

# **The Relationship between the Irish Sign Language Campaign and the Irish Deaf Community**

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***“There is nothing about us, without us”***

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# Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between the Irish Sign Language Recognition campaign and the Irish Deaf community. The dissertation reviews the literature theories of Deafhood, social activism and language rights; applying the theories into the analysis of the findings. The purpose of the exploration of this relationship is to understand where the Irish Deaf community stand in terms of their understanding and their involvement in the campaign. The key focus is the social activism within the community – exploring a range of questions from how the campaign developed to how much do the community know and understand the impact in having ISL recognised as Ireland’s third official language.

The research process involves the compilation of a range of data from two focus group studies that involve thirteen Irish Deaf individuals.

The thesis is laid out in five chapters: introduction; literature review; methodology and methods; findings and analysis and conclusion with the findings and analysis being the main body of the dissertation.

My hope for the outcome of the thesis research is that the analysis of the data gathered can provide a clear idea of where the campaign stands today in the Irish Deaf community. In achieving a clear idea, I am laying out the general attitudes toward the campaign, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses and outlining the suggestions made by the participants in the focus groups in how to improve the campaign in terms of their techniques. In doing so, I hope that the campaign can reap the benefits by considering the recommendations made in the conclusion of the thesis.

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is constantly seen as a form of communication tool and the campaign is making effort in making ISL be seen and treated as a language equal that to spoken languages. In order for the campaign to be successful in their aim, they need to have full backing of the Irish Deaf community.

# Glossary

The glossary lists out relevant terms that will be referred to in the thesis:

ASL – American Sign Language

CIDP – Catholic Institute for Deaf People

d/Deaf – The small letter and capital letter of deaf or Deaf signify different perspectives within the Deaf community. “deaf” is usually associated with a medical perspective that signify that a person has a hearing loss while “Deaf” is connected with the cultural perspective where the Deaf person has a Deaf Identity.

Dáil – the Irish Parliament

EUD – European Union of the Deaf

EUDY – European Union of the Deaf Youth

IDS – Irish Deaf Society

IDYA – Irish Deaf Youth Association

ISL - Irish Sign Language

LIS – Lingua Dei Segni Italiana (Italian Sign Language)

TD - Teachta Dála, Irish for member of Irish Parliament

WFD – World Federation of the Deaf

## Chapter One

# Introduction

### 1.1. Research Topic

The focus of this thesis is the relationship between the Irish Sign Language Recognition Campaign and the Irish Deaf Community. Members of the Irish Deaf community are often regarded as “disabled”; however members of the community see themselves as “disabled” but rather as belonging to a cultural and linguistic minority (Stanley, 2009) with Irish Sign Language (ISL) being the heart of the community. In the last few decades, there has been a slow but growing interest in political activism within the community. It is suggested that this stems from a frustration in being perceived and treated as a disabled and marginalised community. Much of the political activism within the Irish Deaf community is currently being directed towards the current campaign to get Irish Sign Language recognised as Ireland’s third official language. The Deaf community hopes the outcome of this campaign will open doors to a new kind of accessibility within the educational, political, social and employment sectors.

This thesis will explore the knowledge and views of the Irish Deaf community on the Irish Sign Language Recognition campaign. It will also explore their involvement in the campaign; the development of the campaign, activism within the Deaf community and the campaign’s strengths and weaknesses.

#### 1.1.1. Personal reason in the choice of topic

I was drawn towards a constructionist model that Silverman (2009) highlighted in his book, *“Doing Qualitative Research”*; I also happened to stumble across something that made me think. In 2013, I was invited to attend the ISL Bill debate in the Seanad on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2014 by the Irish Deaf Society (IDS). While I was watching the debate about the issues in relation to the ISL Bill, I realised that I did not know what was included in the ISL Bill or to what the senators were referring to. I had attended a few demonstrations and events organised by the campaign and IDS and followed their Facebook page so what was I doing wrong? How come I did not know that much about

what had gone on in the past few years? If I did not know, how many other people did not know either? I believe that in order for a campaign to be successful, one would need strong support from the community; people who can challenge the hierarchies or the “people above them” on human and in this context, language rights. By doing this thesis, I hope to find out where the campaign stands in the Deaf community and look into areas that could be improved so that there is a better chance for the campaign to increase in support and in strength.

## **1.2. Background of the Irish Sign Language Recognition Campaign**

I am going to discuss the development of the Irish Sign Language Recognition Campaign; how it emerged and evolved to what it is today. This understanding is critical for building a clear analysis of the campaign. The key points I want to highlight in my research findings are: how did the campaign develop to where it is today; the key events and issues that contributed to the development; why is the interest in the campaign increasing in recent years; what were the attitudes of Deaf people toward ISL recognition back then and how it has evolved. From a European perspective, the progress achieved in the recognition of sign languages across Europe was and remains slow (Council of Europe, 2003). Recognition of sign language, the Council of Europe (2003: 101) stated:

*“will make it possible to achieve an increase in the numbers of interpreters and ease of access to public and private services, education, recreation and social activity, thereby making significant enhancement of the quality of life and human rights for Deaf people.”*

If sign language recognition will make a significant impact on Deaf people’s lives, why is the level of support from the Deaf community low (with a small increase in support over recent years)?

## **1.3. Introduction to the Irish Deaf Community**

Before I go on to discuss the development of the campaign, it is helpful to briefly give an overview of the policy of ‘Oralism’, which was introduced to the Deaf community in the 1940s.

### 1.3.1 Oralism - A Hegemonic Force

In 1880, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf was held in Milan (the Deaf community often refers to this as “Milan 1880”). In this Congress, several resolutions, which affected the Deaf community for the next century, were passed including the following (Hutchinson, 2007):

- The convention that recognised the superiority of speech over sign language
- The recognition that the use of sign language may hinder the ability to lip-read and speak
- The declaration of a pure oral method to be introduced in Deaf education to enable better aural skills

The resolution did not come into effect in Ireland until in 1947 when it was first introduced in St. Mary’s School for the Deaf Girls located in Dublin. The St. Joseph’s School for Deaf boys did not introduce this method until ten years later, in 1957, with mounting pressure from the Catholic Institution of the Deaf, who funded the school (O’Connell, 2007).

The introduction of the oral system has had a major effect on the Irish Deaf community and the Deaf people themselves, controlling their consciousness. The idea of controlling our consciousness, applying the elitists’ ideas deeply into our conscious so that we become unaware of it, is a major issue that many Deaf people face. The terminologies developed by the hearing community for Deaf people, e.g. hearing loss, deaf mute, deaf and dumb, hearing impairment, always have negative connotations. These terminologies can have major effects on how the hearing community view us and even how we view ourselves. In the late 1950s, the grouping of Deaf boys and girls in their respective schools, based on how well they could hear, had a deep effect on how they behaved toward each other, how they judged each other and even how they judged themselves (e.g. being put in the St. Pius’ section, a “nicer” way of saying Deaf and Dumb, made the girls feel that they are seen by society as ‘stupid’). As Freire (2005) described in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, there are oppressors (the Catholic Church, the hearing society) and sub-oppressors (the partially Deaf girls were the “favourites” in St. Mary’s school as they were seen as more similar to hearing people, with the ability to ‘talk’ and ‘hear’). The simplicity of the wordings had a major effect on these Deaf people, even to this day. The generations who were grouped

based on their level of hearing still view each other as 'different' and judge the generations of Deaf people below them based on how well they can talk. This way of thinking needed to be changed as it affected the Irish Deaf community, pulling Deaf people away from achieving their ambitions by exemplifying the crab theory that is, constantly criticising each other instead of supporting each other. The oral system also created fear among Deaf people with some being afraid or embarrassed to sign in public in case others may view them as inferior or "stupid". In addition to creating fear and shame, the quality of education in the schools had dropped, with pupils being forced to focus on how to pronounce words instead of understanding what the word meant and not being encouraged to think freely, to challenge or to debate. The clustering of young Deaf children into one location brought an unexpected and unintended consequence - an increased hostility to oralism while changing signed languages (Conama, 2009).

Bates (1975) highlighted the importance of being aware that you are a part of a definite hegemonic force – once you have an understanding of how you are under a cultural hegemony, you can begin to analyse yourself, your own consciousness, your 'usual' behaviours that can be seen as either hegemonic or oppressed behaviours. Once you become aware of these behaviours, you can start a 'revolutionary' process within yourself first before you can spread the process to your own society (Bates, 1975). It is only recently that the negative effects these terminologies can have in on a person's mind could be given positive connotations such as Deaf Gain, Deaf Proud, and removing the '-ness', 'loss', 'impairment'; these concepts have been described in the literature review. Cultural hegemony is still visible in the Irish Deaf community – it is difficult to change people's views when they have had fixed views that were taught by hearing elitists and the Catholic Church for so long, views now deeply ingrained into their consciousness. However, there are processes that have begun in the past twenty years that has led to a shift, such as: the cessation of control by parish priests in the community; developments of Deaf-led events or organisations; the shift away from the idea that you have to have the ability to "talk" to be clever, towards appreciating people with diverse intellectual levels; the introduction of Deafhood workshops to make the Deaf community aware of how they are oppressed in certain ways and how to revolt against this oppression; and the development of the campaign to get Irish

Sign Language recognised in Ireland. Despite this progress, there is still a hegemonic force that can be seen in the Deaf community today. Byrne-Dunne (2005) highlighted that a Model School for Deaf Project was established and had nine Deaf children attending in a bilingual environment where ISL and written English are used daily. However, since September 2004, no children have attended the pre-school due to the Department of Education advocating a policy of integration rather than inclusive bilingual education (Byrne-Dunne, 2005). The Department of Education is seen here as a hegemonic force that dictates its view on what is the best form of education for Deaf children, who have different needs to hearing children. In relation to the topic of the development of the ISL campaign and the shifts in people's attitudes, I want to know where is Ireland in terms of the change in attitude toward Irish Sign Language?

#### **1.4. The emergence of the ISL recognition campaign**

In the 1980s, attitudes toward sign languages were shifting. The Swedish government recognised Swedish Sign Language in 1981 (Council of Europe, 2003) and new organisations were being set up such as the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), the European Union of the Deaf Youth (EUDY) and the Irish Deaf Society (IDS). These organisations became vital in terms of their contributions towards the lobbying for sign language recognition. In 1988, Teresa Lynch, now a Deaf interpreter and a lecturer in the Centre of Deaf Studies, stood in St. Patrick's College and gave a speech on how Irish Sign Language is a language with its own grammar and syntax that is different from English and other sign languages. She also stated that ISL should not be treated as a communication tool and that people should start treating it as a language (Lynch, 1988). She proposed a research project that would focus on the Irish Sign Language, gathering the language, coding each expression and making a draft dictionary for tutors to use. The Irish Deaf Society and the Linguistics Institute of Ireland (ITE) would participate in this research project. She concluded the speech with the argument that ISL is its own language and should not be seen or treated as "poor" or "ungrammatical" English (Lynch, 1988). Lynch described the people, who attended as reacting either uncertainly or objecting to the idea she brought in. Eventually, people began to accept this concept, although to this day not everybody accepts it. Ladd (2003) described the colonialism of the mind; being constantly told that sign language should not be used in public and that verbally speaking is the right way to go can affect

people's minds. Repetition of a concept can become so deeply ingrained in a person's mind that the very notion of opposition to such a familiar idea can be confusing. It is hard to shift people's minds towards the idea that ISL is not a communication tool but rather a language; the transformation is extremely slow and even to this day, people are still unsure whether they should refer to ISL as a real language (Deaf Gain describes the idea of sign language as non-written and going against white European ideas - but still represents 'gain' as it challenges people's idea of "language" and linguistics). Some participants in the focus group described Deafhood as a reawakening of the importance of ISL in the progression of Deaf people's lives. However, the attendance of people in these workshops was small so the campaign has to do more than depend solely on these workshops. Gerbaudo (2012) highlighted the importance of the use of social media nowadays in creating political activism upon which I will elaborate in the next section.

#### **1.4.1. Introduction of social media**

The introduction of social media, especially the ability to upload video blogs or "vlogs" had a significant impact on the development of the ISL recognition campaign. People now have the capability to translate written documents and relevant news items into ISL, upload it onto YouTube and share it among the community. However, there are numerous issues in relation to the ISL recognition campaign and how they use social media to broadcast progress updates which were highlighted by the focus group discussions. These issues will be framed and elaborated in chapter four.

#### **1.5. Conclusion**

In conclusion of this introduction section, I have laid out the reasons for the selection of my dissertation topic. I have introduced and explained briefly where the Irish Deaf community stands and how oralism affects the community in how they think and behave. I also summarised the development of the ISL campaign and how social media contributed to the development. In chapter two, I will discuss in my literature review the key concepts that will be relevant to the analysis of the findings. In chapter three, I will discuss the reasons behind my choice of methods and an explanation of my methodology. In chapter four, I will lay out my analysis of the findings I have gathered

from my literature review and data collection. Finally, in chapter five, I will conclude with a reflection on the process I have undertaken in the thesis and the ideas for suggested dissemination following my analysis of the findings.

## Chapter Two

# Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

The topic of this dissertation is:

*“The relationship between the Irish Sign Language Campaign and the Irish Deaf Community”*

In this literature review, I will discuss concepts that are helpful for understanding dynamics within the Irish Deaf community; how the ISL campaign evolved and the relationship between the Irish Deaf Community and the ISL campaign. These concepts are as follows: Deafhood, Deaf Gain, Deaf Space, Community Building, Social Activism and Language Rights. I will also use these concepts in the findings chapter.

In order to be able to understand how, and especially why, the Deaf community works the way it does, it is vital to outline the concept and principles of ‘Deafhood’. Deafhood is a shifting of Deaf people’s attitudes and how they perceive Deaf Identity to a positive, rather than the usual negative slant. The development of this shift in attitude is linked to the concept, “Deaf Gain”.

Using the Deaf Gain concept, I will select a specific focus which is Language Gain. From this vantage point I will look into how sign languages occupy a unique space in the world of linguistics and how it differs from spoken languages. I will also briefly discuss the concept ‘Deaf Proud’ and how having a sense of Deaf Identity can give Deaf people a sense of belonging or citizenship in the Deaf community. Following this, I will discuss the concept of ‘Deaf Space’, certain spaces where Deaf people feel at their most

comfortable for e.g. Deaf Village Ireland in Cabra, Dublin and Deaf Clubs around the country.

The concept of community building and the four pillars that support the development of the Deaf community is important for understanding how the Deaf community heavily depends on these pillars and why. The final two concepts I will frame in this literature review are Social Activism and Language Rights. In those two concepts, I will discuss the general meanings and then link it to activism within the Deaf community and how they campaign for the recognition of their national sign languages, in the case of my dissertation topic, Irish Sign Language Recognition campaign.

## **2.2. Deafhood**

The term “Deafhood” was first coined by Dr. Paddy Ladd in his book *“Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search for Deafhood”*. The concept of Deafhood is open-ended and is often comprehended in different ways. In this section, I will lay out the discussion around Deafhood as outlined by Ladd and other authors.

In the Oxford Dictionary (2015a), a “-hood” is a suffix that denotes a collection or a group. For example, “womanhood” which Oxford Dictionary (2015b) describes as:

1. *“The state or condition of being a woman”*
2. *“The qualities considered to be natural or characteristic of a woman”*

An example of a characteristic that usually relates to being a woman is the menstruation cycle. Similarly to how women may have womanhood characteristics that they may relate to, Deaf people have Deafhood characteristics that they may relate to. Ladd (2003: xviii) describes Deafhood as a *“process by which Deaf individuals come to actualise their Deaf identity”*.

It has been argued that by deaf people grouping into what has been termed a type of “cult”, it excludes various people such as those who have lost their hearing in their old age or these hard of hearing people who never felt like they fit in the Deaf world and find themselves happier in the hearing world they grew up in. Antonio Gramsci uses

the term 'common sense' as an explanation of how society accepts and takes ideologies for granted. Despite the fact that every individual has their own beliefs, opinions and feelings, they can often accept what is held as '*common sense*' among mainstream society and thus remain unchallenged in their thinking (Calton, 2014).

Deaf culture and sign languages are not seen as norms in mainstream society which means Deaf communities often need to defend their language and culture (Calton, 2014). Ladd argues against the point made about excluding certain groups if sign language is introduced in Deaf schools by using the blind community as an example. No one would suggest that spectacle-wearers and blind people should be in the same conceptual space – should spectacle-wearers attend schools designed for blind people? Of course not, it is entirely up to the person themselves. Yet, Ladd felt that, the line between many people who have lost their hearing at an older age and the Deaf signing community has been "*skilfully blurred*" (2003: 14), a deliberate tactic used to suppress sign language in Deaf education.

Deaf culture is complex because it includes people of various levels of hearing, family members of deaf people (e.g. CODAs – Children of Deaf Adults) and sign language interpreters. Garcia and Cole (2014) noted that Deaf Identity has become more fluid since the introduction of technologies that amplify hearing levels. Garcia and Cole also found that Deaf people are constantly "*searching for new social and linguistic resources that allow them to resist identities that position them in undesirable ways*" (2014: 101). An example is the development of Deaf Gain, which is explained in the next section of this literature review.

Ladd highlighted the importance of changing perspective from a medical perspective to a socio-cultural one, from a person with a hearing loss to a member of a cultural and linguistic minority. The socio-cultural perspective focuses on the issue of civil rights (such as access to language rights) and to enable the Deaf community to function fully (and possible even flourish) in a dominant culture (Reagan, 1995). Reagan describes Deaf Culture as a community that has:

- A common, shared language
- Shared awareness of deaf cultural identity

- Distinctive behavioural norms and patterns
- Cultural artefacts
- Endogamous marital patterns
- Shared history
- Network of voluntary, in-group social organisations.

Ladd and Lane (2013) developed the idea of 'Deaf Ethnicity' from patterns that are often seen in cultural minority groups. Ladd believes that there is an explosion of new activities in the Deaf world recently due to various emergences such as mainstream culture, international travel and internet communication. New Deaf art forms and social and cultural activities that were not part of traditional Deaf culture (such as Deaf political activity) are rapidly growing. The increase in access to the internet and travel has enabled Deaf people to be increasingly aware of Deaf commonalities across boundaries (Ladd & Lane, 2013). The highlights of these commonalities solidify the concept of Deafhood even further – these patterns have always been there in countries thousands of kilometres apart but now it is much more noticeable.

Ladd (in Kusters & De Meulder, 2013) views Deaf people as victims of a colonisation process, caused by the policy of 'oralism'. This colonisation of the mind has deeply affected many deaf individuals. It has been suggested the high rate of mental health illness among the deaf community, which is double that of the hearing population, could be linked to this experience (Kusters & De Meulder, 2013). The policy of oralism also delayed entry of deaf people into community life and brings destruction to Deaf heritage and culture.

Kusters & De Meulder (2013: 430) also mentioned that Ladd believes that there are *“destructive patterns that are deeply rooted in Deaf Cultures”*. Some Deaf people are not aware of the positive perspective of being deaf and not aware that sign language is a real language that has its own structure and grammar just like the English language. This is due to the view of people outside the Deaf community toward the term “language” – that it must be spoken. Harold (2013) felt that because of this thinking, sign language, a visual language, confused many people outside the Deaf world. They viewed people without speech as people without a language and that deafness is a

problem. A person who can hear or speak is seen as more intelligible than the person who uses sign language (Harold, 2013).

Many Deaf people have difficulty trusting hearing people and often dislike them plus have a tendency to criticise rather than praise each other (Kusters & De Meulder, 2013). Ladd believes that by understanding the concept of Deafhood, Deaf people can begin to become aware of the positive sides of being deaf and the possibilities that exist for them (Kusters & De Meulder, 2013). In other words, Deaf people will begin to accept their Deaf selves and progress on to embrace the possibilities in the world. This positive view is called 'Deaf Gain'.

### **2.3. Deaf Gain**

Bauman & Murray (2009) believe that deafness is often viewed as something that is missing or lacking, an absence, or a hearing loss. To avoid the negativity usually associated with 'deaf' or 'deafness', a new perspective has been created – Deaf Gain. Deaf people usually do not feel that their lives are defined by something that they do not have or lost. Yet doctors usually say to patients who are going deaf, *"you are losing your hearing"* (Bauman & Murray, 2009: 3). The word, 'losing', implies the patient has lost something. The doctor could say, *"you are gaining your deafness"* (Bauman & Murray, 2009: 3), giving the patient a positive sense that they have gained, rather than lost something.

### **2.4. Language Gain**

An example of Deaf Gain is sign language; a unique language that is distinctive to the norm of speech language that is used by everybody else. Sign language is a visual language and the beauty of sign language is that Deaf people find it easier to communicate with other Deaf people internationally because of international sign language and their built-in adaptor of switching language and using improvisation (Bauman & Murray, 2009). This makes deaf people 'global citizens', compared to hearing people who may have trouble communicating with foreign people, without learning their language.

It is not only Deaf people who gain from the presence of sign language. Calton (2014) argues that sign language is transforming the linguistic field, which is usually focused

on spoken language (and the use of the mouth and ears). Instead, sign language shifts the focus from the use of the mouth and ears to the brain. This shift is still not fully embraced by linguists, because if the linguist shifts his/her focus, he/she will have to accept that many long-held theories about languages and even the very meaning of language will have to be reformulated (Calton, 2014). Sign languages are so different from spoken languages that their *“existence calls into questions many previously held ideological assumptions about the nature of language”* (Calton, 2014: 114).

Over the years, sign languages have often been seen as a simple communication tool, just as blind people use canes for guidance when walking. This is because linguists cannot comprehend and translate sign language to European languages. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and the idea of controlling our consciousness is particularly useful in this context. In this instance, applying elitists’ ideas about what is seen as a ‘language’ so deeply into our conscious that we find the very notion of a change in what we usually associate as a language as hard to accept. Calton (2014) argues that the dominant society creates a hierarchy of power in which sign languages are seen as inferior to spoken languages and thus, position deaf people even more below hearing people. Calton (2014: 115) found that even as recently as 1997 *“the Modern Language Association still listed ASL as an “invented language”*, positioning it with sci-fi TV show (fiction) Star Trek’s Klingon. This is because sign languages are iconic languages rather than the usual arbitrary spoken languages. It took a long time for the ideology of what makes a “language” to transform – even to this day, it is a constant struggle to try and redefine the meaning of language.

Bates (1975) highlighted the importance of being aware that you are a part of a definite hegemonic force – once you have an understanding of how you are under a cultural hegemony, you can begin to analyse yourself, your own consciousness, your ‘usual’ behaviours that can be seen as either hegemonic or oppressed behaviours. Once you become aware of these behaviours, you can start a ‘revolutionary’ process within yourself first before you can spread the process to your own society. It was only in recent decades that Deaf communities were beginning to recognise that sign languages should be treated with the same status as spoken languages. With the introduction of Deafhood, many Deaf people began to explore their Deaf identities and

what sign language meant to them. With the embracement of sign language as their own language, they can begin to try and redefine what mainstream society views as 'language(s)'. Bauman & Murray (2009: 5) noted that the "*foundation of language isn't speech but the human mind and its ability to create language*". This can be done through different forms such as writing, visual language, art. Deaf literature is a new development, with visual poetry as a popular option. Others include film and culture.

Deaf Gain is a new perspective created by deaf people which sees the positive side of being Deaf, rather than what many hearing parents may think when they find out their child is deaf – isolation, limited communication and other difficulties their child may face in life (Bauman & Murray, 2009). Harold (2013) brought up the concept of '*Deaf Proud*' – this concept celebrates deafness rather than viewing it as a medical problem. Being Deaf Proud creates an identity for a Deaf person, a "*positive sense of being*" (Harold, 2013: 848). Having a Deaf Identity can give a Deaf person a sense of belonging and give him/her a political and social identity as well (Skelton & Valentine, 2003a). It could be argued that by having that kind of identity they may feel they have citizenship within the Deaf community.

## **2.5. Deaf Space**

Kusters and De Meulder (2013) note that Deaf people often feel overpowered by the general societal structures that are not provided for them or produced by them. By resisting this overpowering control of society and views on how space should be structured, deaf people produce their own spaces that reflect their existence as a deaf person (Kusters & De Meulder, 2013). An example of Deaf space is Gallaudet University, a university specifically designed for the Deaf people. Gesser (2007) described Gallaudet university as a "*therapist couch*" – a place where, in a role shift, hearing people have to adjust to the environment where American Sign Language (ASL) is dominant. Language is a powerful means of conveying "*solitary, resistance, control, manipulation, oppression as well as a representation of identity within a cultural and a social group*" (Gesser, 2007). In this case, sign language conveys Deaf identity and resistance to the norms of speech as the only language that can be used. Harold (2013) noticed that many people are phonocentric (i.e. they depend a lot on the sense of hearing) so the societal structure of the urban spaces are usually based on

hearing. Mathews (2006) comments that the Deaf community, like many other minority populations, often seek out fellow Deaf people with whom they share an experience of deafness. Contacts between Deaf people are often limited through growing up in a hearing family, a hearing neighbourhood and a largely hearing world (Mathews, 2006). Because of the seeking out of other Deaf people, links are often found and established, creating a network that eventually forms into a Deaf community. The formation of the Deaf community is often facilitated by the presence of Deaf places such as residential schools and Deaf Clubs (Mathews, 2006). The residential school and Deaf clubs are two of the four pillars that have a role in the development of the deaf community, which I will discuss in the next section.

## **2.6. Community Building**

Eickman (2006) writes on how the deaf community is mainly supported by four pillars. These pillars are:

1. Schools for the Deaf
2. Deaf Clubs
3. Deaf Sports Clubs
4. National Deaf Associations

These pillars cover the social, political and educational aspects of the deaf community and play a critical part in maintaining the existence of a Deaf community. They also influence the development of Deaf Identity (Eickman, 2006). Being an active citizen in the Deaf community is important in sustaining one's own Deaf Identity. A crucial part of a Deaf Identity is community building and many do that through volunteering (Skelton & Valentine, 2003a). Volunteering in Deaf Clubs has been a long tradition for Deaf people and their culture (Skelton & Valentine, 2003a). As Skelton & Valentine (2007: 131) stated, being involved in the Deaf community gives the Deaf person a "*new sense of citizenship and belonging*". They also pointed out that volunteering often leads people to become more active in politics as they are more aware of the issues happening within their community.

## 2.7. Social Activism

The Oxford Dictionary (2015b) defines activism as:

*“The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change”*

Other dictionaries use words like *“direct vigorous action”* (Merriam-Webster, 2015) or even *“confrontational actions”* (The Free Dictionary, 2015). However, vocabulary.com (2015) describes activism perfectly:

*“An activist is a person who campaigns for some kind of social change....  
Someone who acts on what she believes is an activist.”*

The majority of dictionaries, including the ones listed above, describe activism as direct and often confrontational. However, activism can take many different forms. Maxey (1999) highlighted that the general public often view activism as dramatic, physical (e.g. demonstrations, sit-ins) actions that aim for short-term public impacts. The acts people do every day to contribute to society, such as cleaning the streets up to running the government, are forms of the social world productions. He argues that activism can come in different forms and that we are all activists whether passive (e.g. reading and discussing social issues, sharing Facebook posts relating to social issues) or active.

Gerbaudo (2012: 2) explained about the new expressions that are growing in popularity lately; these expressions are “Facebook Revolution” or the “Twitter Revolution”. Traditionally, there has been a strong link between collective actions and a strong identity as well as a sense of collective solidarity (Gerbaudo, 2012). However, with the introduction of the use of the social media in social or political movements, there has been an increase in the number of passive activists or as Gerbaudo (2012: 160) describes, *“armchair revolutionaries”* who would never be on the streets taking action, only from the screen. He argues that while there are advantages to the use of social media to social activism such as the successes of the Arab Springs revolutions, there are major downsides. The success of movements relies on the organisational skills of its activists and in their ability to create a sense of togetherness. Another disadvantage is the exclusion of the people who do not engage in social media or even have access to the internet, especially those in rural areas. Lastly, collective action is

declining and activists are acting individually with no centrepiece or a leader, leading to an absence of a formal organisational structure that Gramsci argues is necessary as collective action is never spontaneous (Gerbaudo, 2012). A “collective consciousness” can overcome diversity differences (Christiansen *et al.*, 1995) which is critical for the Irish Deaf community, where there are diverse groups such as people from mainstream/deaf schools, d/Deaf/ Hard of Hearing/ Children of Deaf Adults/ hearing people.

#### **4.8. Activism and the Deaf Community**

The historical idea is that if one is not seen as ‘normal’ or if one does behave and perform in the manner in which a typical peer might, then one will automatically be marginalised in society (Young, 2007). Deaf people are often not seen as ‘normal’ and to communicate in a non-verbal language is unheard of. Society does not know how to deal with this; therefore they put Deaf people and their concerns aside. To cease society’s marginalisation of the Deaf communities, the Deaf community must become politically active, removing the barriers that society imposes onto them. To be politically active, people must stay ahead of current news by reading the news and watching T.V. Knowledge is important in the world of activism; to be able to participate in the political process, the activist must have the facts first (Bateman, 1990). However, minority groups are often at a disadvantage, contributing little to the political process because of barriers. Deaf people are one of these minority groups; they have little say in the decision-making process that affects many aspects of their lives because of a communication barrier for example. Bateman highlighted some causes that may inhibit the deaf individual’s participation in political activism:

- Communication
- Availability and accessibility of interpreters
- Poor ability to make themselves understood
- Complexity of the political process (made even harder to understand due to lack of education).
- Lack of awareness of issues

- The numbers of Deaf people are smaller than that of other minority groups (e.g. Blacks). Out of this small number, a very small percentage has a third level education.
- The Deaf community is social-oriented; many organisations don't encourage political participation.

Bateman emphasises that it is critical for Deaf people to feel part of his or her community because a sense of political empowerment grows if an individual feels that he or she has some control of his or her political and social environment (Bateman, 1990). Kusters and De Meulder (2013) note that Deaf people often feel overpowered by the general societal structures that are not provided for them or produced by hearing people. By resisting this overpowering control deaf people can produce their own spaces that reflect their existence and reality as a deaf person (Kusters & De Meulder, 2013). Bateman challenges people's perspective that Deaf people cannot be empowered or are not interested in politics by using Martha's Vineyard as an example.

Martha's Vineyard is an island off the East Coast of the United States. On this island, the numbers of people with genetic deafness comprised 60% of the total population. Because of the high number, the island became a signing community where everybody, including hearing people, signed to each other. Deaf people were fully integrated and did not behave differently, either culturally or socially to hearing people (Kusters, 2010). Bateman argues that Deaf people voted, held council offices and participated in debates. This is because the communication barrier did not exist. The sense of involvement or integration in the community can lead to an increasing number in political empowerment and activism.

An example of a Deaf community's political empowerment is the Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. A protest was formed because of inability of students to elect a President of this university. They felt frustrated with the numbers of hearing led presidents and wanted to have a Deaf-led president for a Deaf university. The success of this protest is because they had a clear goal; to be able to elect a president. They used the basis that civic rights should be extended to Deaf people to enable more supporters for the protest. Bateman noted that if participants want to attain dramatic effects, they will have to assess whether the benefits outweigh

the risks and if they “*have nothing to lose*” (1990: 176). A radical change may need radical people. Bateman also reminded us that the Deaf President Now is a protest with one goal that can be done in a short term. Longer-term social movements require extra resources such as office space, permanent staff, extra support, radical or courageous people (to sue or to challenge the courts) and more time. However, in both short and long term movements, a collective consciousness of the people involved along with clear goals is needed.

Another key issue needed for a successful collective movement is dialogue. Freire’s idea of dialogical education is appealing as it promotes creativity and free-thinking. Freire (2005) argues that a lack of dialogue can mean there are no mutual trusts built and in order to have a collective consciousness community, mutual trusts are vital. Freire is an activist who strived for social justice and social change (Ollis, 2012). He highlighted the importance of reflection in activism, understanding the theories and philosophies, the tactics and strategies needed to initiate social change. However, despite the importance of reflection, the pedagogy of activism is rarely seen around the world (Ollis, 2012). The struggle for social change cannot be done by an individual; it would only remain strong through people working collectively to push through barriers. Freire warned against activism against in the state that is rash and non-reflective. Activists need a high level of knowledge to equip them in movements; however, they also learn as they push out of their comfort zones. Because once you leave the familiar social space you are in, you constantly reflect back as you go further ahead into new space of social activism (Ollis, 2012). Reflection is crucial in long-term movements; the activist(s) can reflect on what are the strengths and the weaknesses, key moments to highlights so that they can learn how to improve their own practices (Ollis, 2012).

## **2.9. Language Rights**

There are many different human rights that people are entitled to: disability rights, cultural minority rights, racial rights, religious rights. However, Kymlicka *et al.* (2003) highlighted that language rights are often overlooked. It is evident that there are unresolved conflicts between dominant language and regional and historically-rooted language minority. The outcome of the conflicts, Kymlicka noted, is the enabling of

speakers of regional languages to access a wide range of public institutions such as schools, public documents, courts in their own language. An example would be the Irish language in Ireland.

However, sign languages are often not recognised in many countries including Ireland. Trovato (2013) noted that the difference between a minority language and sign language is that the minority language is geographically confined to specific areas (e.g. Gaeltacht regions in Ireland) but sign languages are used nationally. The other difference is that sign languages are usually not transmitted via family like spoken language are because ninety five percentages of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, who are most likely to have little or no knowledge of sign language (Trovato, 2013). Deaf babies naturally acquire sign language faster than spoken languages. Trovato argues that sign languages are the only way to fully guarantee that each Deaf child will develop their linguistic and cognitive ability. With spoken languages, the Deaf child must undergo speech therapies and even then, it is still not guaranteed that the child will fully acquire the spoken language. Despite this fact, doctors and speech therapists argue that “sign kills speech”, against the fact that bilingualism contributes to greater acquirement of language skills.

Controversially, hearing people are now promoting “baby signs” for hearing parents to teach their hearing babies. Superhands (2015) noted that there are benefits to signing with one’s own baby such as reducing tantrums and frustration, increasing the bond between the parent and baby and that parents may, *“accelerate speech; baby signers tend to talk earlier than non signers”* (Superhands, 2015). It seems strange that they would allow the hearing babies to learn sign but not Deaf babies, allowing hearing babies to learn two languages while denying Deaf babies any rights to a language.

## **2.10.Conclusion**

In conclusion, the topics I have chosen for the literature review are the key issues that appear in this dissertation. As Freire posits, reflection is crucial so by highlighting the key points from various literatures, the review acts as guidance in my reflection during the creation of the dissertation. Critical thinking and applying the key concepts to real-life issues and findings from the methodology are the outcomes of the literature review. The concepts that Deaf communities develop such as Deafhood and Deaf

Space are not without its criticism. Deafhood is often perceived and criticised as a form of “cult” and contributes to the “ghetto-icing” of Deaf people from the “normal” world into their own small Deaf bubble. Deaf culture is complex to understand and analyse and this may contribute to the difficulty the ISL campaign faces in its relationship with the Irish Deaf Community.

However, the concept of Deaf Gain is critical; it should be used as a tool to change the community’s attitude towards themselves as Deaf people. If these Deaf people reflect on their behaviour, shift the negative behaviour and thinking into positive ways then it is possible that the community can strengthen to become much more united which is critical toward gaining a stronger movement. Understanding one’s own rights, especially language rights in this context, are critical in enabling people to become politically active. The concept of social activism is rarely discussed in the Irish Deaf community. I want to find out why – what are the reasons contributing to the lack in discussion of social activism, how much does the community know about their own language rights? These questions are laid out in the focus groups that I have organised, which will be elaborated in the next chapter – the methodology and methods section.

## **Chapter Three**

# **Methodology and Methods**

### **3.1. Introduction**

The topic of the dissertation is:

*“The relationship between the Irish Sign Language Campaign and the Irish Deaf community.”*

The data gathered from the research method I have conducted is a major part that contributes to the research as a whole, so it is important to clearly frame the method that were followed, the reasons behind it and how the procession in the analysis of the data were made. Before I go onto explaining the design of the method I have chosen, the difficulties and limitations I have encountered and the content analysis, I will

highlight the key points I had to consider before conducting the research and also during the content analysis. This will be followed by the key points listed above and will be concluded by a short personal reflection.

In the methodology of this research, I am approaching the research using a feminist concept of voicing a feminist consciousness that opens up intellectual and emotional spaces where the personal transforms into the political (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Hesse-Biber points out that having a feminist perspective in the research process can carry messages of empowerment that challenge the knowledge of the privilege. How do I do this? By taking up the insider/outsider perspective, a concept that I will elaborate further in this chapter, enabling me to take on many different standpoints and negotiating these identities simultaneously (Hesse-Biber, 2007). A vital point Hesse-Biber highlights that I deeply care about is being aware of the hierarchies of power and authority in the research process – the danger of being a researcher on the researched, the emotional separation between me as a researcher on the topic I care about, and being an “insider/outsider” researcher. These three concerns will be framed in its own headings as below:

### **3.2. Researched Opinion on Research**

I am aware that by doing research on the Irish Deaf community, I could be seen as a person doing a research based on a desire to gain a good grade, rather than for the community’s benefit. Kitchin (2000) captured my worry well in his paper *The Researched Opinion on Research: Disabled people and disability research*. I am aware that I did mention in the literature review that Deaf people do not see themselves as ‘disabled’, but rather as a linguistic minority. However, the points he made in the paper also apply to ethnic and cultural minority groups such as Irish Travellers. Minority groups that are being researched upon can feel exploited rather than be liberated. Kitchin (2000: 26) mentioned that:

*It is only disabled people who can know what it is like to be disabled and so only disabled people who can truly interpret and present data from other disabled people.”*

Being Deaf myself, I should be able to 'truly interpret' data obtained from the focus groups. I agree that it is better to have a researcher who can understand what the researched person or group is going through as they are going through the same situation themselves. However, I argue against Kitchin's point in another way because there are numerous Deaf people who did research on the Irish Deaf community and yet the community has not received information from these researchers after they obtained their degrees. Their expressions of frustration toward this over the years were seen by me growing up in the community. This is an issue that I kept in mind while conducting my research on this topic. The aim is not to let this research become a 'book on a shelf' type but rather be useful for the campaign progress.

Another issue that may be concerning is the idea of "State Nobility" as described by Lynch and Baker (2005). Education (whether in formal or informal structures) is critical in developing people's understanding of the campaign, however, ironically, having an academic title awarded by an educational institute can change people's perspectives toward the researcher (Lynch & Baker, 2005). This is something I must be aware of as a facilitator in the focus groups.

### **3.3. Emotions**

Another thing I had to keep in mind is the emotions involved in conducting this research.

I had to be aware of my own bias and emotions while conducting the focus group discussions. Anderson and Smith (2001: 7) said that in Human Geography, "emotions occur mainly in the cultural corners of the discipline." With social science, it is hard to define the topic as some people may have different views than others and the line between right and wrong is blurred. There is also a question of credibility with emotions involved. Thinking emotionally is often regarded as unprofessional in the research context as being subjective clouds your vision and impairs your judgement (Anderson & Smith, 2001). To be a good researcher, one must keep one's emotions under control as well as the emotions of others involved. However, it can be argued that by neglecting the emotions is to "exclude a key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies made" (Anderson & Smith, 2001: 7). In doing this research, I have to find a certain balance where emotions shown are appropriate and to be careful of not neglecting emotions while also not being too subjective. As a facilitator, I

must let the participants lead the discussion group, rather than dictating to the group. By doing this, I must hold back my own opinions during the discussion groups and instead follow up participants' answers with more, and sometimes more specific, open-ended questions.

### **3.4. Being an “Insider/Outsider”**

I attended a workshop during the Deaf Academics Conference, held in Leuven, Belgium in February 2015 covering the issue of the insider/outsider perspective. Being Deaf and being born into and growing up as a part of the Irish Deaf community has led me to become an insider in this research and so the participants in my focus groups may feel more comfortable with me as a facilitator. This topic is a subjective, and my being an insider allows me to conduct my research “with” rather than “on the focus groups (Moges, 2015). However, while being viewed as an insider, there have been a couple of cases of the “*you know!*” type of answers to my questions (Moges, 2015). I had to remind participants that they should to treat me like I do not know or expect anything in relations to the answers they give to the question I am asking or anything about themselves as what they would say needed to be transcribed and referenced properly. Being an academic researcher, there is still an element of being an outsider however this is a fluid concept as the shared identities between myself and the focus groups overlap (Moges, 2015).

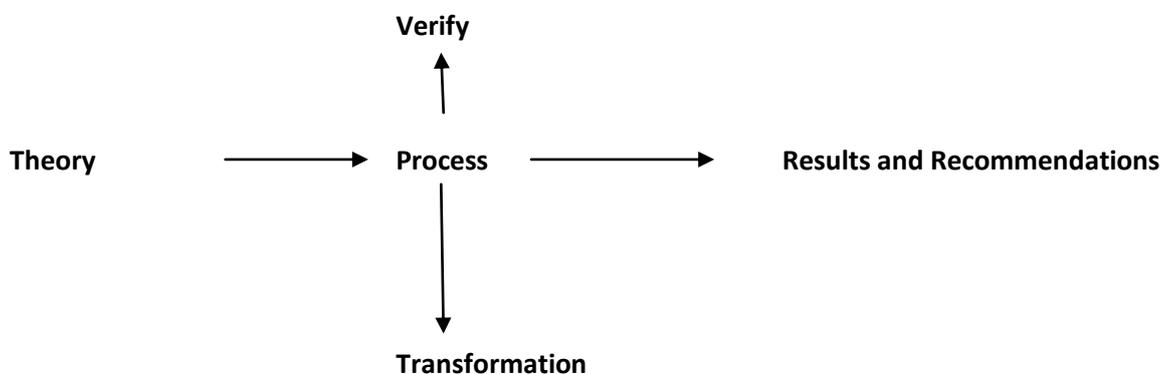
### **3.5. Design of Methodology**

In the methodology for this research, a qualitative approach was taken in the form of focus group discussions. Focus groups are a form of group interview that emphasise on open communication between research participants in order to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995). The focus group method offers an exploration of people's knowledge and experiences. As opposed to in-depth interviews, the focus group process can help people to explore and clarify people's views by discussing it in the open rather than confining it to the researcher and participant which may seem intimidating. Having group discussions in a comfortable setting with a moderator that is in the same

minority group as the group enables a dynamic discussion that in my case resulted in a session lasting two hours.

Focus group methods are now gaining popularity among academic researchers, especially among the social sciences, feminist and Marxist areas (Silverman, 2009). It is seen as a method that reduces the imbalance in power relationship between the researcher and the participants and also put control into the hands of the participants rather than the researcher. The power position is an issue many feminist researchers are concerned about (Liamputtong, 2011). Focus group methods are also popular for those, like me, that hope to “empower” research participants because the participants can become an active part of the process (Kitzinger, 1995). I wanted the participants to become active in their thinking and sought to enable them to openly discuss taboo topics or political issues that are usually hidden away. Freire (2005) says that some academics may find it inappropriate for the researcher to include the participants as active members in their research but he argues against their case in that believing that research methodology should require that the *“investigators and the people (who would normally be considered objects of that investigation) should act as co-investigators”* (2005:87). By allowing the participants in my focus group to lead the discussion group, they become co-investigators. Freire (2005) also argues that it is important for the researcher to watch out for any form of transformation in the way participants perceive reality during the process (in this case, the discussion). The structure of the research should be:

**Freire (2005) – Process of research**



This method is most suited for ethnic minorities and in this case, a linguistic and cultural minority. The participants have common social and cultural experiences and shared areas of concern. In my past research experiences, there was something in my

head that kept telling me that whatever I had achieved in my research, it did not actually affect the community I was basing my research on in any way whatsoever. Freire explained the process of transformation and once I read his book, I came to realise it was because my research was a 'narrative' and 'a copy on a shelf' type of research. In this research, I want to involve the Irish Deaf community as much as I can within the time constraint. I am fortunate to have been born and raised in to this community; it is very likely that the issues the community members feel strongly about, I would feel strong about as well.

The discussions in the focus groups were through Irish Sign Language, which give participants the opportunity to express themselves in the language they feel most comfortable in. With ISL being my first language, I also find this to be comfortable. This method does not discriminate against people who have low level of literacy skills (Kitzinger, 1995) or those with English as their second or even fourth language. This lifts the pressure off some of the participants who may feel uncomfortable using English.

### **3.6. Reasons for the selection of the focus group method**

The reasons that I have chosen the focus group method for my qualitative research are:

1. Principle of the Master in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism course  
*"Learning from each other's struggles"* - The course is based around sharing knowledge and experience around the common goal of moving towards equality (Learning from Each Other's Struggles, n.d.)
2. By having a series of open ended questions thrown into the group, I hope to encourage the participant to explore issues that they feel are important to them in their own language, generating their own questions and placing their priorities (Kitzinger, 1995). The idea is not to put myself above them and have them view me as an academic but rather as 'one of their own' who they feel comfortable sharing information with.
3. Everyday forms of communication – a setting where everyday type of conversations, including jokes and anecdotes are encouraged. Kitzinger argues

that the everyday form of communication tells us about what people know or experience, reaching parts that other methods cannot reach and tapping into information that would not be gained by the conventional types of data collection such as surveys.

By having qualitative instead of quantitative research, I am enabling people that took part in this research to have more of a voice in their contributions rather than limit themselves to ticking boxes and writing short sentences.

### **3.7. How the focus groups are organised**

Instead of the ordinary method of personal selection by the researcher, I used the open invitation approach. I evaluated the positive and negative sides of both options and after careful consideration, I decided to open the focus group invitation to the general public so that everybody could have the chance to contribute if they choose to. I believe it is important to give everybody a fair chance and the ability to choose. I was aware that by having an open invitation, I put the method at risk of failing. However, I believed that the chance, however slim, to meet participants I am not aware of, rather than just choosing specific people that I believe are suitable, could contribute to the discussion.

Before my presentation to the public, I made a video blog (vlog), discussing what I would present on, giving people the option to stay on and be involved in a focus group. I then posted it in a Facebook group that had a large number of Deaf people (and hearing people who are involved in the Deaf community). I also created a public Facebook event advertising the event and invited people on my friend list. I ended up with two focus groups – the first one with ten people and the second with three.

### **3.8. Profile of the Respondents**

Because the focus groups were open to all people, the participant selection was not specific but random. The profile of the respondents was as follows:

- All of the participants were Deaf
- Gender of respondents were fairly balanced, with 7 females and 6 males
- Distribution across the age group was also fairly balanced:

- **18-30:** 6
- **30-50:** 4
- **Over 50:** 3

Despite the random selection, I was fortunate enough to get a wide variety of people in the small focus groups. However, it was not as diverse as I ideally wanted. Kitzinger (1995) noted that it can be advantageous to bring together a diverse group to truly explore different perspectives. I would have liked to have a few hearing people attending (e.g. interpreters, activist, CODAs). Their perspectives may be different to the Deaf participants within the two groups. Nevertheless, Kitzinger also argued that it can be risky to have a hierarchy within the group that could inhibit research data; in this case, the hearing people are often viewed as the group possessing supremacy.

Despite the lack of hearing participants, I was fortunate enough to get a fairly balanced group in terms of gender and age. The other disadvantage of the two groups was that most participants resided in Dublin. This is because the meeting points of the two groups are located in Dublin. It was not possible to travel for me outside Dublin with the time constraint I was given.

### **3.9. Research Questions**

The topic of this thesis is:

*“The relationship between the Irish Sign Language Campaign and the Irish Deaf community.”*

The main research question of this study can be summarised as follows:

What is the relationship between the ISL campaign and the Irish Deaf community – how much do they know, what do they expect from it, what are the weak and strong areas and what does the campaign mean to them?

The sub-questions are:

1. What is Irish Sign Language recognition? What does it mean to you?

2. Have you attended any demonstrations or events organised by the ISL recognition campaign?
3. Were you always interested in this issue?
4. Have you followed any campaigns or issues related to sign language around the world?
5. Do you feel that the ISL recognition campaign is informative?
6. What do you think they should do to improve relations between the campaign and the Irish Deaf community?
7. Have you a dream place you would love to live in (in terms of Deaf issues)?

### **3.9.1. Rationale**

The rationale for asking these research questions is as follows:

- a. To identify where the community stands in terms of understanding what the campaign is about
- b. To find out how involved are the community in the campaign
- c. To understand why the campaign is important to these people
- d. To identify the strengths of the campaigns they follow or had followed around the world
- e. To analyse what are the weaknesses and strengths of the campaign are

The last question – “Have you a dream place you would love to live in?” – is aimed to end the focus group discussion on a lighter note by allowing the participants to explore what they would love to achieve when there are no limitations.

### **3.10. Anonymity and Confidentiality**

A research consent form was made up with the help of the guidelines given by my supervisor. It was printed and given out to the participants to sign before the discussion started. I explained that they were allowed to leave the room at anytime if they did not want to participate in the focus group, and only wanted to attend the presentation. The participants were assured that the use of video camera recording was entirely for note-taking purposes as it was not possible for me to record via tape-recorder or write down everything the participants were saying. They were also informed that their identity would be concealed as part of research confidentiality.

### **3.11. Limitations/ Difficulties Encountered**

The limitations and difficulties I encountered in using this research method are:

#### **a. Validity of Data**

The data collected from this qualitative research has its own advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that, because of the flexibility of the discussion groups and the open-ended questions asked, I obtained data from issues participants expressively and freely discussed whether or not they directly answered the questions. Because the discussion format was open-ended, the answers given could be followed by related questions that could be explored in-depth. Another advantage is that the participants' views were their own. However, I must be aware that the data collected from the participants are opinions and therefore subjective. Despite this, I believe that using personal opinions as data is suited to this dissertation as the topic focuses on how the Deaf community feel about the campaign, which is in itself a subjective topic.

#### **b. Translating ISL-based Interviews**

The focus group discussions were carried out in Irish Sign Language, with a video camera recording the discussion. The difficulty in the first focus group was to capture what everybody was saying through one camera as there were ten people present in the room. However, this was not a major issue as I recorded the key points made on a large paper board that was visible to them. On numerous times, the participants turned away from the camera to talk to the person next to them. I had to remind them that what they said needed to be seen on camera clearly. The other issue is that I was not present on screen myself as I was beside the camera; what I said in the room was not recorded. Skelton & Valentine (2003b) noted that using visual language in an interview as part of methodology can lead to complex ethical and practical issues. One of these is the participants' faces being shown on camera rather than the usual form of voice-recording which ensures anonymity. Participants must be assured that the video-recording is only used for personal note-taking and will not be revealed to anybody but the researcher.

### **c. Differences in the two focus groups**

The first focus group consisted of ten people that attended after seeing my open invitation on Facebook. This meeting was held in Deaf Village Ireland. In the second focus group, the three people were selected by me because I felt strongly that they could contribute well to the research. This meeting was held in the Centre for Deaf Studies which is located in Dublin city. However, the atmosphere was quite different between the two groups. The first focus group ran fluidly while there was a tension present in the second group. I believe that the reason for this difference is because in the first group, I had first held a “What are your language rights?” presentation, giving the participants the opportunity to question and reflect before going onto the focus group discussion. In the second group, I went straight into the questions without attempting to make the participants feel at ease and more open. The familiar room in the Deaf Village Ireland and the bigger number of participants may have also contributed to a much more relaxed atmosphere while the classroom at the Centre for Deaf Studies was unfamiliar for many of us. Having only three participants present may have contributed to a feeling of an “I must have an answer” and pressure to respond.

### **3.12. Content Analysis**

In my content analysis, I will refer to the focus group discussions linking them to concepts highlighted in the literature review, with selection of particularly relevant quotes from certain respondents that expressed well certain ideas related to the literature review.

### **3.13. Personal Reflection**

While doing analysis on these interviews, I had to keep in mind that the people involved in the focus groups are but a small percentage of the population of the Irish Deaf community. While they could give me an overall idea of the relationship between the Irish Sign Language campaign and the Irish Deaf community, they could not truly represent the Irish Deaf community. Another thing I kept in mind is that I limited the ability of Deaf people to attend the focus groups by holding them in Deaf Village Ireland and the Centre of Deaf Studies, both of which are located in Dublin.

For my content analysis, I had to transcribe video recordings of the focus group discussions from ISL to English. My first language is ISL, followed by written English. There was a danger in the translation of ISL into written English that I could interpret what the individuals were saying incorrectly. While transcribing, I have to be aware of this issue. In the past, I had typed up a translation into written English and emailed it to the interviewee, asking if he was happy with the translation before I used it for references. He made a few adjustments and approved the translation work. In the case of these focus groups, some of the individuals' skills in reading written English could possibly be not strong enough to completely understand written English translation. In an ideal situation, I could have emailed the transcription to the individuals who have strong written English skills the transcription and sit with the individuals with weaker written English skills, explaining as we read the transcript together. However, with the time restrictions, I was not able to do this. Therefore to make it fair for everyone, I had to trust my judgement and my skills in translating and then go ahead and use it for references.

To summarise this methodology and methods chapter, I am approaching my methods of research with a feminist perspective. These methods included the two focus groups consisting of thirteen individuals conducted in Dublin at two different times. There were difficulties that I had to be aware of before approaching the focus group method of research and during the analysis of the data collected, I came to realise there were certain aspects that I could have approached in a different way, such as interviewing two individuals that were heavily involved as campaigners but given the time constraint, this was not possible. Another realisation was that the difference in the atmosphere between the two focus group discussions were be influenced by what had happened before the discussions, the numbers in the groups and the room structure. Nevertheless, the answers given from these two groups were valuable and will be used in the analysis of the findings. Having a feminist perspective in this research is positive in the way that I am aware of the concerns that may occur during the focus groups discussion; by being aware of these possible concerns that may arise on the part of the participants, I can prepare myself in cases where this may happen. Fortunately by positioning myself as an "insider/outsider", I have the advantage of not having to

constantly reassure the participants that comments in the discussion groups will not be disclosed to the public and that I would ensure that their identities will not be easily found out. To conclude this chapter, I have collected data from the focus groups discussions, followed it up with readings of articles about events or happenings that were mentioned in the discussions and draw parallels with the concepts I have laid out in the literature review. In the next chapter, I will lay out the finding from my research and analyse them.

## **Chapter Four**

# **Findings and Analysis**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents key findings from the data gathered from the two focus groups. The core questions of this research are; how much does the Irish Deaf community know and understand about the ISL recognition campaign and how involved is the community in terms of social and political activism within the campaign. In this section, I will list key findings that seem to bear some influence on the community's interest in political activism. This is followed by an outline of participants' opinions on why they got involved in the campaign. I end the chapter by highlighting participants' opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the Irish Sign Language Rights campaign and their recommendations on how the campaign could improve overall. I conclude with key findings and provide my own analysis in chapter five.

### **4.2. Oralism – a hegemonic force within the Irish Deaf community**

The oppressive nature of hegemonic forces, especially from the two Deaf schools located in Dublin and their oral system forced onto the students, influenced how the Irish Deaf community is shaped. Two of the participants in one of my focus groups highlighted this hegemonic force in their attitudes toward ISL. Before they attended the Deafhood workshops, they were ashamed of using sign language in public and one did not want to attend the ISL Pride parade out of fear of being seen and shamed by hearing onlookers. Following attendance at the workshops, they realised the

importance of ISL and gained an understanding of why some Deaf people have behaved in particular ways such as being afraid to sign in public or feeling not confident enough to stand and challenge the authorities. One participant used to avoid people he sees as “*not clever*” but now he sees them in a different light; with more respect because he now knows the system made them the way they are and perhaps has influenced their behaviour. He stated that:

*“it’s not their fault, it’s the system’s”.*

This is evidence of Gramsci’s belief that in order to create a new and successful society, a new consciousness must be created and maintained. It is important to be aware of one’s behaviour that may be seen as oppressive or oppressed and learn to change these types of behaviours in order for the society to succeed. Once one learns to recognise his/her attitude that is shaped by a hegemonic force, one can choose to shift his/her attitude to contribute to a greater change and in this context, the shifting of one’s attitude toward ISL from seeing it as a communication tool to respecting ISL as a true language that has equal status to spoken languages.

### **4.3. Attitudes toward ISL as a language**

Irish Sign Language is a minority language like the Irish language. However there are certain aspects of sign language which are different to other minority languages. The first one being that ISL is not geographically confined such as the Catalan language which is spoken in specific areas across Northern Spain. Rather it is a national minority language which means ISL is passed down through individuals belonging to the Deaf Community, not through a geographical community. Secondly ISL is not usually passed down from generation to generation because ninety-five percent of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, who are likely to have little or no knowledge of ISL (Trovato, 2013). ISL is usually passed down within the Deaf community and some hearing parents may possibly feel excluded if their child becomes fluent in a language that they are not fluent in. Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003) claim that children need exposure to language as early as possible in order to develop language acquisition at an average pace. If the child does not receive linguistic input during their developing years, they will not achieve an ability to have grammatical competence (Byrne-Dunne, 2005). A hearing child is born into a hearing environment where they can have full access to language acquisition such as spoken English. In contrast a Deaf child can be

fully immersed in sign language in the home but with spoken languages, they must undergo speech therapy and even, then it is not guaranteed they will fully acquire spoken English (Trovato, 2013). The influence of doctors has been linked to parents believing that sign language can “kill” their child’s speech skills.

It is not only the hearing community that may have this attitude towards ISL. One participant gave an account of the reaction of her friend, a Deaf person, to the presentation Lynch gave in St. Patrick’s College in 1988. He disagreed and even argued against Lynch. To be told that Irish Sign Language should be seen as a language was an alien concept that some people felt hesitant about. Eventually, more people began to accept this concept, although many still do not.

Ladd (2003) described this as colonialism of the mind; being consistently told that sign language should not be used in public and that verbal speech is superior can have deep repercussions. Repetition can build this idea and ingrain it so firmly in people’s minds that the very suggestion of someone disagreeing with this commonly-held ‘truth’ can be confusing. It is hard to sway people’s opinion that ISL is not a communication tool but rather a language. The transformation of this understanding is painfully slow and even to this day, people are still unsure whether they should refer to ISL as a real language. In the very same year as Lynch gave her speech in St. Patrick’s College, Eileen Lemass, an Irish MEP, raised the issue of the importance of recognising sign languages as official languages. An EU resolution calling on member states to recognise their national sign languages as official languages of the Deaf (O’Shea, 2014) was adopted. However, ironically, despite an Irish MEP representative urging the importance of the resolution, it has been ignored by consecutive Irish governments (Reagan, 2013).

The introduction of Deafhood workshops in Ireland has evidently shifted people’s attitudes and created a new, and more positive, consciousness, which I will elaborate later in this chapter. The issue with the Deafhood workshops is that only one hundred and fifty one attended (Lynch, 2015) out of approximately five thousand Deaf people who use Irish Sign Language (Trinity College Dublin, 2010). Thus leading to me to my next question - what are the alternatives?

#### 4.4. Introduction of social media

The growth of the use of social media for political activism is rapid in the past decade with new forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram being introduced. YouTube is a vital tool for political activism with political video messages being broadcasted and shared among listed social network sites. Deaf people, for the first time, can have access to this type of information without having to depend heavily on their hearing families or friends. They can upload and broadcast translations of articles in written English into ISL, sharing their opinions online for everyone to see. An example would be the Irish Deaf News run by the Irish Deaf Society. The Irish Deaf News is a series of Youtube videos, established in 2009, that translates brief contemporary news items into ISL, informing the Irish Deaf community what is happening around them (Youtube, n.d.). Unfortunately, the series stopped uploading in 2013.

The ISL recognition campaign established its own Facebook page and as of July 2015, it has 1,779 likes (Facebook, 2015). The sharing of political activism and messages are not only limited to Ireland. Irish Deaf people can share their messages globally as well as follow what is happening in Deaf communities around the world. Ladd and Lane (2013) describe the explosion of new activities in the Deaf world such as Deaf art, short stories and dramas. The increase in access to the internet and travel enable Deaf people to be aware of Deaf commonalities across national boundaries. Ladd and Lane also highlighted the growth spurt in the use of International Sign allowing Deaf people to become true global citizens. I asked the participants if they have ever followed any major political activism or happenings in Deaf communities outside Ireland. I have selected a few from the long list of what they knew about what has happened around the world:

- The relocation of Örebro kindergarten in Sweden from the centre to Lillån just outside the city. The Deaf community in Örebro was outraged that the county council never included them in its discussions about the relocation of the school (NAa, 2015). They saw this as shameful, especially considering that the government named, without consulting with the deaf community, Örebro as the European Capital of Sign Language (NAb, 2015). The participants stated that Örebro was usually seen as a role model with *“a great attitude to sign, great*

*schools so this was a shock that this could happen*". They also said that Örebro was "a model city for bilingual education".

- The Italian government wanted to change the status of LIS (Italian Sign Language) from a language to a form of gesture. This caused uproar amongst Deaf communities in Europe. The Italian Deaf community asked communities outside Italy to protest at the Italian Embassy in their own country and to demand that the government not demote LIS to gesture status. A letter was presented to the Italian Ambassador in Ireland from Dr. John Bosco Conama urging the Italian government not to rename LIS as language of gesture, and stating the impact this could have on other countries (Conama, 2011).
- Deaf President Now – Gallaudet University protest in 1988 (A brief summary of this protest can be found in the Literature Review)
- 'Fake' Interpreter at Nelson Mandela's funeral in South Africa (2013) – an 'interpreter' at Nelson Mandela's funeral was using 'made up' signs that had no meaning whatsoever, enraging Deaf communities worldwide (The Guardian, 2011).

Gerbaudo (2012) identifies the strong connection between collective action and strong identity. It could be argued that the growth in attendance at Deafhood workshops (exploration of one's own Deaf identity) contributes to an increase in activism on social media, thereby creating a collective movement where people share and support difficult situations they may experience with language barriers and discrimination. This then leads to a creation of a collective solidarity (Gerbaudo, 2012). However, there are numerous issues in relation to the ISL recognition campaign and how they use social media to broadcast updates of progress that were highlighted by the focus group discussions. These issues will be listed below.

#### **4.5. Involvement of Deaf Organisations in the campaign**

The issue about the involvement of Deaf organisations (on the ISL recognition tri-monthly board meetings) kept appearing in the focus group discussion. I believe this means that participants feel strongly about this issue, leading me to analyse further what the involvement of the organisations mean for the Irish Deaf community.

There are currently eleven organisations that are in a cross-community group, established in September 2012, focusing on ISL recognition (Irish Deaf Society, 2015):

1. Irish Deaf Society (IDS)
2. Deaf Sports Ireland (DSI)
3. Catholic Institute of Deaf People (CIDP)
4. Irish Deaf Youth Association (IDYA)
5. Irish Deaf Women Group (IDWG)
6. Greenbow LGBT
7. Deafhear.ie
8. Bridge Interpreting
9. Sign Language Interpreter Services (SLIS)
10. Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (CISLI)
11. Centre of Deaf Studies (CDS)

The idea of the cross-community group is that these organisations can contribute to the progress of the ISL recognition campaign. There were divided opinions in relation to the cross-community group in focus groups. Some believe that this should be seen as positive, comparing it to the Right2Water alliance (where different organisations such as the Anti-Austerity Alliance come together for one common goal, that is to cease the taxation of the Irish water system). The main reason for setting up alliances is to gather greater numbers of support. The more people involved in a movement, the more impact the movement can make in achieving its goal(s) and the higher chance of media attention. Going into an alliance means that the groups or organisations may have to broaden their goals, e.g. standing up against neoliberal ideas, rather than stick to their narrow goals.

This may be good for the movement in that it may attract a wider variety of support from a larger geographical space. A larger geographical space can mean there are greater chances that these movements can gain more (and possibly better) resources (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). This should not be seen as an issue in the eleven organisations listed above, as they are all serving the Deaf community and the information they share to the public is usually through written English and Irish Sign Language. Having ISL recognised is beneficial to these organisations in terms of gaining rights and gaining funding opportunities to reach their potential e.g. applying for

funding to provide public information in Irish Sign Language. However, other participants in the focus group argued against the idea of having representatives from each organisation for regular cross-community meetings in relation to the topic for two reasons:

1. The representatives have their own aims - will they be able to include the ISL recognition campaign as one of their pieces of work? For example, IDS runs a Deaf Adult Literacy service, Advocacy service, ISL Academy - how will they manage to add the ISL recognition to their workload?
2. Some participants felt that they have not heard feedback from these organisations despite the fact there are eleven representatives. They do not see any status updates on their social media or on their website saying that they had a productive meeting or that they need input in organising an event and so on. The participants felt as though *'they kept to themselves'*, and did not include the wider community.

In general, organisations may have some challenges in broadening their original, narrow goals that they have tried to follow through on (possibly for years). Nevertheless, if they want an alliance to be successful they must keep an open mind and be more flexible than they ordinarily are. Bearing this in mind, one must also acknowledge that not all organisations or movements can be good strategic alliances. Similar strategies and similar ideologies combined equal a better collaboration (Beamish & Luebbers , 2009) as organisations that have these similar factors can adopt a “we” frame of mind instead of the usual “me” frame of thinking. In addition it may be easier to develop a culture of trust (Movement Strategic Centre, 2013). Some participants argued that it would be better to form a group with no representatives from the organisations so that the group can focus on one aim - to get ISL recognised. They suggest that Deaf organisations could offer support and contribute but not be fully involved, as they currently are. I would argue against this as it does not appear that the organisations in the cross-community group have their own agenda but have adopted a “we” attitude, with the group uniting toward one common goal. Participants did comment that these organisations need to involve their members more by asking them to contribute in areas they are unsure in. After all, the more unity they can

gather, the stronger the movement will be. A good example of the unity between Deaf organisations and the Deaf community is the ISL Pride parades.

#### **4.6. Irish Sign Language Pride Parades**

The first recorded ISL Pride Parade was held on Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> April 2005 in conjunction with the Sign Language Awareness Week (Indymedia Ireland, 2005). The turnout for the march was over 500 (KerryDeaf.com, 2005) starting from the Garden of Remembrance and ending in St. Stephen's Green park with a ISL choir provided by Irish Deaf Youth Association (Indymedia Ireland, 2005). After this parade, the next one on record is the ISL Pride parade in 2008. The purpose of the march, Mathews (2011) highlighted was to strategically oppose a particular ideology (in this case, the 'particular ideology' is that a language is usually perceived as either spoken or written and this was accepted by society). Marchers carried banners, placards, handmade artistic pieces such as the "We 'heart' ISL" alphabet banner. The route that was taken was the same as the first one in 2005; Mathews highlighted the significance of this route in that it was usually the route taken by civil rights marches such as the annual Gay Pride parade.

The importance of this march is to make Irish Sign Language visible in a public place during a busy Saturday afternoon, raising awareness and in this case of this research, to foster a sense of community and pride among Deaf people (Mathews, 2011). If the parade is, as Mathews mentioned, significant in creating public visibility and media attention for the campaign, why did it cease in recent years? One participant in the focus group has asked that question and the response was that the march was held on the wrong day of the week (on Saturday, when the Dail is closed) and if the march was held on the days the Dail is open, there also will not be a large attendance or public visibility as people would either be working or out of Dublin. The participant then went on to say this is the reason why the ISL rally is held every year instead of a Pride parade, usually on Wednesdays during ISL Awareness Week (usually held in the third or last week of September); so that the people attending can grab chances to approach TDs and raise their awareness about the importance of ISL recognition.

In 2013, the participant explained, the people attending had to work hard to approach TDs, to explain about the purpose of the rally and why it is important to get ISL recognised, as they come out of the Dail. In contrast, in 2014, the TDs approached them asking for more information, which shows the importance of having the ISL rally on a Dail workday. However, accessibility in terms of attendance can vary among people e.g. people situated in rural areas may not have the same level of access as people in urban areas and this can affect the campaign. The people living in urban areas have better access to transport, technology (internet, media, etc.) while the people living in rural areas may have to travel long distances to get resources, information or even to protest e.g. in the Right2Water movement. People in urban areas can travel much easily to demonstrations than people in rural areas which are probably the reason why the numbers attending the rallies are usually not as big as the previous Pride parades. This can cause tension within the community, with some people who are at a disadvantage feeling excluded, something which the campaign needs to be aware of.

#### **4.7. Local Authorities' Motions**

The ISL recognition campaign has asked Deaf communities all over Ireland to press their local authority to pass a motion for ISL to be recognised as Ireland's third official language. To this date (July 2015), forty-three local authorities have passed this motion calling on the government to recognise ISL. The campaign emphasised the importance of having local authorities on the side of the campaign to push the government into looking at this issue (DonegalDaily, 2015). The Deaf community had been strongly involved in getting the motion passed in these forty-three local authorities.

One participant noted that she thought that there are usually two to five people involved in trying to get the motion passed in these local authorities, which is not enough to attract significant attention. In my analysis of Deaf people's activism in regard to the local authorities' motions, I could not find clear information about what it would mean if the motion is to be passed in a local authority. Upon looking at the comments section in one Facebook post on the ISL recognition campaign, I sourced an answer. A commentator asked what it meant for the local authority and the Deaf

community if this motion is to be passed. The campaign's response (Facebook, 2015) is:

*"We know council motions don't have any legal weight but it symbolises the democratic process at the local level that the motion is well supported and it can send a strong message. At the same time, councillors and local media are educated of the campaign as we deal with the great amount of ignorance and lack of awareness out there! We are at the stage where we have to educate the public and especially the elected representatives of our campaign."*

This is a clear statement of what it means for a local authority to pass the motion to get ISL recognised. One participant stated this problem:

*"...the minority group should tell the majority why it is important. I'm not sure we are doing that right, even if we go to their website like the IDS website or look for information on Facebook about the ISL recognition campaign, it does not tell you what you can do to help... I go into their Facebook and I see about county councils' motions being passed and I'd be like ok what do I do?"*

Despite the clear explanation listed above, the fact it was positioned in the comments' section on one Facebook post demonstrates how the social media techniques have not been fully grasped by the campaign. The participants emphasised their view that the campaign should look at the Yes Equality campaign social media techniques and to look into how the LGBT minority community managed to encourage the interest of the majority into voting yes. The social media techniques suggestions will be elaborated on further in this chapter. In terms of political activism, the local authority motions have been passed with thanks to the Deaf community's effort and involvement. The interest in getting involved and getting the local authority on the side of this campaign is increasing with thanks to the social media. However, there is one addition that may contribute to the increased interest in political activism - that is the foundation of the new Deaf Village Ireland.

#### **4.8. Deaf Village Ireland – A Deaf Space**

Deaf Village Ireland (DVI) is a Deaf led space where a unique ethos of both ISL and English are used daily. The DVI is a collaborative organisation represented by the twelve organisations (eleven are listed in the previous section with the addition of Citizen Information Centre). These organisations provide various activities for the Deaf community ranging from religious services to adult literacy services and sport facilities. Crucially, DVI gives the Deaf community a space where they can feel comfortable to express in their language, ISL and share their Deaf Culture among others. One participant even stated DVI as his '*dream home*', where Deaf people mix and communicate in ISL. A powerful bond of belonging can give the Deaf people a stronger sense of their own Deaf Identity leading them to fight for what they believe in – greater equality (Duggan, 2014). The concept of Deaf Space and territoriality ensures that the community's governmentality reigns, and not that of a hegemonic force (Mathews, 2006). It could be argued that perhaps the founding of DVI can contribute to the growing interest in political activism. The important elements of the Deaf community are located in one area such as the Citizens Information Centre and the Deaf Forward service, provided by IDS where Deaf people can enter and query about their rights. Another important aspect is that the gathering of these twelve organisations into one space can bring new perspectives to the community. This open space can create opportunities for new discussions among the community on how discriminations they experience can be challenged.

I have stated above the key points that may have contributed to the increased interest in political activism within the Irish Deaf community and how that led to an increased interest in the ISL recognition campaign. In the next section, I will discuss the reasons the participants in my focus groups had for their interest and involvement in the ISL recognition campaign. This will be followed by a discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign.

#### **4.9. Reasons for involvement in campaign**

Twelve participants were involved in one way or another in the activism organised by the ISL Recognition Campaign, leaving one that has never been involved. I asked the twelve participants why they attended any of the demonstrations or events organised

by the campaign. The responses were various. One participant felt passionate about her basic human right:

*"It's my language, MINE"*

A participant stated when she attended the pride parade; she did not understand what ISL recognition would really mean for the Deaf community. She attended the parade because she was following her peers as a teenager:

*"Growing up, I attended because my friends were attending. I was passionate but I didn't really understand the context of it"*

However, because she got involved without really meaning to be involved, she learnt what it meant to have language rights.

I then followed up by asking how they started becoming interested in this issue, what made them think "that's it, I want to be involved". Some participants became interested because they attended classes or international events:

*"I attended some demonstration and IDYA organised a flashmob last year"*

*"I... didn't have a real understanding until I went into CDS [Centre for Deaf Studies, Dublin] and attended international events where I learnt what it meant and the practices involved"*

*"By IDYA really, I attended WFDYS {World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section} camp for the first time and it hit me how important language is, human rights and so on. I became interested from there on."*

Many of the participants also became interested because of the Deafhood workshops they attended:

*"I learnt from the Deafhood workshop, it hit me as I reflected back on how naive I was. Deafhood has made me think of issues I would never thought of before"*

*"Growing up, I was not fully satisfied, I wanted more understanding. When I attended Deafhood workshop, I was like "Finally, this is it, the answer I have been waiting for! I understand the frustration, the "driving mad" of Deaf people*

*and their problems but when I attended, I understood more about the reasons behind Deaf people's problems and behaviours"*

*"Deafhood workshop, it really made an impact, I understood a lot more".*

Others because of the barriers they face at home or in public because of the lack in the ability to communicate with hearing people:

*"I am a third generation Deaf person in my family. One side of my parents have many Deaf family members but the other side is hearing. I never really communicated with them whereas with my Deaf aunts and uncles, I sign a lot to them. The other side does not really respect ISL; they see it in a negative way. I became disillusioned. They should show respect for ISL."*

*"I started becoming interested when I was a teenager, facing barriers, growing up with hearing people mocking. I felt frustrated at the discrimination. I got it in my head that one day I will do something. After I left school, I became involved with IDS. It's the childhood experience of oppression"*

Only one participant became interested because of social media. The updates on Facebook about the progress of the campaign made him more aware of what is happening and understand more about what ISL recognition means.

One simply said:

*"I decided enough is enough"*

Having Deaf children made two participants in one focus group realise how important it is to have ISL as a vital part of the school curriculum and motto:

*"It wasn't until I had a Deaf child that I really got involved. I became really frustrated from there on. If I didn't have a Deaf child, I don't think I would be this much interested."*

*"My son, who is five years old, complained about why the teachers couldn't sign, it's the school for the Deaf! The teachers should be able to sign!"*

Not only having a Deaf child can make people interested, having Deaf parents with different ways of communicating can have an effect on the child that makes the

participant want to fight for ISL recognition so that nobody would have to experience the oppression of the oral system like many did:

*“For me, it started with my parents. My father attended the boys’ school having never experienced oralism and my mother went through the oral system. When they told me their stories I got more and more frustrated. Then funnily enough... in school, one of my classmates... she’s in an oral group while I was in the signing group. I encouraged her to tell the teacher that sign language is great, that it is her right. I was quite young; I think I was eleven years old. I told her to go on and ask and she challenged the teacher and the teacher flipped out to her. From that, I knew.”*

After the discussion relating to the interest in getting involved in the campaign ended, one participant wanted me to highlight that nobody got interested in the issue of ISL recognition because of the Deaf schools. They believe that the children in these Deaf schools are in a “bubble wrap”, not aware of the political issues within the Deaf community.

#### **4.10. Key Points from the Focus Group Discussions**

I asked the two focus groups what ISL recognition means to them. The key words that came up often in their responses are:

1. Equality
2. Accessibility – access to ISL in schools, universities, museums, to information e.g. TV
3. To be recognised as citizens – not to be treated as second-class citizens.
4. Choice – social outings such as theatres, cinemas; one should be able to have the choice to attend in their own time rather than to be given specific films at specific times. The choice to have ISL as part of one’s school curriculum and on state examinations.
5. Respect – from families, friends and the wider hearing community.
6. Human Rights

Others include the end of paternalism, inclusiveness, access to ISL from early age so that the child can acquire language and therefore education easier. Many find it

frustrating that the government provides access to ISL at third level but not in primary or secondary level. One argues that:

*“Primary school is where you begin to learn until you are able to enter university. But we have to struggle until we get to university level then we are provided all access! The key to language acquisition is to start at early age!”*

*“It seems funny that university can provide access that schools cannot. Schools are more important in receiving education yet we get more access at third level, a big jump... In school, it’s very restricted in terms of gaining our rights but in university, we are given so much we struggle!”*

The participants seem to have a good basic understanding of what ISL recognition could mean for the Deaf community in terms of their rights. However, there is a concern that they may see this as a complete solution to all their problems. This led me to question what are the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign which is laid out in the next section, which will be followed by the participants’ recommendations in how to improve the campaign’s techniques. An analysis of the participants’ opinions will be laid out in chapter five, the conclusion section.

#### **4.11. Strengths and Weaknesses**

Two of the questions that were asked in the focus group discussions were:

1. Do you feel that the campaign was informative?
2. What do you think they should do to improve?

The answers for the first question are more negative than positive; however, there are some good points from both the negative and positive sides which I will list below.

##### **4.11.1 Voluntary/No full time staff**

A weakness that the participants feel strongly about that may hinder the ISL recognition campaign is that the people involved are working on a voluntary basis. There are no full time staffs that can focus on improving the access to information via social media, update the website, translate important relevant documents into ISL, do research into statistics and find useful information that can advance the campaign. The main contributors to the campaign are working full-time and it is difficult for them to

set aside time for the progress of the campaign and the distributing of updated information onto social media. The participants felt that the Yes Equality campaign for marriage referendum is a perfect example for the campaign to follow. The use of logos published everywhere, the constant Facebook, Twitter and Instagram updates, the uploading of touching videos on Youtube are prime examples that the participants feel are most useful for the ISL recognition campaign. However, they did argue that because of the lack of staff, it is difficult for the campaign to follow and use the Yes Equality campaign techniques. Bateman (1990) highlights that it is important to remember that the African-American civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s and in this case, the LGBTQ movement in Ireland are minority groups, they are still significantly larger in numbers than the Irish Deaf community that uses ISL. Out of this small number, an even smaller number of Deaf people have college education (Bateman, 1990). One participant notes this point by arguing that very little people have actually read the ISL Bill put forward to the Seamed in January 2013, not because they are ignorant but because they cannot access the information through the language they are most comfortable in, ISL. She also argued that the Irish Deaf academics have more access to information than the general Deaf population, creating an inner hierarchy within the Deaf community. She also argues that if ISL is recognised as a third official language, it would mean that the general Deaf population would have the same access to information as the academics.

#### **4.11.2 Information Distribution**

- **ISL Bill**

One of the key documents that the Deaf community has little access to is the ISL Bill. The ISL Bill is 26 pages long, describing every aspect that would come into effect if it is to be passed (Oireachtas, 2013). Understanding this Bill is essential for the people who want to be involved in this campaign. Out of the thirteen people involved in the two focus groups, none of them read the Bill. My concern for the lack of access to this Bill is that if people fought hard to get it passed only to find out the Bill is limited in terms of accessibility and equality, they might be disillusioned. It is important for the Deaf community to know what is being outlined and the reasons behind these outlines, so they are aware of what would happen if the Bill is passed. As I have noted above, the

lack of provision of staff to translate the ISL Bill into ISL hinders the campaign in the way that it is not fully accessible to Deaf people.

- **Social Media**

The participants feel that the campaign does not share as much information on the progress it has made as much as it could have. They suggested that the organisations involved in these board meetings share the information gathered from these meetings onto their websites or their Facebook page. They also suggested following the marriage equality campaign, looking into how they got people's attention – by using personal and emotional stories and broadcasting them, making a good logo that everybody can recognise, clear explanation of what people can do to help the campaign that is laid out on the Facebook page and on the website. There is an encouragement for the campaign to broadcast stories through journals and newspapers. One suggested having an ambassador to lead the campaign; a key person that can speak for and to the community, a person that everyone can feel comfortable talking to and ask questions:

*“a person on the same level as the Deaf people who can understand them or how to communicate with them”.*

#### **4.11.3. Radicalism**

One participant argued that the campaign is passive and not radical or extreme enough to grab people's attention. Another said that there is a feeling of the campaign as “spreading happiness” with no deeper meaning or understanding of the context behind it. Bateman (1990) states that if people want to make dramatic effects, they will have to think carefully if the benefits outweigh the risks and that they have “nothing to lose”. An example of a good radical campaign would be Deaf President Now in Gallaudet University in 1988, where the Deaf students grabbed the opportunity to make the campaign stronger by using the President's argument that Deaf people are not ready (Bateman, 1990). The same example is the LIS (Lingua Dei Segni Italiana) protest in Italy after the government proposed to pass a law recognising LIS as a “Language of Mime and Gesture” (WFD, 2011). The Italian Deaf community made this a global event, asking every Deaf community outside the country to protest outside the Italian embassy in their own country, uniting to make a stronger front which lead

to an achievement, the latest being that LIS is recognised in the Lazio Regional Law to enable full accessibility for Deaf people in community life (Movimento Lingua Dei Segni Italiana, 2015).

#### **4.11.4. Dialogues**

*“The negative is that I didn’t feel involved in the discussions; there needs to be more public discussions”*

A few of the causes that may inhibit the Deaf individual’s participation in political activism are communication and lack of awareness of political issues (Bateman, 1990). It is critical for Deaf people to have political empowerment and the way to grow empowerment is that a person feels part of his/her community and has some sense of control of his/her political and social environment (Bateman, 1990). A key tool in building up personal relationship with the community as well as growing one’s interest in political activism is dialogue. Freire (2005) argues that a lack of dialogue can mean there are no mutual trusts built and in order to have a collective consciousness, mutual trusts are vital. One participant suggests that the people involved in the campaign should have open discussions with the community, not just the Deaf organisations. Once the community can fully grasp what they could do to contribute to the campaign, they can feel encouraged to act such as in trying to build up relationships with one’s local TD or people working in the media. Another example is that they can participate in trying to build up relationships with potential allies; it is possible that a member of the Deaf community is also a member of a potential ally (e.g. organisation or company) without knowing that these allies can contribute to the campaign.

The positive outcomes from this campaign the group listed are:

#### **4.11.5. ISL Awareness Week**

The group believes that the main positive outcome of the campaign is the increasing numbers becoming involved in ISL Awareness Week, usually held on the third week of September annually. During this week, many activities are organised by various Deaf organisations. Examples of event organised are: presentations relating to ISL, coffee morning in different counties so that people can get together and communicate in ISL in public places, ISL rally held outside Leinster House, short dramas (Facebook, 2015). This idea only started in 2013. The only negative the participants felt about the

awareness week is that it only grabs people's attention for one week a year. There is a need to grab attention constantly rather than leave it to one week a year and it seems to grab the attention of only Deaf people, rather than the wider hearing community.

#### **4.11.6. Identity Building**

One participant said:

*"I think the campaign was good in informing the Deaf, making them learn more about their identity. You learn more about yourself and at the same time, you campaign."*

The broadcasting of the importance of ISL makes people self-reflect their attitudes towards ISL as a language and change their attitudes for the better.

#### **4.11.7. Involvement of organisations**

I listed this as positive as well as negative as seen above because the group was divided in this particular topic. The positive outcome of the involvement of these organisations in the campaign is that they are contributing, rather than leaving it to one organisation. The eleven organisations are building a good relationship with one common goal: to get ISL recognised as Ireland's third official language.

#### **4.12. Recommendations suggested by focus groups**

I asked the participants if they have suggestions in how to improve the campaign. The first and foremost one that they emphasise is to have full time staff. Another point that has been noted above is to have a board that does not consist of organisational representatives but rather one that will focus on the ISL campaign alone, without an ulterior motive. Discussions with the Irish Deaf community and not just organisations were also suggested. One participant believes that members of the Deaf community should:

*"build up personal relationships with local TDs."*

The reasons for the building up of personal relationships with one's local TDs are that they can build up these TDs' knowledge about Deaf Identity, Deaf Culture and the importance of ISL recognition. Meeting your own TDs and proving to them that you

can do anything if access to your own language is provided may change their views toward ISL.

One participant also suggested that the members of the community should build up relationships with local media people such as journalists so that they can write or broadcast about ISL and the Deaf community in a positive light, rather than the usual negative and medically-focused light. Better use of the media is strongly emphasised as the participants believe that it is vital to make use of the media to attract people outside the Deaf community, to make them ask questions about the importance of ISL recognition and to raise awareness of the campaign. Participants suggested making videos that would touch people emotionally such as interviewing the Deaf person growing up in mainstream schools and then finding their identity in the Deaf community or interviewing hearing parents of these Deaf people, asking their views on ISL – perhaps these hearing parents can explain how they were told by the experts that sign kills speech and how their views have changed today.

As noted above in the “Attitudes towards ISL as a “language”” section I explained how it is critical to intervene in the early stages of a Deaf child’s life. A participant believed that it is vital to bring in some sort of a language policy stating that doctors are:

*“legally obliged to show all information that is relevant for the parents who are having a Deaf child, showing them the option of mainstreaming and Deaf school education, broadening their options”.*

#### **4.13. Conclusion**

The headings in this section were created by my own understanding from what the participants discussed in the two focus groups. The participants expressed their views on what they perceive that having ISL recognised as Ireland’s third official language would mean for the Irish Deaf community, the impact social media had and could have on the community, the importance of the involvement of the deaf organisations in the campaign and how the ISL Pride parades and the foundation of Deaf Village Ireland impacted the community in terms of political activism. I have also laid out the reasons they gave for their interest or involvement in the campaign and summarised the key points they made in the discussion about what ISL recognition mean. I noted the

participants' opinions on what are the strengths and weaknesses that the campaign has. In the next chapter, I will conclude with my own analysis of the participants' opinions expressed and my own recommendations in what the campaign can do to improve the relationship with the Irish Deaf community, ending with my personal reflection of my research thesis.

## **Chapter Five**

# **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I will lay out my analysis of the participants' discussions: the reasons for their involvement in the campaign, their views on the campaign's strengths and weaknesses and their recommendations on how to improve the campaign. I will end the chapter with a personal reflection in my findings and on the thesis research as a whole.

### **5.1. Analysis and Recommendations**

In this section, I will discuss the campaign's techniques and the recommendations suggested by the participants in the two focus groups. The main aspect that the participants felt strongly about was the use of social media to attract attention from a wider audience. It was recommended that the campaign follow the techniques used by the Yes Equality marriage campaign such as creating short videos explaining how lack of access to language at an early age can affect the Deaf person, or interviews with parents of Deaf children comparing how they viewed ISL at the time of their child's diagnosis to how they see it today.

The videos would have to be either transcribed or subtitled and thus accessible to both Deaf and hearing communities. Participants emphasised the need to create a strong logo that everybody can recognise; a brand that people could relate to. The internet is

a powerful tool and should be used to the campaign's advantage leading to a stronger movement, attracting people from different communities.

ISL Awareness Week seems to be a positive technique used by the campaign, and has potential to expand and attract a wider audience. One suggestion is that during the annual ISL Rally outside Leinster House (usually held on a weekday), the campaign could give people living outside Dublin a chance to rally, perhaps outside their local TDs' offices, or outside county council buildings. An alternative could be arranging meetings with Deaf people's TDs to discuss the impact access to ISL have on every aspect of a Deaf person's life. The more information that can be shared with the TDs, the better informed they will be and the better chance to construct a strong argument in favour of passing the ISL Bill in the Dail.

In the focus group, I suggested provision of a lobbying training for the Deaf community, teaching them techniques one could use to make a strong argument during meetings with politicians or authorities. One participant mentioned an important point that could affect this campaign; the provision of ISL interpreters. In order to lobby well, individuals could then take advantage of coffee breaks during meetings to discuss important issues with certain influential people. However, the ISL interpreters could reply that they have a right to breaks to recover after long hours of interpreting - which means that the Deaf person is left at a disadvantage. This is an important consideration that should be shared with the wider community; the fact we are often marginalised because of the lack of provision even in lobbying which is critical if we want to improve the quality of Deaf people's lives. As I stated in chapter four, dialogues are essential so that people can be aware of these barriers and even possibly provide good alternatives that the Deaf community can use.

Another vital concern that has been pointed out is in relation to poor provision of information from the campaign to the Deaf community. There are no official translations of the ISL Bill so one suggestion could be to have the ISL Bill translated into an ISL video which could be uploaded onto the campaign's website. Another option would be to hold a road-show or open discussion night, where people could query the contents of the Bill, ensuring they fully understand what to expect if the Bill was

passed. However it was highlighted by participants that the lack of people working full time on the campaign could hinder the ability of the campaign to achieve its full potential.

In terms of encouraging creation of open discussions, the Deafhood workshops were evidently successful. These workshops contributed to identity building, which is critical; self-reflection can lead to an increased interest in political activism. The participants that attended understood the importance of giving ISL the same status as that of spoken languages. Once Deaf people start seeing ISL as a true language, then it is possible to convince the wider community to see ISL in this way. One suggestion is that the campaign can look into encouraging Deaf schools and units to discuss the importance of political activism within the community and to highlight what students think are important issues that should be tackled by the Deaf community. These political issues can be discussed in the schools' Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) classes that are already provided for. This will create dialogues within schools at an earlier age than at present.

These were the recommendations that were suggested by the thirteen participants and me in the focus groups' discussions. There is potential for more new and fresh ideas if the campaign has these kinds of open-ended discussions with the Deaf community, and even the wider hearing community.

## **5.2. Conclusion**

The Irish Sign Language recognition campaign has had numerous achievements in recent years, such as the passing of motions in forty-five local authorities with the help of the Deaf community, and their ISL Awareness Week event which has encouraged increased activism. There are also numerous aspects of the campaign that have contributed to increased interest in political activism, leading to a growing interest in the campaign; such aspects include social media, the foundation of the Deaf Village Ireland and the ISL Pride parades. However, it can be seen that the campaign can do more to include the Deaf community such as using the power of the Internet to generate interests, creating more open discussions within the community and

providing clear information that people can find online. After all there is nothing about us, without us.

The thesis has addressed the question of where the Irish Sign Language Recognition campaign stands in terms of its relationship with the Irish Deaf community, exploring their knowledge and views on the campaign. It has also explored their involvement in the campaign, the development of the campaign, activism within the Deaf community and the campaign's strengths and weaknesses. The recommendations created from the data gathered from two focus groups have been framed to ensure a better chance of the campaign in succeeding. Without the Irish Deaf community, there would be no campaign. It is therefore vital to include the community in it.

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