

# Roadblocks to Inclusive Education and Career Development for People with Hearing Impairments in French and Italian Speaking Switzerland

Silvia Rodríguez Vázquez<sup>1</sup>, Pierrette Bouillon<sup>1</sup>, Irene Strasly<sup>1</sup>, Christiane Hohenstein<sup>2</sup>,  
Larysa Zavgorodnia<sup>2</sup> and Manuela Näf<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dpt. of Translation Technology - Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI)  
University of Geneva - 40, Bd. Du Pont d'Arve - 1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland

pierrette.bouillon|silvia.rodriguez|irene.strasly@unige.ch

<sup>2</sup> Intercultural Studies & Linguistic Diversity - School of Applied Linguistics Zurich University of Applied Sciences- Theaterstrasse 17 - CH-8401 Winterthur  
christiane.hohenstein|larysa.zavgorodnia@zhaw.ch

## Abstract

At present, the penetration rate of deaf and hearing impaired students in tertiary education continues to be low in the French and Italian regions of Switzerland. This paper summarises some of the findings of a nation-wide survey, conducted to provide a better understanding of why that is the case. Data gathered seems to point at communication barriers during primary and secondary education as the main reasons for this lack of integration.

## 1 Research Background

In Switzerland, the number of students accessing tertiary education has doubled since 2000 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2018). However, while national statistics show that the penetration rate of certain population groups, such as women and foreign students, has substantially increased over the past years, the percentage of people with disabilities reaching higher education has decreased considerably and remains extremely low when compared to non-disabled individuals (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2017).

The Barrier-free Communication (BFC) project aims at reducing this gap through the development of practical guidance and technological resources to facilitate barrier-free communication among three key stakeholders (students – with and without disabilities– , teaching and administrative staff members) in higher education institutions. The project places particular emphasis on the need to advocate for a more inclusive tertiary education for students

with visual and hearing impairments in the country.

As part of the first stage of the project, a nation-wide survey was conducted in order to elicit data on the communication-related barriers that the aforementioned population groups are currently experiencing in Switzerland, from primary education to employment.

In this paper, we focus on the particular situation of deaf and hearing impaired individuals from the French and Italian speaking areas of the country, as perceived by representatives from these communities themselves and those surrounding them.

## 2 The Survey

### 2.1 Scope

The main goal of the survey was to identify the communicative and technological obstacles faced in educational settings by deaf, hearing impaired, blind and visually impaired individuals in Switzerland. However, the survey addressed not only these communities, but also their relatives and staff members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and any other type of institution offering support to these population groups. In addition, it also targeted sign language teachers, interpreters and learners. The rationale was to better understand the potentially different views and demands that these groups may have with regard to the same issues.

### 2.2 Design and Implementation

The survey, launched in seven languages (English, French, German, Italian, Swiss French

Sign Language (LSF-CH), Swiss German Sign Language (DSGS) and Swiss Italian Sign Language (LIS-SI), was implemented through SurveyMonkey, an accessible online survey administration platform.<sup>54</sup> A ‘snowball’ sampling method was used to recruit targeted respondents, who were given eight weeks to complete the online survey.<sup>55</sup> It featured between 30 and 60 questions and covered six different dimensions, according to the respondents’ profile: (i) communication barriers in education and training; (ii) obstacles to employment; (iii) communication practices at work; (iv) sign language learning; (v) use of sign language services; and (vi) use of technologies.

### 3 Top-Level Findings

This paper summarises the evidence found with regard to areas (i) and (ii) affecting deaf and hearing-impaired individuals. It focuses on the responses collected through the French, Italian and English versions of the questionnaire. Preliminary results concerning the German-speaking region of Switzerland are presented in Hohenstein et al. (2018), together with further details about the survey methods.

#### 3.1 Respondents’ Profile

A total of 210 usable responses were collected through all language versions of the survey: 138 German (DE), 66 French (FR), 5 Italian (IT) and 1 English (EN).<sup>56</sup> For the purposes of this paper, data from the last three groups will be presented collectively. The 72 respondents were distributed per profile as follows:

- *Profile 1: Deaf and hearing impaired individuals* (N=17, 24%; 8 male, 9 female): All of Swiss nationality, with the majority of them (88%) ranging between 36 and 65 years (2 were in the age range 18-35). Twelve (N=12, 71%) were deaf and 5 (29%) hard of hearing. Only two deaf respondents listed LSF-SR or LIS as

their mother tongue and 8 (67%) as L2 or L3.<sup>57</sup> Five (29%) had reached tertiary education.

- *Profile 2: Relatives* (N=9, 13%; 4 male, 5 female): All respondents from this group were Swiss and the age range was quite diverse (from 18 to 65 years). Two of them indicated that LSF-SR was their native language (as their parents were deaf) and three others marked it as L2.

- *Profile 3: Members of institutions* (N=25, 35%; 3 male, 21 female, 1 non-disclosed): Nationalities included Swiss (80%), Italian (8%), French (4%), Belgian (4%) and American (4%). English was the mother tongue of one respondent, although the majority had French as their single native language (N=19, 76%). The rest considered French at the same level as that of German (N=1), Italian (N=2) or English (N=1). Almost half of the respondents from this group added sign language as L3. More than half worked in the educational sector (N=13, 52%), 5 (20%) in a community-related centre, 4 (16%) in the private sector and 3 (12%) in the medical domain.

- *Profile 4: Sign language (SL) interpreters and teachers* (N=6, 8%; 3 male, 3 female): All of Swiss origin, with ages between 46 and 60.

- *Profile 5: Sign language learners (SL)* (N=10, 14%; 1 male, 9 female): All young adults (9 Swiss, 1 Swiss-Italian nationality), with French (N=6), Portuguese (N=1) and Italian (N=3) as dominant languages.

The remaining 5 respondents were 2 blind and 3 members of blind-related institutions, but these profiles fall outside the scope of this paper.

#### 3.2 Major roadblocks to education

- Primary school. Regardless of the participants’ profile, data suggest that the main obstacle faced is the lack of awareness about the communication needs of deaf and hearing impaired communities. According to the

<sup>54</sup> The survey is available for download in PDF, in all four languages, at <https://goo.gl/wX6CeA> Last access: 20 September 2018.

<sup>55</sup> The original call for participation is available at the BFC project website: <https://bfc.unige.ch/en/news/calls/survey-education/> Last access: 20 September 2018.

<sup>56</sup> (i) The number of responses per language is proportional to the language distribution in Switzerland. See <https://goo.gl/b4efm6> Last access: 20 August 2018.

(ii) The respondent who chose to participate using the English language version did so under *Profile 3*. The distribution of the five participants who used the Italian version was the following: *Profile 1* (N=1), *Profile 3* (N=1) and *Profile 5* (N=2). The fifth respondent chose a profile related to the blind community, so the data were not considered for the present paper.

<sup>57</sup> In language learning contexts, we say L2 and L3 to refer to an individual’s second language or third language, respectively.

respondents, this can be observed both among hearing peers and teachers. The lack of social awareness is often translated into lack of patience, as well as insufficient attention and time investment. Deaf children are more and more integrated in non-specialised schools, but the general belief is that these are not yet prepared to successfully accommodate their needs. Teachers lack basic sign language skills and interpreting services are scarce, which makes it difficult for children to connect with the classroom and their peers. A common desire for a full bilingual solution to reduce isolation was observed.

-Secondary school. While the lack of social awareness is a predominant theme among all data collected, especially in the case of deaf respondents, the need for interpreting services seems to be more important in secondary and tertiary education. As courses become more complex, respondents complain about the lack of full interpreting services (sign language and cued speech). The community believes there are not enough professionals available and, therefore, the quality of the education they receive is low. Similarly, respondents consider that deaf students need to invest more time, cognitive and attentional efforts than hearing peers, a fact that teachers are not always aware of. For instance, respondent R26 states: « L'attitude de l'enseignant n'est pas toujours adaptée (son positionnement, sa vitesse d'élocution, etc.), ce qui ne facilite pas la communication avec l'enfant sourd. La disposition de la classe n'est pas forcément pensée pour accueillir des personnes sourdes (placement des pupitres). »<sup>58</sup>

-Tertiary education. Respondents consider that students with hearing impairments feel discouraged and do not reach university mainly due to (i) the poor level of education received before and (ii) the lack of national support (financial and political) to get interpreting services. A few respondents also mentioned the lack of accessibility during the enrollment process. Given the complexity of higher education courses and infrastructure (larger rooms, number of students), unidirectional communication seems inviable. A few non-deaf

respondents (SL learners) highlighted that the higher use of technology in tertiary education can bridge the communication gap (use of digital course materials, communication with teachers and peers via e-mail and forums) and reduce isolation.

### 3.3 Employment access

While the vast majority (87%) believe that they have less chances on the job market than their hearing peers, the hearing-impaired individuals and relatives did not show a high level of dissatisfaction when asked about their experiences with applications for an apprenticeship or a job position. Evidence seems to indicate that not having enough support to access higher education is not considered as a major cause for lack of employment. Respondents, however, showed frustration as they believe they are not always free to choose the career path they want due to the lack of state help to support them with the services they need at university.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

Overall, data collected shows a widespread discontent among the studied communities. Despite the relatively low number of respondents, the survey has provided insight into which are the major concerns of deaf and hearing impaired individuals in French and Italian speaking Switzerland with regard to their access to education in particular. Our findings seem to be in line with those presented in Hohenstein et al. (2018) in the case of German-speaking Switzerland.

The survey proved to be a very useful instrument to gather data on other dimensions of barrier-free communication not covered in this paper. One of them was SL teaching and learning. While a comprehensive data analysis process is still ongoing, in the short term the team plans to expand on the findings from the SignTeach survey<sup>59</sup>, in which Switzerland representation was considerably low (9 respondents), with complementary data from our national survey.

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<sup>58</sup> “The teacher's attitude is not always appropriate (e.g. positioning, speech rate, etc.), which makes the communication with the deaf child harder. The layout of the classroom is not necessarily designed to

accommodate deaf students either (e.g. arrangement of desks).” Our translation.

<sup>59</sup> <https://goo.gl/jAPyB7> Last access: 20 August 2018.

## Acknowledgements

The work presented in this paper was conducted in the framework of the Project “P-16: Proposal and implementation of a Swiss research centre for barrier-free communication” (2017-2020), a joint effort of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences and the University of Geneva. It is approved by *swissuniversities* and funded by federal contributions. We would like to express our gratitude to: S. Girletti and M. Maradan for the translation of the Italian and French versions of the questionnaire; A. Pelletier and S. Tedjani, who translated the survey questions into LSF-CH; I. Amore, who did the LIS-SI videos; and J. González for the technical support provided.

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