

**Draft of speech to FEADPA congress, Geneva 14 October 2005**

It gives me great pleasure indeed to open the proceedings today. This is my first congress as President and I am delighted to be here in Geneva on this occasion. I have been involved with FEAPDA since 1985, long before the United Kingdom - in the form of the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf of which I am now National Secretary - decided to join the Federation. In those days my French was much better than it is now (!) and I acted as a French-English interpreter for many years.

During those years I got to know many colleagues from across Europe and very much value the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss the whole range of issues affecting the education of deaf children.

The last congress was held in Cardiff in Wales in the United Kingdom and I was the chair of the organising committee. This was a very challenging task and I know that our Swiss colleagues experienced similar challenges. I hope that they are feeling slightly more relaxed now the congress has officially started. I know what they have been through!! However, I know that they won't really relax until the congress is over. Our grateful thanks are due to all the organisers for all their hard work.

I am particularly delighted that the congress is taking place in the United Nations Building. A few decades ago the United Nations might well have been needed to try to bring peace to the world of the education of deaf children!!! In those days strong arguments and differences of opinion raged and were often taken personally. Colleagues sometimes even refused to talk to each other. Today, certainly in the UK, and I am sure throughout Europe, Teachers of the Deaf are much more respectful of each other's positions. All Teachers of the Deaf pursue the educational approach they feel to be most beneficial for the children with whom they work - and we can all learn from each other. Whether the approach is broadly auditory oral, oral with signed support or sign bilingual, all colleagues have things to teach and learn from each other. We can all gain by studying each other's practice, techniques and approaches. This applies within individual countries and across the countries of Europe. This is why a FEAPDA congress is such an important event. Clearly, people will disagree with each other on some basic aspects of education but this should not prevent communication with between those with different views.

There have been many developments in our field over recent years and all Teachers of the Deaf have constantly to reconsider their work practices in the light of these - these include greater and more sophisticated understanding of language development - including sign language, cochlear implantation, neonatal screening and digital hearing aids. FEAPDA has covered all these subjects in

recent congresses and will continue to focus on the subjects which are of greatest interest to Teachers of the Deaf across the continent of Europe.

The biennial congresses are the lifeblood of FEADPA and have been for many years. However, with the advent of electronic communication, it is now possible for FEADPA to be involved in other activities during the period between the congresses. For example, this year we have been used as a vehicle to carry out research into the effects on educational services throughout Europe of cochlear implantation. I am pleased to say that Sue Archbold, a keynote lecturer in our Strasbourg congress four years ago, has produced a summary of this research which I will make available to all delegates. Incidentally she appeals for anyone who hasn't completed her questionnaire to do so – it's not too late!!

This year we have supported two bids to the European Union for funding for research projects with a variety of European partners. Sadly, neither was successful on this occasion but they indicate some ways forward for the future. One of the projects would have fitted in very well with one of my key aims as President of FEADPA. That is the expansion of the Federation. In particular, we are interested in bringing in more countries from Eastern Europe - many of whom recently joined the European Union. One of the research projects I just mentioned was intended to establish minimum standards for the training of Teachers of the Deaf across Europe – similar standards are being produced for mainstream

teaching. This would have been an excellent way to involve the countries newly acceded to the EU. We must work to involve them in other ways. One of the main difficulties with this is that FEAPDA is a Federation of Associations of Teachers of the Deaf and most, if not all, of these countries do not have an association of Teachers of the Deaf. It is possible to overcome this however. Some of the current members of FEAPDA are based around a school or institution and this could certainly be a way to increase the involvement of these other countries.

We need to move forwards in the interests of deaf children throughout Europe.

My other key aim has been to establish a website. I am pleased to say that this has now occurred – mainly thanks to the hard work of a deaf student in Scotland.

Indeed we now have two websites!! The Swiss organisers of this conference set up a website with which I am sure you are all familiar and the main FEAPDA website has been operating now at [www.feapda.org](http://www.feapda.org) for two years. Please visit it and send in any ideas for improvements.

I come now to the congress for which we have all gathered in this fine building and city. For years there has been much discussion in our profession about the effects, advantages and disadvantages of sign bilingualism in the education of deaf children. This approach is taking place to different extents across our member countries. However, there is another and different type of 'bilingualism' which we

have not really addressed at all to the same extent. This refers to the effect on deaf children and young people of living in a family where the language (and often the culture) of the home is different from the language of the country - and therefore the schools - in which they are being educated. This creates significant additional difficulties for deaf children and, of course, for their teachers. In the past, it was common to tell parents not to speak to their children in the language of the home but to insist on the language of the country. This caused many problems including possible difficulties within the family in which the language spoken within the country was not that spoken by all the family members. Much greater understanding of language development now indicates that when children develop language in the home – even when this is not the language of the country - this can serve as an excellent base on which to build a further language. This is especially challenging, of course, for deaf children but evidence across the continent shows that it is possible. We will hear about this during the coming conference.

I am delighted to welcome such a rich variety of keynote speakers to the congress and am very much looking forward to listening to their contributions. In addition to these lectures, which will be painting a wide and sometimes theoretical perspective we will have some different contributions from some of the member countries showing, perhaps in a specifically practical way, how they are tackling

this issue and addressing its implications for the language development and education of deaf children.

We are delighted to have with us keynote speakers from Switzerland, of course, and from Belgium, the United States of America, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Their keynote abstracts (to be found on the congress website) are very interesting and presage a stimulating two days, covering, amongst other aspects of this issue, how parents respond to a different culture and language from theirs and how that affects their deaf child, how we can draw on available data to develop best practice, how to ensure that teachers and other workers with deaf pupils learn to appreciate the cultural differences and needs of their pupils and their families, an examination of the models of disability as they affect children from a range of cultural backgrounds and some practical information about working in an area with a high level of deaf children from ethnic backgrounds.

As usual in any FEAPDA congress, the discussions outside the keynote lectures are as important as the keynote and country presentations themselves. Furthermore, there will be an opportunity for delegates to discuss these issues in language groups during the congress. There are also a number of social events including the congress dinner and the civic reception at Geneva's 'département de l'instruction publique' which are always very enjoyable occasions. I hope that you will be able to attend these occasions so we can get to know each other better.

I look forward to meeting you during the next few days and I will wait no longer to introduce Jean-Paul Biffiger, the director of the special education service in Geneva and UN's delegate officially to open the Congress.