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Interview with sign language interpreter and trainer Maya de Wit

Maya de Wit¹

Esther de Boe²

Maya de Wit studied in the United States and the Netherlands, and works internationally as a sign language interpreter in Dutch Sign language, American Sign Language and International Sign. She is involved in academic fields linked to SLI, with a strong interest in topics such as education, interpreting quality and technology. Maya de Wit has also been active in SLI policy making, by means of her membership to - among others - the Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NBTG), the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) and EULITA (European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association). She is an active member of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), for which she helped to develop guidelines for spoken and sign language conference interpreters, and she currently coordinates AIIC Sign Language Network activities. Her publication *Sign Language Interpreting in Europe* is updated and republished every 4 years. Maya de Wit is also an SLI consultant and trainer.

Esther de Boe holds a MA in Liberal Arts, a MA in Translation and a European Master in Conference Interpreting (EMCI), and has worked since 2011 at the University of Antwerp (Belgium), teaching translation and interpreting at bachelor and master level. She is a sworn translator and interpreter and is currently working on a PhD on interpreting quality in remote interpreting (by telephone and videolink) in medical healthcare.

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Esther: Can you tell us something about your background: How did you first become interested in Dutch Sign Language and how did you learn American Sign Language?

Maya: I always had an interest in sign language, but never thought of using it professionally. I was on a 1-year internship for a bachelor of arts in recreation at the Maryland School for the Blind in Baltimore, Maryland, and there were also deafblind children. They asked all the staff who would be willing to learn sign language, so the children who are deaf-blind would have a wider range of persons to speak to. I did so, and became so intrigued that I used every possible minute to learn more about sign language and how to sign. I went back to the Netherlands, finalized my BA in recreation, got married and we then moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. I there enrolled at St. Catherine's sign language interpreting program. So, my first sign language was really American Sign Language. At the end of my stay, I took the RID test and 3 months later, when we were back in the Netherlands, I received by fax the notification that I had passed.

For many years I have worked as an ASL interpreter across Europe. In 1998 I became the policy maker of the Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NBTG), a position which I held for 10 years. During these 10 years, one of my major ambitions was to establish a national register of sign language interpreters, which we managed. One of the prerequisites for interpreters to subscribe to the register is to have completed a BA in SLI. In 2000 I enrolled in the BA degree, which I completed in 3 years, instead of the usual 4 years. I graduated in 2003 and ever since have been working a lot with Dutch Sign Language, in combination with Dutch, but also with English and German.

Currently I combine different components in my day to day work: interpreting, research, training and consultancy. When I find challenges in my work as an interpreter, or when I am asked certain questions as to why there are no services or access for deaf sign language users, then I am triggered to study and compile this information and use these results in my training and consultancy. It is essential that we, as sign language interpreters, provide the best quality in interpretation, so that the deaf sign language users have the best possible equal access to society, for example, to education, employment and leisure. It is disheartening to see the lack of access to quality interpreting services for deaf sign language users, and this must change. What remains a struggle and a challenge is that even if there are rules, regulations or laws in place, these are no guarantee to access to interpreting services. We must continue to fight for an acceptable and broad implementation of these services. With my work I hope to contribute a little bit to this change.

Esther: How and when did you acquire International Sign?

Maya: In 2006 I was elected president of the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli). I held this position for the maximum of the 2 terms, until 2012. It was an amazing opportunity to meet interpreters and deaf persons across Europe. I also started to work closely with the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), which is based in Brussels. All these encounters helped me to understand how to communicate with deaf persons across Europe and the world. I was increasingly asked to give presentations in International Sign. One day, a deaf person whom I knew well asked me if could interpret International Sign. Although hesitant at first, I did it, and I then slowly got more and more involved in it. At this moment, I interpret mostly between International Sign and one of my spoken languages (English, Dutch, and German). I work at national and international conferences and meetings, and for EU institutions, the UN, and the Council of Europe. I have also been a member of the task force of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), with whom I worked to set up the accreditation process for International Sign interpreters. Currently, I am a member of the WFD Expert Group on Accessibility (Technology & Sign Language).

Esther: How did you develop expertise in interpreting in international settings, working with English and spoken language interpreters in a team, and in team interpreting?

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Maya: As I have so many working languages by practice, I often end up in settings which are multilingual. I have also encountered the many challenges that come with interpreting in these settings. By working with experienced and less experienced colleagues, I also found how little training and information there is on this topic. I also noticed that working in a good and balanced team makes an enormous difference in the quality of the final interpretation. So, the more we get out of the team by informing one other well, the better the result.

I also wanted to find out what it is that we do exactly in these international settings and have written several research papers on the topic. These results I then use again in my training and classes. Participants find it very helpful, as it is a combination of practice and research-based at the same time.

Additionally, I found that it's not only in sign language interpreting (SLI) that a team can improve its cooperation and interpretation, but that this is also true in mixed teams. There is very little awareness among spoken language interpreters of how SLI work and vice versa. By increasing this awareness, the interpreters will improve their cooperation and their final product, the interpretation. Therefore, as the AIIC Sign Language Network, we developed guidelines on how to work in mixed teams, but also information for sound engineers and conference organizers to know what is needed to work with SLI and SpLI in conference settings. As the current coordinator of the AIIC SLN, I also aim – together with the members of the network – for a greater visibility of SLI and to raise awareness of the fact that sign language interpreters are also conference interpreters and do not work solely within the community.

Esther: I know you have networks across Europe and that you have expertise in reviewing interpreter education curricula. Can you tell us something about interpreter education across Europe, divergences, similarities? Do most European countries offer interpreter education, and if so, at what level (universities, community training)? Can you see any differences in sign language interpreter education in the U.S. and in Europe?

Maya: When I was president of efsli, we often received requests on how to establish a sign language interpreter training program and also on best practices in the current programs. In order to have an overview, we organized three working seminars where trainers from the current programs and stakeholders and experts got together and analysed and shared knowledge and expertise. The result after these working seminars was a publication of a model curriculum for a 3-year BA degree in SLI.

There are now nearly 90 SLI programs in Europe. In many countries there is more than one program. The programs differ in length and credits, but throughout the years, we can identify that the overall length is increasing and the content is providing a more solid foundation. Most of the programs in Western and Northern Europe are now at BA level. In Eastern Europe, the majority of the countries do not have a formal recognized SLI program. The programs available are temporary or short courses.

The major difference between spoken and sign language interpreter programs is that the majority of the SLI programs do not require that students have knowledge of the language before entering the program. This means that the sign language is acquired during the education. It has been shown that those who acquire SL before the program or have an intensified SL teaching at the start of the program are more fluent and competent in interpreting at the end of the program.

I cannot really make a comparison between the U.S. and Europe, as even in Europe the diversity of the programs is quite large.

Esther: What type of training are you most often asked to provide, and why do you think this is?

Maya: I am asked a lot to provide presentations based on my research data on the status of the SLI profession. As I have conducted this research every 4 years since 2000, these data can provide a longitudinal insight into best practices. These best practices and also other findings can help other associations to identify what is applicable and useful to their national situation.

The other topic I am most frequently asked about is interpreting in international settings and interpreting between my national sign language and English as a third language. The majority of sign language interpreters are not trained to work with English, as this is not one of their native or national languages. At the same time, the use

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of English even in the national setting has increased, as there are more students attending higher education and we see a globalization of the deaf community. Deaf persons travel more and interact more with each other internationally. As a result, there is more use of English in international contexts.

Esther: What advice would you have for other interpreter educators and why?

Maya: I would advise looking into reviewing the curriculum of SLI training, creating first a solid foundation of the languages the students will work with prior to entering the interpreting program. A solution would be to first offer a language program, followed by an interpreting degree. Ideal would be if, next to the spoken foreign languages, sign language became one of the languages students can choose, which is only the case in very few programs at the moment. In this way, students would be trained as interpreters instead of learning languages and interpreting separately, which is often the case now.

Esther: What advice would you have for interpreting students or new graduates?

Maya: Next to being involved with the deaf community, become involved with your profession and its development, even during your studies. This will provide you valuable input and connections for your future career. As a new interpreter it will be challenging to start your career, but with the support of practising interpreters it can be a smoother ride. Find a buddy or mentor who is willing to work with you as a novice interpreter. This is a learning experience for both the interpreter and the novice interpreter.