

## The role of Sign Language (LIS) in the Italian educational system

*O papel da Língua de Sinais Italiana (LIS) no sistema educacional italiano*

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**Abstract:** Italian Sign Language (LIS) education is going through a profound transformation in Italy. Since its recognition, in 2021, as the natural language of the Deaf minority, and the definition of LIS interpreters as the designated professionals to mediate communication needs involving signers in all public settings, the debate has increased in the attempt to determine the content and purpose(s) of the interpreters' training (in Higher Education?) courses. While formal education in sign language (SL) is becoming increasingly important for interpreters' training, and universities are opening experimental courses for them, the linguistic education of deaf children and the vocational training of Deaf adults as SL teachers are gaining new attention. In light of these changes, I discuss the state of the art of general education for the deaf in Italy, glancing at the steps that led to LIS recognition, and the training of bimodal bilingual (deaf) children in public education. Past choices influence the present. The topic will be covered from a historical and interdisciplinary perspective, following the evolution in the social as well as political decisions that influenced deaf education.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, language policy, Italian sign language, deaf education, minority languages.

**Resumo:** O ensino da Língua de Sinais Italiana (LIS) está passando por uma profunda transformação na Itália. Desde o seu reconhecimento em 2021, como a língua natural da minoria surda, juntamente com o dos intérpretes de LIS como profissionais designados para mediar suas necessidades de comunicação em todos os ambientes públicos, o debate aumentou na tentativa de determinar o conteúdo e o(s) objetivo(s) dos cursos de formação de intérpretes (no ensino superior?). Enquanto a educação formal em língua de sinais (LS) esteja se tornando cada vez mais importante para o treinamento de intérpretes, e as universidades estão abrindo cursos experimentais para isso, a educação linguística de crianças surdas e o treinamento vocacional de adultos surdos como professores de LS estão ganhando nova atenção. À luz dessas mudanças, discuto o estado da arte da educação geral para surdos na Itália, observando as etapas levaram ao reconhecimento da LIS e ao treinamento de crianças bilíngues (surdas) bimodais na educação pública. O tópico será abordado a partir de uma perspectiva histórica e interdisciplinar, acompanhando a evolução das decisões sociais e políticas que influenciaram a educação de surdos.

**Palavras-chave:** educação inclusiva, política linguística, Língua de Sinais Italiana, educação de surdos, línguas minoritárias.

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## 1 Introduction

It is a special moment to be a researcher in sign language (SL) and its education in Italy. The recent passage of National Law number 69, article 34-ter, on 21 May 2021, recognized Italian Sign Language (LIS) as that of the Deaf linguistic minority and indicated LIS interpreters as the professionals in charge of mediating deaf-hearing communication in public settings. Combined with the recent publication of the Companion volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2020), makes it a perfect moment to redesign LIS education on an equal basis to other (spoken) languages.

This article is a snapshot of such changing moments for LIS, prompted by years of scientific, educational, and political attempts to make it the official language of the Italian Deaf community and to promote equal opportunities for D/deaf children to live and learn using the language of their choice. Retracing the changes in the language policies concerning SL in Italy in the past century, and the outcomes in the social and linguistic life of the deaf who were in school while these changes occurred, the picture of a diverse Deaf community appears. Especially starting from 1971, a lot has changed since the passing of the law on scholar inclusion (in Italian, *integrazione scolastica*), allowing students with disabilities the opportunity to attend general education.

Focusing on deaf children, that single decision has led to many adjustments, and the definition of new professionals working in school to ease their integration, learning, and social living. Once restricted to special schools, deaf children started to attend general education, which has seen a rapid increase in the presence of children with special needs. Special schools began to shut down and those professionals who used to work there moved to general education. Where LIS would be combined with general education, excellence would arise. This is the case of the infancy and primary school in Cossato, Biella, which has promoted a project for the inclusion of the deaf involving deaf educators, LIS training, and sign language interpreters to address and solve any

possible problem arising from misunderstandings and different life backgrounds.

The passage of the law on LIS as a minority language (Law 69/2021), in a context where there are twelve recognized minority languages, taught at school and protected by Law 482 of December 15th, 1999, offers the opportunity for it to be safeguarded as well. Once again, this role is in charge of the Italian general education schools.

## 2 Language Policy and Deafness in Italy

On May 21st, 2021, in Law number 69, regulating several actions prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, the Republic of Italy passed an article (Art. 34-ter) recognizing Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Italian Tactile Sign Language (LIST) as the languages of the signing deaf and deafblind minorities, with the following sentence: “[...] the Republic recognizes, promotes, and protects the Italian sign language (LIS) and tactile Italian sign language (LIST)”<sup>1</sup> (Art. 34-ter, paragraph 1).

In the Italian constitution, sentences like this one are used to recall the fundamental rights of people: the right to a family, to work, to receive education, to a language and, now, to LIS as a minority language. In Italy, minority languages (ML) are recognized and safeguarded by Law 482 of December 15th, 1999. The preservation and teaching of the ML is mostly in charge of the local schools, receiving extra funding to promote its education through curricular and extracurricular activities, open to children and their families. Schools providing this kind of education can promote classes in ML and also train adults through extra-curricular activities.

The 2021 national law on LIS followed some circumstances that helped its passage. Given the circumstances, one – accidental - helping factor came from the extra visibility of sign language during the COVID-19 pandemic, when LIS interpreters were streamed daily together with the politicians who would

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<sup>1</sup>In Italian, “[...] la Repubblica riconosce, promuove e tutela la lingua dei segni italiana (LIS) e la lingua dei segni italiana tattile (LIST).”

update the population on what was happening during and in between lockdowns. LIS became a familiar language and a topic of interest for the general population, who started to show interest in learning more about it and began looking it up on the Internet (Gianfreda, Gulli, La Mano, & Volterra, 2021; Gulli & Volterra, 2020).

From the political perspective, an important drive came from the number of regional laws recognizing and supporting activities in LIS since 2011. In that year, some political parties and associations supporting oral education suggested LIS be an inadequate and archaic way to communicate with the deaf, that it was not a “real” language, and, thus, that the acronym should have changed from LIS (in Italian, *Lingua dei Segni Italiana*) to LMG (in Italian, *Linguaggio mimico-gestuale*). In response to this incitement, on May 25th, 2011, hundreds of Deaf people from all over Italy met in Rome to march against yet another abuse of power against the Italian D/deaf community, refusing to be deprived of their natural language and to see it being confused with other non-linguistic forms of communication. The “march on Rome” echoed in many political headquarters and received a lot of public support. On the same day, *Movimento LIS subito!*<sup>2</sup> was born, followed by local protests and sit-ins in Foggia, Milan, and Turin, among others.

The movement was formalized in the shape of a non-political association, asking to take part in the round tables and debates on deaf sign language and to represent and inform about the interests of the Italian D/deaf community. Faced with this act of linguistic awareness, and the organized actions that came after it, one region after the other decided to support the local D/deaf community by passing regional laws recognizing and supporting LIS. In May 2021, almost all of the Italian regions had some kind of regulation about it. Faced with the initiatives coming from their regions, national authorities were prompted to offer a follow-up so, ten years after the birth of *Movimento LIS Subito!*, they had to break the silence in favor of the

D/deaf community and, finally, passed the law recognizing it as a minority language.

A few months after the passage of Law 69/2021, an update regulating the formal education of interpreters has passed, listing a number of actions to favor the social and cultural inclusion of the deaf and deafblind people (also see De Monte, 2022a). The Ministerial Decree signed on January 10th, 2022, regulates the process for interpreters’ training in LIS and LIST, defining a framework for the creation of a new academic degree. We are thus in the midst of a three-year experimental phase (beginning in the academic year 2022-2023) in which universities are invited to propose bachelor’s degree training paths that will be assessed and validated at the end of the trial (Gazzetta Ufficiale, n° 81, 2022).

In an online article discussing the case, Volterra (2022) reports how LIS has been in the interest of many different universities since the first linguistic description of LIS in 1987. Since then, LIS has been taught as a second language and/or for its visual and gestural features. However, there was no consistent investment in this line of research, and many deaf teachers and young researchers were forced to give up their studies because of the lack of funding and long-term perspective. Of course, this has negatively affected the growth and development of traditions in LIS education as well as the growth — in number and professionalism — of deaf SL teachers, who very seldom hold an academic degree.

Having a law framing the way in which interpreters of LIS should be trained is a first step towards the formalization of the whole process, including the formation of LIS teachers and standardization of the language. This is especially true for those deaf teachers who have a long experience in LIS teaching but, due to the unfortunate history of deaf education in Italy (which I will cover in the next section), may not have the titles to access teaching in Higher Education.

### **3 Methodological changes in deaf education: linguistic and social outcomes**

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<sup>2</sup>In English: Movement LIS now!

As already mentioned in De Monte (2022a; 2022b), the past fifty years of deaf education in Italy have been subject to major changes, the direct consequence of which can be seen in all levels of (il)literacy in the adult deaf people taking part of the workforce today. This is especially true in the case of spoken language (in)competence, which is a well-known issue for many deaf people around the world (see Krausneker et al. (2020); Mayer et al. (2020); and Leeson (2006) for an overview of the European situation).

The generation of deaf people who were educated in special schools for the deaf (up until 1971) and who are now aged above 56, was taught that signing was not a language and not to use it in public. For them, sign language is “private to the deaf” and it is often used in combination with words borrowed from spoken Italian. Their signing shows a very high level of variation and can be grouped in “families” rooting back to the college that they have attended. They went to school at a time when they had to repeat each scholar year twice (for a total of 10 years at the elementary level) and would be trained to craft works that would give them the autonomy they needed when school was completed. Typical jobs for the male deaf would be tailoring, carpentry, bookbinder, and blacksmith; in the case of the female deaf, embroidery, laundressing, and hairdressing would be typical professions instead. Their craftwork would be much appreciated for their fine attention to detail and concentration. However, in terms of their competence in spoken language, their ability would easily settle at an elementary level, unless they personally kept studying for their own accomplishments. For the eldest, illiteracy return is also an issue (De Monte, 2022a).

The year 1971 drew a line as Law 118 allowed students with disabilities (thus, deaf students as well) to enter general schools. From the perspective of teaching methodology and social inclusion, the Seventies in Italy was a time when grassroots movements prompted the end of segregation by closing special schools and psychiatric hospitals. As Giangreco & Doyle (2012) recalls, in the years immediately following the passage of Law 118/1971,

“the percentage of students with disabilities placed in general education classes rose from estimates of 20% to 30% to approximately 98% [...]. Law 118 aided the widespread shift of students with disabilities from special schools to general education classes”, leading to what is called *inserimento selvaggio*<sup>3</sup>. They continue: “wholesale shifts were made without necessarily having sufficient transition plans, supports, and trained personnel in place; though as special schools closed, their specialized teachers with skills and knowledge of children with disabilities were placed in some schools as supports” (Giangreco & Doyle, 2012, p. 72). Deaf people who attended general schools after 1971, now aged loosely between 51 and 56, might have severe literacy problems, given the lack of a specific methodology for their education, combined with partial knowledge of LIS, given the absence of a context of use in early childhood.

In 1977, the passage of the landmark Law n° 517 marked a new important stage in the evolution of Italian deaf education. This law provided a number of service delivery parameters to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in general schools such as:

- specially trained support teachers<sup>4</sup>;
- a limit to 20 students per class, when involving at least one student with a disability; and,
- making all extracurricular activities accessible to all students.

The support teachers were to be paired, and still are, with classroom teachers, to facilitate the awareness of the existing differences among students, thus mitigating stigma for students with disabilities. Since the training path of support teachers does not consider sign language, it is unlikely for them to be skilled in it. Once again, most of the training was/is left to the individual’s motivation to learn out of formal education and by trial-and-error.

It is probably with the passage of the landmark Law 104/1992 that deaf education received new, positive inputs, the introduction of whom is generally

<sup>3</sup>In English: wild insertion.

<sup>4</sup>In Italian: insegnante di sostegno.

referred to as communication assistant<sup>5</sup> (in full: *communication and autonomy assistant*). This professional is dedicated to deaf children and his/her role is to facilitate the mediation between the student and the hearing people at school, especially when the child is very young. Although his/her role is very important for any child requiring support in communication (deaf, blind, deafblind, etc.), the training of the communication assistant was long left without any formal requirement. Thus, SL, braille, or any other natural or technical language training was not required. After all, Deaf Studies became a reality in Italy in 1984, and the first descriptive volume on LIS was published in 1987, edited by Virginia Volterra. Given these circumstances, it is likely that formal SL training began around the same time as Law 104/1992 passed.

As a result of these changes, the (now) deaf adults who attended school after the passage of Law 104/1992, were supported by two trained hearing professionals, the support teacher and the communication assistant, to whom a third would soon be added. In the history of deaf education in Italy, the Nineties were also a time when the social and emotional development of the children became important, thus, in the case of deaf children, another new professional profile emerged, which is the *deaf educator*. Considered a positive role model for the deaf child, the deaf educator was (and still is) a Deaf adult, signer, who successfully completed her formal training and would assist the deaf child at school, improving her signing skills and coping mechanisms in the social (hearing) context.

Children who attended school after 1992 also lived through the age of SL “empowerment”. LIS is no longer something to be ashamed of and there is no fear of using it in public. Adults from this period show more confidence in the use of the language when compared to their older peers. Their competence in Italian varies, but it is higher compared to previous generations (De Monte, 2015). The opportunity to use both Italian and SL in online contexts also seems to

play a role in improving their bilingual bimodal literacy skills (Capuano, et al. 2011; Nuccetelli, et al. 2010; Spano, et al. 2011).

Considering the technological development of the past 20 years, this group can also be subdivided into a fourth group of deaf adults who are digital natives, or *millennials*. These are young adults, deaf, now aged under 30, who have always had access to communication technologies and the Internet. Given the huge impact that access to online communication technologies has had in the life of D/deaf people, overcoming distances that would often affect their social life, it is important to consider its influence on the process of learning, experienced by the D/deaf. It has also meant an increased possibility to use SL in online settings, offering – for the first time in history – a choice of which language to use to express their thoughts. All of this, combined with the improvement in the technology of hearing supports, resulted in younger generations having higher linguistic skills in speaking, writing, and SL, the latter being finally considered a full-fledged language with a wider audience, visible to people who have never met a deaf person in their lives.

The common denominator to all of the above-mentioned “groups” is the exposure to LIS, which is no longer something to be ashamed of, but still lacks formal training. Thus, most deaf students learn how to sign in informal contexts, by chance. This is the case, for example, of deaf children born to Deaf signing families, where SL is learned through a “linguistic bath” from their birth, but it is hardly formalized through grammar learning. Other cases include orally educated deaf children learning LIS through the help of friends, in social settings made of signers. In most cases, formal SL training is only available to those signers who decide to become a teacher, thus in the context of vocational training. The National Association of the Deaf (ENS - Ente Nazionale Sordi) or other associations of Deaf LIS teachers typically offer this kind of training, attended by native or near-native signers. Programs usually consider LIS grammar and pedagogical skills to teach LIS to interested people, typically hearing adults.

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<sup>5</sup>In Italian, assistente all'autonomia e alla comunicazione.

#### 4 Language policy and deaf education

When enrolling in public education, families of Italian deaf children can choose between special or general schools. In both cases, all classes are held in Italian and the professionals mentioned in the previous section support students with special needs. The amount of hours allocated to each professional (support teachers, communication assistants, and/or deaf educator) is defined by the individual educational plan (*Piano Educativo Personalizzato – PEI*), which is normally prepared as the student enters the school, after consultation with the family and all other professionals involved in the education of the child. In the case of the D/deaf, for example, the speech therapist can also take part of the consultation process. The PEI is regulated by the legislative Decree 66/2017, which also details the functions of the professionals involved in special education. In all cases, the number of support hours per child cannot exceed 18 hours/week (with respect to the average 30 hours/week of required attendance).

The formal structure of general and special schools are the same: certifications coming from both educational paths are equally valid, as are their duration and ministerial programs of reference. The main differences are in the approach used to train children with disabilities and in the number of pupils grouped in the classroom, which is normally smaller in the case of special schools. Special schools are also open to children without special needs, enrolling in those cases where their parents live near that specific school or are particularly open to the idea of social inclusion, and wish their children to learn SL and join the local community of signers. In fact, special schools often provide extra-curricular activities such as LIS classes or special training for teachers and parents, organized through their extra funds. A census published by the Italian Ministry of Education in 2019 reports the existence of twelve (of eighteen) special schools for the education of the D/deaf, mostly concentrated in Rome or in other greater cities located

in the central-northern regions of Italy (Ministero dell'istruzione, 2019).

The training and the role of the professionals involved are being scrutinized and updated in light of the 2021 law on LIS (Senato della Repubblica, 2023). This far, the support teacher specializes in a one-year vocational training course regarding the features of the different disabilities. Once training is completed, candidate support teachers can register to a list of candidates in a given number of schools, chosen by the candidate. The list scrolls as the position opens, normally at the beginning of each school year, in September. Thus, as for curricular teachers, support teachers are assigned to a specific school and student randomly. Since their training on disability is very broad, support teachers who are hired by special schools may not have any specific skill in deaf education, thus, as already mentioned, the extracurricular training can be provided by the school itself.

Communication assistants (CA) are also trained in a one-year vocational training path, which, however, is not formally defined in terms of contents and language requirements. Thus, the CA training varies a lot and is not always completed with signing skills. Since the role of the CA is to support the child during the learning process, using a set of strategies to adapt the contents provided by their teachers during classes, should they be skilled signers, they could often serve also as “educational interpreters”. In this case, they would mediate in most interactions between the bimodal bilingual deaf child and other hearing school professionals.

Given the variety in the type of deaf students attending school, many of whom are orally educated<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>6</sup>The effects of the Milan Congress on the education of the deaf have meant that, since 1880, SL has been suppressed to favor spoken language education. Since, at the time, schools were often equipped with medical teams who would follow the evolution of the linguistic skills of the deaf, the matter concerned both medicine and school. When the law on scholastic integration passed, in 1971, many professionals coming from special schools were used to educate the deaf in general education as well. The tradition of orally educating the deaf by the motto “signs kill speech” thus moved from special to general schools and is still used by the supporters of the oral method. The difficulty in reaching full SL training, often located only in big cities in the center/north of Italy, has not helped a change in the methodology in use. More recently, the surgical treatment of deafness

it is difficult to impose SL training for the professionals involved in the education of the deaf. While the family of the child has little-to-no power in the choice of the support teacher, in cases where the CA lacks the trust of the child involved, the latter can ask for a substitution with another professional. Similarly, in case of a positive collaboration between the deaf child and her assistant, the first can ask the CA to keep working with her until the end of her scholar age (which in Italy is between 6 and 16 years of age).

### 5 Specific projects and their outcomes: the Cossato model

When the direction of a general school meets the willingness of families, teachers, local health and governmental authorities, excellence happens. It is the case of the infancy and elementary school in Cossato<sup>7</sup>, located in northern Italy, near Biella. This school became famous in Italy for considering deaf children as a linguistic minority already in 1992. Their experience is well described in the book *Una scuola, due lingue* (In English, *One school, two languages*), edited by Lilia Teruggi in 2003.

As in the words of the school's head teacher, reported in the book's opening:

"The project's aim is to integrate deaf children in the "common" school, training a group of deaf children (there is a need for the deaf to stay with other deaf) who acquire LIS as a natural language together with hearing children who use LIS as a second language, as early as possible (that is, starting from kindergarten) with the contribution of collaborators who are experts in LIS"<sup>8</sup>.

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(cochlear implants), the persistent difficulty in training in LIS, and the aging of teachers in general education have contributed to blocking any possible change in favor of bilingual/bimodal education in school. It is only in the past few years that the situation has taken new directions: the 2020 pandemic favored a new generation of online LIS courses and the teacher turnover means having younger and more prepared professionals who would try anything to make their students feel included. However, the results of this change in perspective are not available yet.

<sup>7</sup>More information about the project on the following link: <<https://www.iccossato.edu.it/pagine/lis-lingua-italiana-dei-segni>>. Last visit September 2, 2023.

<sup>8</sup>In original Italian: "Il progetto si propone di integrare i bambini sordi nella scuola "comune", formando un gruppo di bambini sordi (vi è la necessità che i sordi stiano con altri sordi) che

The project, which is still active, is based on the collaboration of the school with the local speech therapy service<sup>9</sup> and the families of the deaf children, all agreeing on the fact that:

1. Deaf children must attend a general school and avoid being institutionalized.

2. Deaf children must acquire SL as early as possible in a "normal" school setting, in order to maximize social integration and curricular learning.

3. It is important for deaf children to be constantly supported by a skilled signer for the whole duration of their scholarly education, to grant continuity.

4. It is important to reach such objectives avoiding the misuse of human and organizational resources, and problems for the users.

Classes are organized so that deaf and hearing children attend together. Teachers work with the support teacher, the deaf educator (who is the 'skilled signer' mentioned above in section 3), and an interpreter. Other than the regular activities, all children attend one hour of extracurricular LIS classes. The constant exposure to both Italian and LIS allows all children to become completely bilingual, thus favoring the exchange of knowledge among peers. Children naturally learn and use LIS for communication, with the help of an interpreter or the support teacher, if needed.

All teachers know how to sign or attend classes to learn LIS, and the constant collaboration between the class teacher, the support teacher, the deaf educator, and the interpreter makes it so that the learning process and interaction modalities of each deaf child are constantly monitored and improved on a daily basis. As a consequence, the deaf and hearing students have the choice of the language they want and are free to learn and use signed or spoken language in a context of "total communication", where

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acquisiscono la LIS come lingua naturale insieme a bambini udenti che impiegano la LIS come seconda lingua il più precocemente possibile (cioè partendo dalla scuola dell'infanzia) con l'apporto di operatori esperti in LIS." (Teruggi, 2003, p. 19)

<sup>9</sup>In Italy, much of the medical services are public and managed by the local health authority (Azienda Sanitaria Locale – ASL). When, following a hearing screening, a child is found deaf, the common practice is for him/her to be followed by an otolaryngologist and a speech therapist from a very early age until the full development of spoken language.

SL is used for any possible interaction, among children or with teachers and other adults.

## 6 General education and deafness: state of the art

The experience described for the school in Cossato is unique in its kind, especially when considering that it came from a general education school. Other schools reporting similar experiences would create separate classes of deaf children, in the case in which the number is sufficient to create one. Most of the time, deaf children attend general school being the only person in their condition, making their best out of their social skills and their ability to exploit their hearing and speaking educational path, as well as the availability of trained support teachers and communication assistants.

As I have explained in the section on language policy and deaf education, SL was never considered a priority in teacher's training, nor in those cases where communication was the goal of it all. This, combined with the lack of standard training of communication assistants, creates many distortions in terms of competence in deafness and respect for the linguistic choices of the families of deaf persons. Teachers and other professionals who exit their vocational training path are informed by medicine and hearing technology, with little knowledge about the way sign language creates the linguistic portfolio of the deaf person. It is very common to hear teachers believing that cochlear implants will eradicate deafness, turning sign language into something of the past. After all, the increasing number of deaf children who receive a cochlear implant at a very early age, preferring the adoption of an oral method rather than a bilingual bimodal one, also supports this idea.

As a result, there are often misunderstandings and mixed feelings about the best methodology to adopt when working with the D/deaf. While this seems to be changing under the pressure of the law on LIS passed in 2021, the ideal of a school allowing D/deaf

children to study in the language of their choice is still far from reality. Schools that are interested in training and using SL often miss the necessary funds to create training projects, despite the best intentions of the teachers working there. In cases where there is only one or two deaf signers, teachers often arrange training for themselves and the class on their own funds.

While universities in Italy are working to set up proper academic paths for training interpreters, a new wave of political decisions are coming from regional initiatives. Just a few months after the recognition of LIS as a minority language, one of the regions located in southern Italy has passed a local law promoting – and funding – teaching LIS in general education, specifically in lower secondary school (students aged 11-14 years old). The project was launched in December 2022 and it considers LIS education for both teachers and students, with the support of information technology. At the moment, there is very little information on the structure of the project, which is the first of its kind. However, should it be successful, it would be the first step towards training LIS as a minority language at school.

## 7 Acknowledgment

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## Policy Texts

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