

The Sign Language eLibrary of Finland: how, why and who?

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Abstract

The core task of Finnish libraries is to offer all citizens equal access to information and culture. When it comes to deaf sign language users, this means there should be material in sign language made available for them. To ensure the production and availability of sign language material, the Sign Language eLibrary was founded in 2014. The Sign Language eLibrary is a true digital library, as it operates solely online. The library's collection consists of videos in sign language. The majority of the material is produced by the library itself and is made by deaf signers. The library's defining objective is to produce and publish sign language culture and literature. Translated works are also featured. The library's collection currently holds over 800 titles. The material is freely accessible for all. The library's funding comes from the Ministry of Education and Culture and is thus one of the libraries funded by the Finnish government. The Sign Language eLibrary is operated under the Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD). The web address for the library is www.viittomakielinenkirjasto.fi.

Keywords: Deaf, Sign Language, eLibrary, accessibility.

Introduction

Finland has a population of 5,5 million and has 854 public libraries that are funded by the government and municipalities. In Finland, there is a legal basis for library services. The first Public Libraries Act came into effect in 1928, and the newest version effected in 2017. The objective of the Public Libraries Act is to promote:

- Equal opportunities for everyone to access education and culture
- Availability and use of information
- Reading culture and versatile literacy skills
- Opportunities for lifelong learning and competence development
- Active citizenship, democracy and freedom of expression

The implementation of these objectives is based on a sense of community, pluralism and cultural diversity.

In addition to public libraries, several academic and privately owned special libraries carry out the Public Libraries Act. All Finnish libraries are free of charge, and anyone with an address in Finland can get a free library card.

Some public libraries are given special tasks. One of these tasks has to do with the language of the collected material – a library has to collect material in at least one other language outside of Finland's official languages, Finnish and Swedish. For example, the Library of Helsinki has the task of being a multilingual library; the Library of Espoo has the job of collecting Russian material, and the Library of Rovaniemi material in Sami.

In addition to public libraries, Finland has a library for the visually impaired, Celia, and the Sign Language eLibrary, both of which are government-funded libraries. Unlike public libraries, both Celia and the Sign Language eLibrary have material production of their own. Celia's productions include audiobooks, books in Braille and tactile books. The Sign Language eLibrary produces video material in sign language.

This article deals with the Sign Language eLibrary and how it is maintained and operated, and what its core mission is.

By Whom?

The first plan for the Sign Language eLibrary was drafted in 2006. The plan was the result of a collaborative team's efforts – a team with representatives from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the FAD. The original plan had a very narrow definition of the target customer group: deaf people who use sign language. However, it was clear even then that the library would operate solely on the internet, and that its resources would consist of sign language videos that could be streamed online. Still, it took seven years before the library finally secured its funding by being included in the national budget. From 2013 onward, the national budget has yearly reserved funds to operate the library and keep new material in production. The funds are granted to the FAD – the Sign Language eLibrary operates underneath it.

Why did the Finnish government grant the funding to the FAD instead of giving a public library the task to collect sign language material? First, the FAD has had sign language material production in place since 1981 with the support of different grants. The FAD thus has a long tradition, knowhow and the necessary equipment for sign language video production. Therefore, the Sign Language eLibrary did not have to start from nothing, but instead, it had the accumulated knowledge and skills of the FAD at its disposal. The FAD also has thorough insight and solid networks with the signing deaf community in our country. The support of these networks made it more secure to launch the library and keep it operational.

Planning for the Sign Language eLibrary restarted in the spring of 2013. The plans had to be completely reworked, since the plans of 2006 were all helplessly outdated – IT and the Internet had developed immensely in seven years. A person was hired to carry out the planning. To support her, a project group was formed, consisting of professionals from the FAD's online communications and sign language material production, and professionals of

library work. The FAD also has a traditional library, specializing in sign language linguistics, deaf culture, history and education, as well as sign language interpreting.

The Sign Language eLibrary opened its virtual doors in October 2014. At that time, the library featured 250 videos in sign language collected from earlier FAD video productions. More recently, the library has aimed at releasing one new video each week. Currently, the library holds about 800 titles, about 10% of which are links to e-resources on other platforms. The rest are the Sign Language eLibrary's and the FAD's own productions.

Why?

Why does the Sign Language eLibrary exist and why is it needed? The answers for these questions can be viewed from two different perspectives: a societal/legal perspective and an individual/sign language community perspective.

Finnish legislation holds two laws, which are significant to the Sign Language eLibrary: the Public Libraries Act and the Sign Language Act. The Public Libraries Act states that every citizen should have equal opportunities to access culture, information, lifelong education, as well as active and equal citizenship. The Sign Language Act, enacted in 2015, states similar civil rights toward sign language users. According to the Sign Language Act, authorities must promote sign language and its usage in society. In addition to these laws, Finland has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which also recognizes sign language, and promotes sign language users' rights to their own language with equal membership in society. The Sign Language eLibrary is the concrete embodiment and implementation of these laws.

What significance does the Sign Language eLibrary have for a sign language user and the whole signing community? As long as there have been communities of deaf people, there have also been signing and sign language culture. The first deaf school was founded in the 1840s. The school assembled deaf people, who up until then had been alone and separated from other deaf people, and simultaneously gave birth to a deaf community. Sign language and sign language culture has traditionally lived and thrived in face-to-face meetings. The progress made in IT in the 2000s has opened up a completely new, effective way for the signing community to collect, produce, record and publish sign language and sign language culture for everyone to enjoy. Still, there is need for an organization that does this methodically, sustainably and with a clear mission. This is especially important now as traditional deaf schools are closing their doors and deaf children are placed in normal public schools. Up until very recently, deaf schools had a significant role in transferring sign language culture from one generation to the next. Sign language lived and breathed in schools, pupils often had close ties to local deaf clubs, and sign language storytelling and culture transferred from deaf elders to the young. With the closing of deaf schools, this chain has been broken. The significance of schools in transferring tradition and culture is heightened by the fact that 90 % of deaf children are born to hearing adults, who usually are not familiar with sign language and deaf culture. Finland, along with many western countries, is also experiencing a huge change in age structure where fewer children are born, meaning fewer deaf children as well. Additionally, the majority of deaf children surgically receive a cochlear implant, a hearing aid, which has made the role and status of sign language once again a hot topic.

Finland has thus experienced a great need for the government funded Sign Language eLibrary. The mission of the library is to collect and store this endangered language and its culture while offering the material for all to see. Statistics have already proven the library's necessity. Since 2014, whilst the library has been online, the customer base has increased yearly by about 30 %, and based on the statistics, many others who are not part of the signing deaf community, also use the library's resources. There are approximately 2900 signing deaf people in Finland. Based on customer research, the library also serves family member, friends of deaf people, individuals who work with deaf children, students of sign language and people who work in customer service. In 2018, there were 40 000 unique IP-addresses visiting the library and its web pages were clicked 200 000 times.

How?

The Sign Language eLibrary has a staff of two: a producer and a media worker. A production team is assembled for each production separately: a screenwriter, a director and the performers. The people chosen in a production team are mainly native signers themselves with deep knowledge of how to make good material in sign language. The production team is thus representative of the target audience. The library is able to offer work for deaf people with media expertise and has with its productions brought out new operators in the field. A media worker is responsible for shooting, editing and video graphics. The producer is responsible for assembling the production team, practical arrangements and administrating the library website.

Topics for the productions are chosen by considering direct requests from the library's customers, as well as by paying notice to important and relevant topics arising from and affecting the signing community. Diversity and different age groups are considered as well. Deaf people, with visual impairments, are taken into account, for example, by paying attention to the contrast levels of video material. The videos in the Sign Language eLibrary are stored in a separate media server, and they are shared to the public by the library's online platform. A short description and accurate bibliographical information are recorded of each video. Subtitles are added to as many videos as possible to make them accessible for non-signers. Screen reading software's technical requirements are considered when choosing subtitle formats. Making sign language and deaf culture known to the general public is one of the library's goals.

The Sign Language eLibrary website is built with search engine optimization in mind. The user interface (UI) is designed to be as visual as possible so that it can be usable even if one does not know the UI's main language. For the time being, it is still not possible to build a search engine that would work in sign language, which means the UI works on written Finnish and Swedish – both official languages in Finland. The website fully complies with the EU's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 AA. The website will be reformed in early 2020.

References

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Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

WCAG 2.1 <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/>

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