

Sign language – observing how it is taught in Cyprus, through French eyes

In March 2007, French sign-language instructor Christophe Giner visited Cyprus with the help of a Grundtvig in-service training grant. Here are his reflections on an experience which in the short space of ten days changed his life and work.

“My job-shadowing experience consisted in an observation placement at the Deaf Federation of Cyprus in order to have an idea about their activities and experiences. The main objective of this job-shadowing visit, was to gain an understanding of the methods/approaches used for both social and working inclusion of deaf people, as well as to observe activities developed by the deaf community in Cyprus more generally. For me this was also an opportunity to discover and appreciate the Cypriot education system targeted at deaf learners. I had the opportunity to observe some learners during an entire week.

During my stay, I was guided by the President of the National Federation of Deaf and I had the opportunity to meet the Minister of Labour. This experience has been a tremendous success. I visited and met a number of organisations and actors active in promoting literacy, such as a

school for the deaf in Nicosia; the Association of Cypriot Deaf in Nicosia, the Deaf Association in Larnaka; the Deaf Association in Limassol; the Cypriot Association of Parents of Deaf Children; the Cypriot Labour Ministry, department for handicapped people; the Cypriot Confederation of Associations of Handicapped People. I attended courses targeted at young deaf people.

The Cypriot sign language was only recognised as an official language for the deaf as recently as 2006. It is still under Greek and American influence and there is still an absence of training materials. To overcome this problem, I had to adapt the icons I was used to in French sign language in order to be able to communicate effectively with the deaf people in Cyprus. I also proceeded to gather information relating to Cypriot deaf community expectations, and in particular I focused on a comparison between education, social and professional laws and achievements in France and other European countries which was a really useful exercise for me.

This job-shadowing experience allowed me to better understand Cypriot deaf culture, which seems to share, with all other European deaf communi-

ties, a number of values and activities. I was encouraged to further learn and compare my experience with people I met in Cyprus, I further developed my sign language competences and gained a better understanding of the learning process that has to be implemented when teaching deaf learners. The opportunity to exchange experiences and compare them with different approaches and education systems was of great benefit to my school. My motivation to continue to stress the need for the recognition of sign language and the specific learning needs of deaf people, has unquestionably been greatly reinforced.”