FROM ALBANIAN SIGN LANGUAGE TO TEACHING METHODOLOGY: DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN INTEGRATED MODEL FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – A CASE STUDY IN ALBANIA

NGA GJUHA E SHENJAVE SHQIPE TE METODOLOGJIA E MËSIMDHËNIES: HARTIMI DHE ZBATIMI I NJË MODELI TË INTEGRUAR PËR ZHVILLIMIN PROFESIONAL TË MËSUESVE – STUDIM RASTI NË SHQIPËRI

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Abstract

The current study analyzed the process of designing and implementing an integrated professional development program for teachers of deaf students, emphasizing the integration of skills in Albanian Sign Language (ASL) with teaching techniques. The research was carried out at the Resource Center for Deaf Students, Albania, in the academic year 2025–2026, using the qualitative, descriptive and interpretive research approach, represented by the institutional case study. The program design was grounded on the analysis of professional needs and individual evaluation of the knowledge of the teachers in ASL. Within the framework of the current research, a six-module training program accredited by the Ministry of Education was implemented, involving 30 teachers.
The content of the modules combined the acquisition of language competences with curriculum design, teaching methods and bilingual education theory. The analysis was based on the program materials, module goals and the procedures for assessing participants' performance. After each module, there were assessments for theoretical and practical skills, where practical skills were assessed through video recordings of the exercises. The findings indicated an organized way of presenting the training material from linguistic and cultural skills to pedagogical and didactic skills.
The research provided a model of institutional practice, which connects the assessment of professional needs with linguistic and methodological preparation of teachers. The conclusions are restricted to the analysis of the program design and implementation, whereas its effect on teachers' practices and students' achievement needs to be studied further.

Keywords: Albanian Sign Language; bilingual education; pedagogical competence; initial knowledge assessment;

1. Introduction

Education of deaf children necessitates the creation of a learning environment, which will ensure linguistic access and equality in terms of participation in the learning process. In this regard, professional preparation of teachers is not restricted to subject expertise but also involves their capacity to conduct classes in compliance with the linguistic and educational needs of the students.
Albanian Sign Language is an integral part of communication and access to learning for those who speak it. Yet the knowledge of sign language and pedagogical use of it are two different skills. It is essential for the teacher not just to be able to communicate but to teach using linguistic and didactic methods.
This relationship between linguistic and pedagogical competence requires professional development programs that treat training in sign language as part of teacher training. The design of such programs relies on the identification of teachers' needs and the intentional organization of the training content.

The study examines the experience of the Resource Center for Deaf Students in designing and implementing an integrated six-module program. The aim is to analyze how the assessment of professional needs was linked to the design of the program and how the transition from training in Albanian Sign Language to curricular, pedagogical and didactic competencies was organized.
Research question: How was an integrated model of teacher professional development designed and implemented, combining training in Albanian Sign Language with teaching methodology and principles of bilingual education, based on the prior identification of professional needs.

2. Albanian context and institutional development

The Institute for Deaf Students, founded in 1963, has many years of experience in educating deaf students in Albania. According to the institutional historical record, until 2022, Albanian Sign Language had not been included as a separate subject at the institution, and no structured program for training teachers in this language had been established.
In 2022, Albanian Sign Language (ASL) was included as a separate subject at the institution. For the first time, in cooperation with the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education (ASCAP), Albanian Sign Language subject curricula were developed for the preparatory class through grade IX, as well as for grades X–XII. In parallel, structured training for teachers in GJSH began. All these events showed the necessity of combining language preparation with curriculum development, methodology, and assessment of the learners' success.
In 2024, the regulatory document concerning reorganization of special education schools into resource centers was adopted.
Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 148 dated March 13, 2024, specified support for educational institutions and the professional development of educational staff among the functions of resource centers [4]. The institutional transformation expanded the scope of activity of the Resource Center for Deaf Students, linking the education of students with professional support for teachers.
In the same period, national curriculum documents constitute the general framework for curricular developments in pre-university education [1, 2]. Following these developments, during the 2025–2026 school year, the integrated six-module program that is the subject of this study was implemented.

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Sign languages are natural linguistic systems, with grammatical organization and distinct structures. The foundational study of American Sign Language contributed to the development of sign language linguistics and to the recognition of sign languages as linguistic systems [7]. In teacher education, this perspective supports the transition from knowledge of individual signs to an understanding of linguistic parameters, grammatical structures, the use of space and non-manual elements. Such knowledge provides the basis for the intentional use of Albanian Sign Language (ASL) in teaching.
Teaching requires the integration of content knowledge with knowledge of how to present and explain it [6]. For teachers working with deaf students, this means using ASL to construct explanations, organize interaction and assess learning. At the same time, teaching ASL as a subject must be distinguished from its use as a language of communication and instruction in other subjects: both functions are related to linguistic competence but require different didactic decisions.

The bilingual dimension extends this relationship by including the use of sign language and written language in the development of knowledge and literacy. The literature on bilingual education of deaf students addresses precisely the relationship between these languages and the development of literacy [5]. In the Albanian context, this requires pedagogical planning for the use of ASL and written Albanian, as well as teaching materials that support understanding and the construction of concepts.

Teachers' professional development requires content linked to practice, active participation in learning, collaboration and reflection on teaching [3]. In the model examined, the prior identification of professional needs served as a starting point for organizing linguistic, curricular and didactic training. Consequently, the conceptual framework of the study is based on the relationship between the initial assessment of knowledge, linguistic competence and pedagogical preparation, without equating participation in training with proven improvement in teaching practice.

4. Study methodology

4.1. Research approach and participants

The study used a qualitative, descriptive and interpretive approach, organized as an institutional case study. A case study allows for the examination of a phenomenon in its real-world context [8]; here, the unit of analysis was the professional development model, examined through needs assessment, module structure, content and assessment procedures.

The study was conducted during the 2025–2026 school year at the Resource Center for Deaf Students. Thirty teachers participated in the program. The institutional documentation reviewed describes the completion of the six modules and the individual assessment of participants after each module. The selection of the case aimed to document and interpret the institutional experience, not to achieve statistical generalization.

4.2. Needs assessment and documentation analysis

Before the program was designed, an assessment of professional needs and individual testing of teachers' knowledge of Albanian Sign Language were carried out. The process aimed to identify the initial level of knowledge and the needs for theoretical, practical and pedagogical training. The information obtained served to guide the training content and link language preparation with teaching requirements.

The initial testing was carried out individually for the 30 teachers and covered three language skills: receptive, expressive and interactive. Receptive skills were assessed through comprehension of video material in ASL; expressive skills, through the description in ASL of situations presented in pictures; and interactive skills, through direct communication with a deaf person on a topic related to school life. The highest possible score on the test was 100 points, while the minimum required to pass was 40 points and 80 points for the category "very good".

The analysis was based on the documentation of the six modules which contained objectives, thematic content, expected outcomes of learning and means of evaluation. Three criteria were considered when evaluating the documents: the connection between the needs and the training objectives, consistency of content across the modules, and organization of theoretical and practical evaluations.

By comparing these aspects in the documentation, the characteristics of the model were described. The analysis focused on the design and implementation of the program, not on the statistical comparison of individual results.

4.3. Participant evaluation and limitations

At the end of each module, there was an individual assessment conducted, consisting of two parts: theoretical assessment of 40 points and practical assessment of 60 points. In this case, the practical part involved the completion of exercises in video format, during which the teachers performed the competencies that had been established as goals of the module. Thus, the combination of theoretical and practical knowledge was made possible, while the results of the assessment were measured in terms of scores.
In addition, this study was concerned with the development and use of the model in a particular institution, thus the results cannot be generalized statistically. Even though there was an initial assessment of knowledge and individual assessments after each module in the program, the study did not seek to assess the influence of the training on the teaching process or on the academic performance of the students.

5. Design and organization of the professional development model

The six-module model was designed and approved by the Ministry of Education. The content of the six modules was organized in such a way that the process started with language and culture and progressed into curriculum development, instruction, assessment, and bilingual education.

Table 1. Organizing an integrated model of teachers' professional development

Module	Training field	Targeted professional competencies
1	Deaf people's sign language and culture	Identifying the linguistic and cultural elements of the deaf community and the Albanian Sign Language which are used for communication and education.
2	Sign language acquisition, grammar, and language diversity	Learning sign language, its' grammatical structure, and linguistic diversity.
3	Sign language grammar, syntax, and linguistic elements	Identification and use of grammatical structures and linguistic parameters of the GJSH.
4	Sign language grammar, classifiers, and non-manual features of sign language	Identification and application of classifiers and non-manuals in the process of meaning formation in GJSH.
5	Curriculum, instruction and assessment of competency-based learning in Albanian Sign Language	Organizing classes based on competency-based programs, using teaching techniques and assessing students' performance in GJSH.
6	Teaching deaf students in two languages: Theory and practice	Awareness about the principles of bilingual education, choosing teaching techniques and utilizing bilingual textbooks in teaching.

Overall, the model was conceived as a formation process that connects language knowledge with its pedagogical use and with the requirements of bilingual education.

6. Results and discussion

The analysis of the program documentation highlighted three interrelated features: the support of module design to identified teacher needs, the organization of content from language knowledge to pedagogical application, and the inclusion of theoretical and practical assessment. These features are discussed below in relation to the purpose of the study and the institutional context.

6.1. Initial assessment of knowledge and identification of professional training needs

The analysis of the program design showed that the definition of its content was based on the preliminary identification of professional needs and on the individual testing of teachers' knowledge in Albanian Sign Language. This data was considered when defining the objectives and content of the modules.
All 30 teachers passed the minimum threshold of the initial testing. Five teachers (16.7%) were classified in the "very good" category, 18 (60%) in the "good" category, while seven (23.3%) showed more pronounced difficulties (Figure 1).

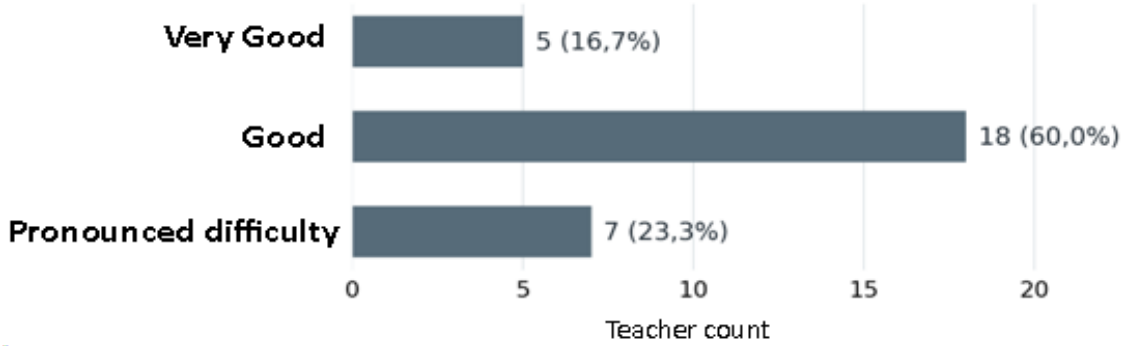


Figure 1. Distribution of teachers according to the results of the initial assessment in GJSH (n = 30).

The most pronounced difficulties were identified in receptive skills. In expressive tasks, difficulties were identified in the use of space, hand shapes, movement and non-manual elements. These findings were reflected in the design of the content of modules 2–4, which address the grammar, structure and linguistic parameters of the ASL.
In this way, the initial assessment of knowledge was included in the program design process, creating the connection between the level of preparation of the participants and the requirements of linguistic and pedagogical training.

6.2. Gradual development of linguistic, pedagogical and bilingual competencies

The order of the six modules reflects a deliberate organization of the content: preparation in Albanian Sign Language and its linguistic structures precedes the treatment of curriculum planning, teaching methodology and bilingual education. This organization supports the connection between content knowledge and the ability to use it in teaching, in accordance with the concept of pedagogical content knowledge [6].
In the case under consideration, this connection is expressed in the transition from language training modules to modules for teaching Albanian Sign Language as a subject and for its use as a language of communication and teaching in other subjects. The bilingual education module

completes this continuity by treating the relationship between Albanian Sign Language and written Albanian in the educational process.

6.3. Theoretical and practical assessment in the institutional context

Another element that emerges from the analysis of the program is the combination of theoretical and practical assessment. At the end of each module, teachers were subject to individual assessment with a total of 100 points: 40 points for theoretical knowledge and 60 points for practical application. The tasks carried out in video format enabled the documentation of the use of Albanian Sign Language in activities defined by the objectives of the modules. This method of assessment is consistent with the program's aim to link language knowledge with its application. However, the documentation of assessment procedures does not in itself constitute evidence of the improvement of teachers' competencies or students' results.

The importance of the model is also related to curricular developments and the expansion of the functions of the Resource Deaf Center. The regulatory framework of 2024 foresees the professional support of teachers among the functions of the resource centers [4]. In this context, the program represents a structured experience of professional development. The contribution of the study lies in documenting the connection between needs identification, training in the GJSH, methodological preparation, and practical evaluation.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The study examined the design and implementation of an integrated professional development model for teachers working with deaf students, in the context of the Deaf Resource Center

The analysis highlighted three main features: the use of initial knowledge assessment for curriculum design, the deliberate sequencing of the content of the six modules, and the combination of theoretical knowledge with practical demonstration of competencies. The model links Albanian Sign Language training with curriculum planning, teaching methodology, and bilingual education.

For further development of the model, systematic review of documented assessment results, the use of comparable instruments for tracking the development of professional competencies, and the study of the implementation of these competencies in teaching practice are recommended.

It adds to the debate about teacher professional development through its institutional model which connects the needs assessment, language competency, and teacher training for teaching deaf students.

The documented experience can serve as a reference point for other institutions that educate deaf students. Adaptation of the model to other contexts should be based on the assessment of the initial competences of teachers and the needs of the institution, not on the unmodified reproduction of the modules.

At the level of educational policy, the Ministry of Education and responsible institutions can consider the development of continuous training that combines competence in SLT, teaching methodology and bilingual education. This approach also recognizes SLT as a language of teaching and learning. The exchange of experience between resource centers, schools and training providers can support the design of adapted professional development practices.

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