out to develop a sample assessment kit for sign language competency at the C1/C2 level, which we associate with the sign language competency that demonstrates fitness to practice as a professional interpreter.

However, given that the majority of sign language teachers with whom we engaged had limited or no experience of working with CEFR, the team went back to basics in order to ensure a bottom-up approach to developing competency across our target stakeholder group. Given this, we focused on assessment of A and B level competencies in our work.

Ensuring engagement from sign language teachers and communication with various stakeholders' from across the continent of Europe was a challenging linguistic task. A key mechanism for supporting access to information was the provision of all project content (e.g., podcasts about CEFR, descriptors, etc.) in International Sign on the ECML website.¹ It is important to note that International Sign is not a language per se (i.e., with lexicon and grammar on its own). International Sign has been described as a lingua franca that is used by Deaf² people who do not share a common language (Adam, 2012; Napier & Rosenstock, 2016). Fluent signers are able to derive meaning from International Sign on the basis of their native signing skills in their own sign language, topical and contextualized knowledge, and iconic clues, as well as their experience to negotiate meaning with both deaf and hearing people who do not necessarily share their (sign) language.

Thus, selecting International Sign as our lingua franca helped us to increase accessibility to CEFR-related data for sign language teachers. Our rationale for this is predicated on the basis that sign languages are commonly taught by Deaf signers who may not have functional literacy in their country's dominant written language due to delay in exposure to signed and written language (Leeson, 2011). Further, previous pan-European studies have reported that Deaf people usually have significantly less access to information about their sign languages and Deaf culture than hearing people in their countries, because information is so often made available in written language only (Kyle & Allsop, 1997). The ProSign team approach aimed to leverage the capacity of online streaming to ensure that all project content was available in International Sign. A parallel goal was to encourage colleagues across Europe to localize this information in their national sign language(s) in an attempt to repatriate this knowledge within national and regional Deaf communities where L2 sign language teaching and learning occurs (following Harrisson, 2007).

In a bid to establish a base-line understanding of how, where and to what degree

¹ <http://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2012-2015/ProSign/tabid/1752/Default.aspx>

² It is a widely-recognized convention to use upper case *Deaf* for describing members of the linguistic community of sign language users and, in contrast, the lower case *deaf* for describing individuals with an audiological state of a hearing impairment, not all of whom might be sign language users (Morgan & Woll, 2002).

CEFR is embedded in approaches to sign language teaching, learning and assessment across European sign language courses in tertiary education, we launched an international survey (ProSign, 2013) that is comparable to the 2005 CEFR survey for spoken languages by the Language Policy Division of the CoE, thus allowing for comparisons. Our online bimodal survey was made accessible in print and via signed films, in International Sign in late 2012. The survey also intended to benchmark current methods of assessing sign language learning in terms of language comprehension, production and interaction. Results indicate that while some institutions have begun the process of using the CEFR as an assessment tool for diagnosing sign language competency, there continues to be limited access to materials and training on the part of sign language teachers, which undermines the goal of ensuring a strong framework across sign language instruction programs and subsequently, a lack of standardized practice. This seems to be connected to the status of sign languages across Europe (European Parliament, 2016a), and the relatively late ratification by many European member states of the UN Convention for the Rights of People with a Disability (UNCRPD), which makes five explicit reference to sign languages (see Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012; European Parliament, 2016b). However, to date, no empirical work has explored the nature of this relationship, or the ways in which sign languages have been promoted or the consequences of such promotion, following from legal recognition at state level (De Meulder, 2015) and/or following from ratification of the UNCRPD.

The survey served to underpin our action research approach in two areas: curriculum development and pedagogy. In order to facilitate this, the survey design had the following research questions in focus:

1. To what extent is the CEFR implemented in higher education institutions that offer programs in sign language interpreting and Deaf Studies in Europe?
2. What is the current level of awareness of CEFR amongst sign language teachers working in higher education institutions in Europe?
3. What kind of supports are offered within these institutions to Deaf Studies and interpreter education programs aiming to implement CEFR-aligned curricula and assessment?
4. How are sign language assessments currently carried out in these institutions?

2. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and Sign Language Teaching and Learning

The CEFR, created by the CoE in 2001, is a reference tool describing levels of proficiency in foreign/second language learning. It includes six levels of proficiency, described across three tiers: *Basic User*, *Independent User*, and *Proficient User*. The CEFR has become the standard for diagnosing language competence in foreign/second language learning (with the original focus on spoken languages rather than signed languages). At pan-European level, the CEFR had not been applied to sign languages: the modality specific language of the original CEFR required modification to capture the norms of sign language interaction, for example. Reasons why CEFR had not previously been mapped to the teaching and learning of sign languages are varied. They potentially include the fact that it is a relatively new instrument, and it takes time for such tools to be tried and tested by early adopters, with a trickle-down effect occurring over time. In this case, sign language teachers were not involved in the original

development of the CEFR, and as a result, sign language specific issues were not included from the beginning. Thus, the issue of ensuring that diversity in language type (be that majority-minority, foreign-indigenous, spoken-signed) is represented in discussions about approaches to language teaching, learning and assessment is key, with far reaching consequences for policy and practice.

Another key influence is the lack of official recognition of sign languages in many countries (De Meulder, 2015) and the subsequent low status of sign languages in many jurisdictions. This brings with it low levels of awareness of the existence of sign languages (historically the case amongst policy makers, for example), uncertainty regarding applicability of the CEFR to sign languages by key stakeholders, and the lack of standardized curricula and assessments for sign language instruction programs (Rosen, 2010).

Another major concern lies in the dearth of comprehensive linguistic descriptions of many sign languages (e.g., Pfau, Steinbach, & Woll, 2012), along with the lack of reference grammars for sign languages (e.g., McKee 2015, see however Quer et al., 2017), thus complicating decisions regarding what is taught to sign language learners, at what time, and why.

The ProSign project was established with the aim of establishing CEFR descriptions for sign languages in order to present a reference tool for use in the teaching, learning and assessment of a broad range of sign languages for professional purposes across Europe. The project targeted to teachers, curriculum developers, language testers and university level professors along with international NGOs that serve Deaf communities like the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) and the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli). In order to secure establishment and standardization of the CEFR descriptors for sign languages, the initial aim was to provide definitions of the CEFR proficiency levels and a sample assessment kit for C1/C2 levels, building, where possible, on pre-existing CEFR related work for sign languages.

While we focused on the teaching, learning, and assessment of sign languages in tertiary education, and not on interpreting skill, evaluation, there is potential backwash for those considering the evaluation of interpreting capacity too. For example, Roberts (2000) argues that national assessments for interpreters are advantageous because they establish minimum standards of performance that can be considered as valid primarily because the number of subjects is large. However, prior to 2000, there were only a handful of assessments for community interpreting in the world because the development of interpreting tests is time consuming and costly (Hale, 2012; Leeson & Venturi, 2017). C1/ C2 levels have been described as desirable language capacity outcomes for professional sign language interpreters (Sheneman & Rathmann, 2014), but overall (in Europe) sign language interpreter education programs get their students to B-level competency, as per the efsli learning outcomes (Leeson & Calles, 2013). The need for a harmonized continent-wide assessment tool for sign language interpreters could build on the ProSign descriptors, thus reducing the workload required in creating pan-European or national-level interpreting tests.

3. Method

3.1 Survey

An online bimodal survey was created using an open source survey application, Lime Survey (www.limesurvey.org) (see Figure 1). We opted for a survey tool that allowed response submissions in English or, via films/online recording, in International Sign, which were sent to a secure server. There were three major parts to the survey:

1. Respondents background information
2. Familiarity with and implementation of the CEFR
3. Assessment of sign language competencies

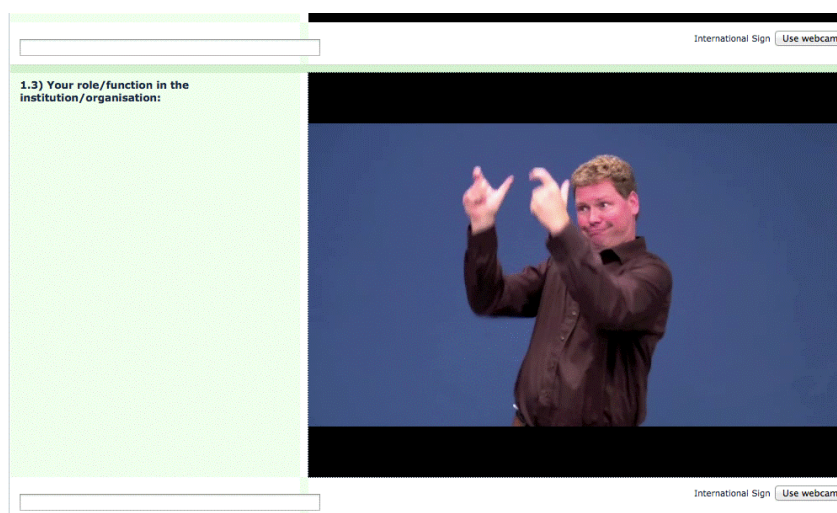


Figure 1: Screenshot of the survey interface

The survey ran in November-December 2012 and was distributed via the following professional networks: (1) European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters, (2) European Union of the Deaf, (3) the mailing lists of the Sign Language and Linguistics Society and the SLLING-list, and (4) personal networks. A reminder was sent via these networks after two weeks.

3.2 Analysis

The survey responses in English were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The International Sign responses were translated into English by a Deaf native signer of American Sign Language (ASL) with competence in International Sign and entered in the Excel spreadsheet. Grounded Theory served as the framework for this data analysis. Grounded Theory is a research method that allows data to be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively thereby leading to the formation of a theory (Hansen, 2009). The qualitative inquiry involves the process of memo-ing, documenting the researchers' notes about what is being learned from the data. The responses are thematically categorized and counted based on the number of incidents to describe the phenomena.

For the quantitative portion of the project, the responses for close-ended questions were counted and categorized based on the survey questions themselves. Non-responses were not counted. A significant number of non-responses were evident. The open-ended questions were categorized based on common themes. Themes were

determined based on wider use of the same concepts. For example, if there were at least two responses that referred to the same concept, they were categorized as a theme and then counted. Some responses were not categorized because they either did not answer the question directly or were too vague to be categorized under a theme, but these responses were still maintained for information purposes. Others on the team reviewed the categorization of themes to verify accuracy of analysis. The results were compiled in a summary report (Haug, Van den Bogaerde, Leeson, & Rathmann, 2013), which included the quantitative data as well as non-categorized highlighted comments.

4. Results

4.1 Background information on survey participants

The survey generated a total of 59 complete response sets. However, six of these were from respondents outside Europe. As this report focuses on the European responses only, we exclude the non-European responses.

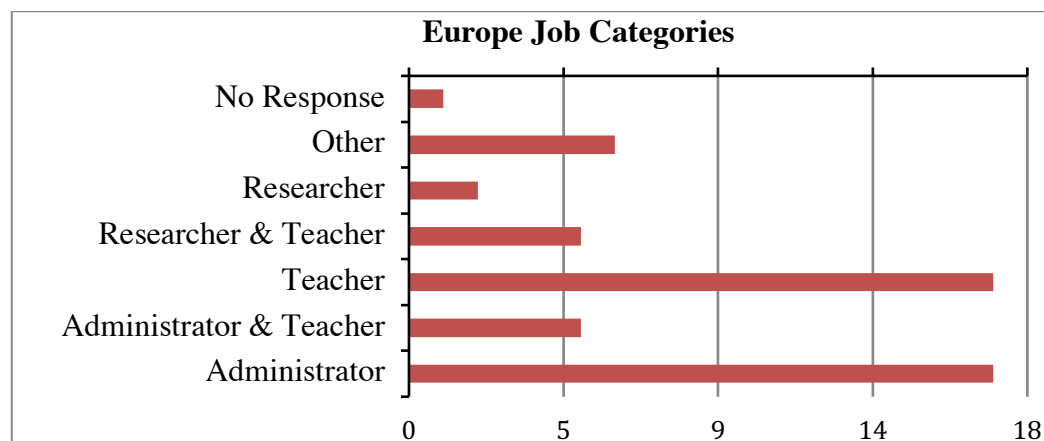


Figure 2: Function of survey participants ($N = 53$)

The 53 European respondents (see Figure 2) were mainly professionals including but not limited to teachers, researchers and administrators from a total of 23 countries (Figure 3) across Europe³ with the highest number of respondents from the United Kingdom (7). Seven respondents submitted some or all of their responses in International Sign while all others ($n = 46$) responded in written English.

³ This Google map link highlights the locations of respondents:
<https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msid=213385246584454453267.0004d605aab83b7dcf992&msa=0>

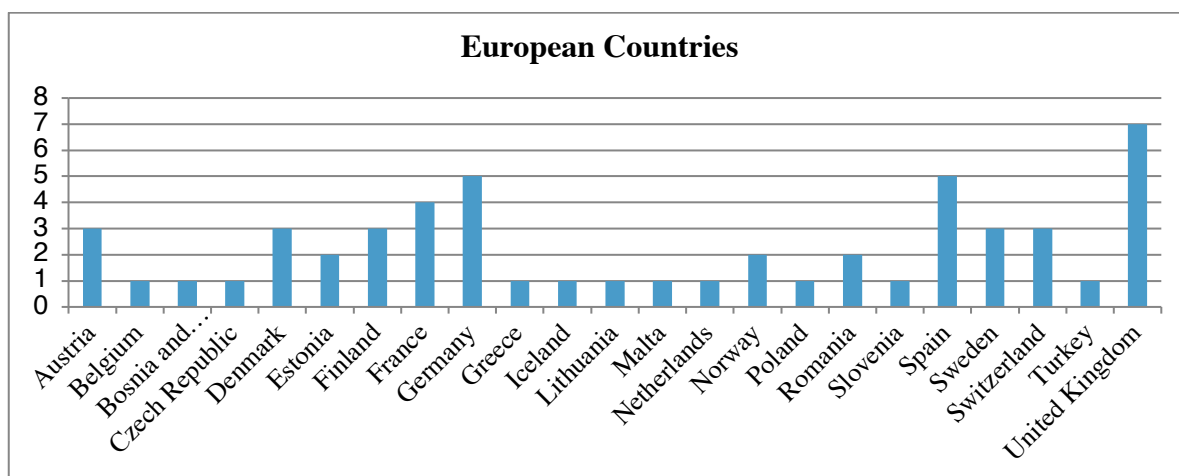


Figure 3: Reporting countries across Europe (N = 53)

The respondents came from different types of institutions: higher education, secondary schools, teacher trainer colleges/centers, assessment providers, language centers, adult education centers, national Deaf organizations and sign language course providers (Table 1).

Table 1: Type of institution (N = 79, multiple responses possible)

| Type of institution/organization | Frequency |
|------------------------------------|-----------|
| Higher education institute | 29 |
| Teacher trainer center | 7 |
| Teacher education/ Teacher college | 8 |
| Assessment & examination provider | 7 |
| Language school/ center | 9 |
| Adult education | 10 |
| National deaf organization | 3 |
| NGO | 1 |
| Sign language course provider | 5 |
| Secondary school | 1 |

Most of these institutions ($n = 31$) offer sign language courses as opposed to workshops (see Table 2). Others provide sign language workshops ($n = 12$), vocational training in sign language ($n = 8$), continuing education (non-matriculation) ($n = 8$), and teacher training ($n = 1$). A smaller group offers both bachelor and master programs ($n = 3$). The length of programs ranges from 100 hours to four years. The majority (33/53) do not require any sign language skills prior to program commencement. Only 13 require sign language skills before entering a program (no responses: 7). At this point, it is unclear what level of sign language (if any) is required to be admitted in those programs.

Table 2: Level of sign language courses offered (N = 97, multiple responses possible)

| Level of sign language courses | Frequency |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Courses only | 31 |

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| Workshops only | 12 |
| Vocational training | 8 |
| Continuing education | 8 |
| BA program | 25 |
| MA program | 9 |
| BA and MA program | 3 |
| Teacher training | 1 |

4.2 Familiarity with and implementation of the CEFR

More institutions/organizations are familiar with CEFR than not (a total of 37 as opposed to 6, see Table 3) or they may know someone else within their country/region who is using CEFR, indicating a widespread recognition of the CEFR “brand”.

Table 3: Institutional/organizational familiarity with the CEFR (N = 53)

| Familiarity | Frequency |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Known to a great extent | 16 |
| Somewhat known | 15 |
| Very little known | 6 |
| Not known at all | 6 |

Fewer than half of the respondents (23/52) reported that the CEFR has been translated into their spoken language(s) (to the best of their knowledge) and a much smaller number (total of four) have had the CEFR translated into their sign language(s). A further 17 respondents reported that there are plans in place to do work in this regard. On the basis of these responses, we can say that not many institutions/organizations have yet implemented CEFR for sign languages (a total of 18 or 34% institutions/organizations, Table 4). The main reason for non-implementation lies with their self-reported lack of familiarity or because they are using another framework in place of the CEFR such as an in-house assessment tool. However, seven institutions/organizations in the following countries: Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and United Kingdom report that they are currently in the process of implementation. Within the institutions/organizations, sign language teachers and material developers primarily use the CEFR in the following domains: sign language interpreting, sign language assessment, and sign language material/ curriculum development.

Table 4: Institutional/organizational implementation of CEFR (N = 53)

| Yes | No | No Answer |
|-----|----|-----------|
| 18 | 19 | 16 |

A majority of respondents who do not use the CEFR report that they are using materials that have been developed either countrywide or for an institutional curriculum. Of those that have implemented CEFR within their institutions, four are satisfied with it and seven report being moderately satisfied. Twenty-three respondents

reported that they found CEFR to be “moderately useful” or “very useful”, mainly with regard to its use in framing the curriculum/syllabus development and with regard to testing/assessment/certification. Eight respondents have undertaken the process to systematically map their teaching of sign language to the CEFR and a further 23 respondents have specific plans to begin this process. An additional 16 reported that this has been carried out on an institution-wide basis.

In order to implement CEFR, institutions go through the process of collaboration, gathering and reviewing CEFR, and conducting meetings to discuss how best to begin making adaptations to the CEFR instrument to ensure its suitability for teaching and learning sign languages. Most of those who report using CEFR have implemented most of the lower levels (A1-B1) and a few are planning on implementing C-levels. A total of 18 respondents expressed interest in attending training provided via the ECML to focus on implementation of C1/C2 levels. Additionally, 18 respondents expressed willingness to share CEFR-based work samples with the team.

A small number of survey participants (19/53) provided information on the levels of CEFR that have been implemented in their curriculum (Table 5).

Table 5: Application of CEFR levels (N = 19)

| | A1 | A2 | B1 | B2 | C1 |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| A1 | 12 | | | | |
| A2 | 31 | | | | |
| B1 | 25 | 16 | | | |
| B2 | 22 | 13 | 14 | | |
| C1 | 19 | 9 | 10 | 10 | |
| C2 | 20 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 7 |

4.3 Assessment of sign language competencies

Respondents reported significant variation in assessment frequency of students' sign language competencies, with most carrying out assessment at the end of each semester/course (29/56 responses, see Table 6).

Table 6: Assessment frequency of students' sign language competencies (N = 56, multiple responses possible)

| Assessment of sign language competencies | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| After each class (module) at the end of the semester | 29 |
| At the end of the academic year | 7 |
| Both at end of class (semester)/academic year | 4 |
| Final exam before graduation | 7 |
| Every 4 months/3 times a year | 2 |
| On-going/Continuous | 4 |
| Don't know | 1 |
| Undecided | 1 |
| Other | 3 |

Approximately half of the respondents reported that they assess in the following language areas: vocabulary ($n = 24$), discourse ($n = 27$), and language in use ($n = 27$).

Table 7: Assessment areas in language (N = 78, multiple responses possible)

| Language area | Frequency | Description |
|-----------------|-----------|--|
| Vocabulary | 24 | Vocabulary knowledge, communicative interaction and content knowledge. Iconicity. Vocabulary knowledge and communicative interaction. |
| Discourse | 27 | |
| Language in use | 27 | Grammar, sociolinguistics, cultural know-how. Grammar. Basic grammar. Grammar in theory and in use. Swedish Sign Language. I take it that 'language in use' includes all aspects of grammar and sign language form. |

Assessment of sign language production, comprehension, and interaction includes use of standardized tests (outlined in Table 9 below), in-class observations, in-class exams, student portfolios, and interviews with students. Some respondents mention a combination of those (Table 8 below).

Table 8: Assessment method to measure students' sign language competencies (N = 110, multiple responses possible)

| Assessment method | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Standardized tests | 12 |
| Observation in class | 22 |
| Students have to take an in-class exam which will be evaluated later | 18 |
| Interview with students | 20 |
| Sign language portfolio that students have built up by themselves | 10* |
| In class exam + interview | 5 |
| In class exam + observation + interview | 4 |
| Standard tests + observation + portfolio | 3 |
| Observation + interview | 2 |
| Portfolio | 3 |
| Film homework/ examination | 5 |
| Written assignments | 3 |
| Group discussion | 1 |
| Undecided/ unsure | 2 |

(*Nine in combination with other assessment)

Most of the respondents make use of observation, standardized tests, in-class examinations or interviews (or a combination of these) as a means to test student sign language production (Table 9).

Table 9: Assessment method to measure students' sign language production ($N = 74$, multiple responses possible)

| Assessment method | Frequency | Description |
|--------------------|-----------|--|
| Standardized tests | 11 | Interpreter register test Fictional interpreting test BSL British Sign Language (BSL) conversation skills Topic and level assessment Degree of language proficiency Comprehension test |
| Observation | 18 | Group work informal discussion Regular observation and feedback |
| In-class exam | 16 | Exam is recorded and corrected Created by institution Only used for re-sits |
| Interview | 19 | We are using situations of communication adapted from standardized tests for French (DELF) and we have adapted their evaluation grids for French Sign Language (LSF). Live panel. Additional certification language. Interview between tutor and student, which is recorded on camera. 'Oral' exams |
| Portfolio | 10 | Research topics for portfolio and filming itself for production skills. Examination using film recording. Competitive recruitment of teachers. |
| Other | | Films, project recordings |

A similar pattern emerges when looking at the methods applied to the testing of sign language comprehension and interaction, but with less reported use of standardized tests. For comprehension ($N = 76$) and interaction ($N = 59$) respondents reported only 13 and 8 standardized tests (multiple answers possible), respectively (see Appendix 1, Tables A1 and A2 for respondents' comments). Observation in class is used more frequently (comprehension: $n = 18$; interaction: $n = 20$) and in-class exams occur regularly (comprehension: $n = 17$; interaction: $n = 10$). Interviews are also used to assess sign language comprehension ($n = 15$) and interaction ($n = 16$), less so Portfolios (comprehension: $n = 7$; interaction: $n = 5$).

A total of 15/24 respondents expressed the view that there is a need for more standardized CEFR-aligned assessment methods. Specifically, they emphasized the lack of description available regarding what might constitute appropriate CEFR-aligned comprehension and production tasks, both for formative and summative assessment. They also noted the need for comparison across assessment data to offer points of

contrast. Many expressed a need for more collaboration and information exchange (Table 10).

Table 10: Comments from respondents about sign language assessment production needs (n = 5)

| Comments |
|---|
| "Better training qualification that is designed for SL area." |
| "Too many things to list here." |
| "Published and through descriptions on the process of implementing the CEFR in other countries (interpreter education)." |
| "I would like to see more collaboration with other countries in Europe to learn about what is being used." |
| "I spoke to my colleagues and we agreed that there is a need for more information/emails in Europe about what is being done." |
| "Training materials." |

5. Discussion

This survey is the first of its kind in Europe relating to the CEFR and sign languages, contributing to documenting how widely sign languages are taught, and to what level in tertiary education across Europe. Writing in 2016, De Wit documents more than 87 training programs for sign language interpreters in Europe (2016, p. 36) in 32 countries (here Figure 2.1, p. 37), ranging from short temporary non-degree courses to MA degree programs. De Wit provides no information on CEFR language levels of the graduates of these programs. There are an estimated 8,591 sign language interpreters active in Europe (De Wit, 2016, p. 50, p. 58) in member (6,555) and non-member states, for an estimated 1,373,000 sign language users in 43 countries and regions. The European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters continues to gather data on existing sign language interpreting programs in Europe and new programs are still in the process of being established.

In recent years, there has been a move toward standardized instruction and assessment practices in sign language programs in the United States (e.g., CASLI, 2016), Australia, and Britain (Napier, 2006). In 31 EU countries, De Wit identified 28 bachelor and 15 master programs, with 7 countries having more than one bachelor, and only France having more than one master program (De Wit, 2016, p. 37). Our survey of 23 countries provides a snapshot on levels of familiarity, implementation, and assessment issues related to the CEFR for sign languages. This is the first step towards the development of a standardized CEFR-aligned assessment system for sign language competency for professionals in Europe.

What becomes very obvious is that collaboration in developing and implementing a CEFR for sign languages in curricula is in its infancy, and that structural and longitudinal exchange of information and research results about the further development of aspects of the CEFR for sign languages is urgently needed. The lack of a validated and reliable test battery or batteries for sign language(s) as an L2 is evident, not least resulting from the fact that the sign languages of Europe remain under-described (Vermeerbergen & Leeson, 2011), and in many instances,

unrecognized in their countries (Wheatley & Pabsch, 2012). Further, the need to benchmark current standards and point in the direction of best practice outcomes has gained attention at European level: following from two years of consultation, efsli published documentation, presented to the European Parliament, outlining minimum competencies that graduates from a three years Bachelor program should attain (Leeson & Calle, 2013) along with a sister document on assessment (Leeson, Bown, & Calle, 2013). These documents include a call for a European effort to use the CEFR in the teaching, learning and assessment of sign languages.

We would also suggest that at present, there are inconsistencies in the curricular development and assessment methods implemented across sign language interpreter education programs in Europe, in great part because interpreter education is located in a wide range of institutional and NGO settings. Given this variability, coupled with the lack of any pan-European accreditation of interpreter education programs, many institutions in Europe have requested efsli to provide model curricula (De Wit, 2012). As we have seen, very few programs that train interpreters – or where sign language courses are offered as part of an institution's range of language options – report that they are currently incorporating the use of CEFR. Thus, there is a need for additional CEFR training and resources to be made available before the goal of standardization of CEFR usage for sign language instruction and interpreter education programs can be achieved. This is a long way off, not least because very few resources are made available in sign languages and the majority of sign language educators are Deaf, with potentially limited access to written documentation in English/French (the primary working languages of the Council of Europe). Evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence (Van den Bogaerde, 2013) are essential ingredients in informing the ProSign team in their collaborative move toward standardization. ProSign's efforts to push for standardization and become an information clearinghouse for resources and materials for sign language programs across Europe has meanwhile resulted, via the ECML website, in the availability of CEFR descriptors for sign languages (Leeson et al., 2016).

6. Action: Implementing our findings

Since completion of the survey, podcasts discussing CEFR in International Sign were created to ensure accessibility for Deaf teachers of sign languages⁴. These were made available on the ECML's website and garnered many hits. Indeed, we know that the ECML's ProSign website has attracted a significantly greater number of hits than other projects, suggesting that the availability of content in International Sign is reaching our target audience.

Also, the podcasts received a very positive response from teachers of sign languages across Europe and elsewhere (e.g., Canada, Brazil). Further, dissemination has occurred via a number of face to face events. Some, funded by ECML, have facilitated significant engagement with representatives of 24 ECML member countries, while other parallel events have facilitated dissemination to hundreds of sign language teachers from across the continent of Europe. These events have also helped move more

⁴ <http://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2012-2015/ProSign/tabid/1752/Default.aspx>

institutions toward implementation of CEFR and played a part in motivating moves to establish a pan-European association of sign language teachers.⁵

Our next steps entail the ongoing localization of the CEFR document to local sign languages as well as a follow up project that seeks to pilot use of the European Language Portfolio in a number of university sign language classes in 2017-18. We are also continuing to build capacity amongst sign language teachers with regard to application of CEFR to their teaching practice. Our commitment to empirically validating the CEFR descriptors is also being brought forth in partnership with the sign language teachers who have worked with us over the past five years.

⁵ See European Network of Sign Language Teachers (ENSLT)'s website at <http://www.enslt.eu/>

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Appendix

*Table A1: Assessment methods to measure students' sign language comprehension
(N = 76, multiple responses possible)*

| Assessment method | Frequency | Description |
|----------------------|-----------|---|
| Standardized tests | 13 | <p>"A fictional interpreting assignment"</p> <p>"BSL DVD - questions and answers given by awarding organisation BSL clips."</p> <p>"2 groups 'narratives'."</p> <p>"Degree of language proficiency."</p> <p>"Sign language films with sets of questions to answer."</p> <p>"Answer questions (in SL) about a given text."</p> |
| Observation in class | 18 | <p>"Conversation skills - topics and filming for evidence."</p> <p>"A Deaf person is invited to talk to one of the students and we observe if they can communicate in sign language."</p> |
| In class exam | 17 | <p>"We are using situations of communication adapted from standardized tests for French (DELF), and we have adapted their evaluation grids for LSF."</p> <p>"Students review a few films and answer questions about what Deaf persons in the film are signing."</p> |
| Interview | 15 | <p>"Additional certification language."</p> <p>"'Oral' exams."</p> |
| Portfolio | 7 | <p>"Competitive recruitment of teachers"</p> |
| Other | 6 | <p>"Communication test."</p> <p>"Homework."</p> <p>"(Incomplete response) Seeing as Sweden is small.... I pick specific signs to see how they sign about the country and then I document same."</p> <p>"I don't know."</p> <p>"Not decided."</p> |

*Table A2: Assessment method to measure students' sign language interaction
(N = 59, multiple responses possible)*

| Assessment method | Frequency | Description |
|--------------------|-----------|--|
| Standardized tests | 8 | <p>"I am knowledgeable about the CEFR so it is easy to assign levels once I have observed a student's signing expression and interaction."</p> <p>"A fictional interpreting assignment."</p> <p>"Conversation skills and BSL DVD from awarding organization."</p> <p>"Workshop with different tasks."</p> <p>"Degree of language proficiency."</p> |
| Observation | 20 | "Group work exercises" |
| In class exam | 10 | "I give them questions about several themes covered during the semester." |
| Interview | 16 | <p>"Additional certification language."</p> <p>"Oral' exams."</p> |
| Portfolio | 5 | |