

# Metodo VISTA – Teaching Sign Language in Italy

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## Abstract

The **Metodo VISTA** is a video course consisting of a Teacher's Book and a Teacher's Video, a Student's Book and a Student's Video. It is based on the book "**Signing Naturally**" for the teaching of American Sign Language written by **Chery Smith, Ella Mae Lentz and Ken Mikos**, and has been adapted for the teaching of LIS. Thus the first, second and third volume are intended for teachers who wish to teach LIS and for students who want to learn it. Its aim is to help teachers organize a series of lessons divided into three different levels of language learning. The **Metodo VISTA** leads the students who know nothing about deafness or Sign Language to interact with deaf people in a wide range of situations. The knowledge of the culture of the deaf is an integral part of the programme. It is also taught by the presentation of native signers who show cultural and linguistic behaviour in various situations in a video.

The S.I.L.L.S. Group and the Mason Perkins Deafness Fund (MPDF) have collaborated since 1997 and published:

Cameracanna, E. Franchi, M.L. Rossini, P. (1997). *Metodo VISTA 1° livello*. Roma (It): Kappa publisher.

Cameracanna, E. Franchi, M.L. (2000). *Metodo VISTA 2° livello*. Roma (It): Kappa publisher.

Cameracanna, E. Franchi, M.L. (2003). *Metodo VISTA 1° livello*. Roma (It): Kappa publisher.

The **Metodo VISTA** is a video course consisting of a Teacher's Book and a Teacher's Video, a Student's Book and a Student's Video. It is based on the book "**Signing Naturally**" for the teaching of American Sign Language written by **Chery Smith, Ella Mae Lentz and Ken Mikos**, and has been adapted for the teaching of LIS. Thus, the first, the second and the third volume are intended for teachers who wish to teach LIS and for students who want to learn it. Its aim is to help teachers organize a series of lessons divided into three different levels of language learning.

Each level is structured in five or six units, each of which is divided into chapters and comprises the organization, activities and material of the unit. Furthermore, each Teacher's Book contains one unit dedicated to language review, supplemented by a video on cultural behaviour, values and social rules. The **Metodo VISTA** leads the students who know nothing about deafness or Sign Language to interact with deaf people in a wide range of situations. The knowledge of the culture of the deaf is an integral part of the programme. It is also taught by the presentation of native signers who show cultural and linguistic behaviour in various situations in a video. Before devising the programme, various approaches to foreign language teaching were analysed in search of an approach which stresses interpersonal communication. In the end, an approach was chosen that focuses on the communicative intentions during daily interaction among people, such as, for instance, introducing oneself, inviting somebody to one's house, asking somebody a favour, discussing a film, a book or an event, telling a tale or an adventure.

## 1. THE PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING

The units refer to the following principles:

1. Students learn a language better when the contents of the units are presented in a context;
2. Students memorize the language more easily when the activities are meaningful and based on personal experiences;
3. Students develop comprehension skills faster than production skills.

Therefore, all units are devised to be presented in LIS, avoiding the use of the voice, of written Italian, of "translations" or comments and the teachers are encouraged to sign on a level of production which is slightly superior to the students' level.

## 2. ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITS

The "list of contents" at the beginning of each unit shows the teacher at a quick glance what is to be treated in each lesson.

Each unit is divided in basic sections:

### GYMNASTICS:

It supplies the teacher with useful activities to help the students warm up their hands and to teach them the proper use of their hands in order to sign correctly.

### PERCEPTION AND VISUAL DISCRIMINATION:

The teacher is provided with useful activities to accustom his students to "listen" with their eyes, to memorize and to learn to distinguish the signs.

### INTRODUCTION:

It supplies useful activities to the teacher in order to work exclusively on the students' comprehension, concentrating on the way of presenting the grammar and new words of a specific topic in a context.

### **SIGN PRODUCTION:**

It shows the teacher how to train the students in developing the production of signs. The production activities focus on sentence structure, dialogues or narrative practice.

### **INTERACTION:**

It supplies the teacher with communicative activities ranging from structured to spontaneous dialogues, allowing the students to integrate grammatical structures they have studied with new words. The students become acquainted with an interlocutor's reaction and experiment with conversational strategies.

### **EXTENDED COMPREHENSION**

It shows the teacher how to support and extend the topics, grammar and vocabulary presented in the chapter. This activity is useful to increase comprehension skills. Stories told by the teacher should be a regular part of the lesson. The narration of experiences or events which happened in class will lead the students to develop comprehension strategies without necessarily understanding every sign.

### **COMPREHENSION CHECKS:**

They allow the teachers to check the comprehension of concepts, topics or linguistic structures which were treated in the foregoing lessons. Obviously Level 2 provides for a larger number of activities of this kind than the precedent level.

### **NARRATIVE PRACTICE:**

Provides teachers with communicative activities that help develop techniques for narrating. Students develop skills for role shifting, spatial structuring, sequencing events and establishing time references.

### **BREAKAWAYS:**

They provide the teacher with the possibility of varying the activities, to develop relationships in class and to work on other aspects of LIS. They are divided into six types of activities: group activities, facial expressions, visualization, giving orders, dactylogy and numbers and mime. These activities can be used by the teacher at random any time and can be repeated as needed.

### **TEAM-BUILDING:**

Activities of this kind foster relationships and lower the anxiety level in class

### **FACIAL EXPRESSIONS:**

These activities provide the students with some more practice to improve both the grammatical and emotional non-manual components

### **VISUALIZATION:**

These activities help the students to develop their skills in the use of space and glance

### **GIVING ORDERS:**

These activities provide the students with yet another way of memorizing words, grammar and functions

### **FINGERSPELLING AND NUMBERS:**

These activities train the students to master these specific aspects of the language

### **MIME:**

These activities train the students in the development of miming capacities which help them to master the non-manual components of the language

## **3. TEACHER PREPARATION**

We suggest at the teacher to many counsel , for exemple th following:

View the teacher's video which is designed to demonstrate various activity types and discuss language principles central to the curriculum.

Read the entire curriculum to familiarize yourself with how functions, topic and grammar features are sequenced and recycled throughout the level.

Familiarize yourself with the Transcription Conventions to help you understand the glosses in the text should be memorized or a prepared in avance so that you do not have to read and sign simultaneously in class.

## **4. TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS: SYMBOLS USED FOR WRITING LIS**

<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
WORD	DEAF	An Italian word in capital letters stands for a LIS sign (this word is called a gloss) The meaning of the sign and the Italian word may not be exactly the same.
#	#CAR	A pound sign (#) indicates a fingerspelling loan sign
Etc.		

### **CLARIFICATION OF SOME PUZZLING GLOSSES**

<b>IX</b>	short for INDEX, IX indicates <b>pointing</b> and is used for third person pronouns (he, she, it, him, her) Specific referents are indicated by italicized words in quotation marks, immediately following the gloss.
<b>IX-dir</b>	<b>IX-dir</b> is used when the pointing gives <b>directions</b> or traces a route to a place (i.e., IX-dir " <i>around the corner to the righth</i> ").
Etc.	

## SYMBOLS FOR NON MANUAL BEHAVIOR

<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
-----q	-----q	
	YOU EAT FINISH	yes/no questions

Etc.

## SYMBOLS FOR CLASSIFIERS

<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
DCL	descriptive classifier sign used to describe an object or a person. What is described is italicized and quotation marks (i.e. DCL "curly hair"). Sometimes referred to as size and shape specifiers or SASSes.

Etc.

## ORGANIZATION OF LEVEL 1

Each of the six units focuses on different basic subject as follows:

- Unit 1: How to introduce yourself
  - Unit 2: Exchange of personal information
  - Unit 3: Description of the surroundings
  - Unit 4: Talk about where you live
  - Unit 5: Talk about your family
  - Unit 6: Everyday life – what we do and when
- Cumulative review: units 13-17

Each unit uses and integrates the topics of the subject, the vocabulary and grammar presented in the precedent lessons. The students learn to exchange personal information, such as give their name and address and talk about their families.

## ORGANIZATION OF LEVEL 2

Each of the six units focuses on different basic subject as follows:

- Unit 7: Giving directions
  - Unit 8: Describing others
  - Unit 9: Making requests
  - Unit 10: Talking about family and occupations
  - Unit 11: Attributing qualities to others
  - Unit 12: talking about routines
- Cumulative review: units 7-12

Each unit uses and integrates the topics of the subject, the vocabulary and grammar presented in the precedent lessons. The students learn to exchange personal information, such as give their name and address and talk about their families.

## ORGANIZATION OF LEVEL 3

Each of the six units focuses on different basic subject as follows:

- Unit 13: Complaining, making suggestions and requests
- Unit 14: Describing and identifying things
- Unit 15: Locating things around the house
- Unit 16: Talking about the weekend

Unit 17: Exchanging personal information: life events  
Cumulative review: units 13-17

## ORGANIZATION OF CUMULATIVE REVIEWS

This unit is organized such as to repeat all dialogues of the foregoing lessons and is based on the presentation of dialogues in the video.

The video shows cultural behaviour as well as topics which are important for relationships regarding exchange and relations among different cultures and also conversational strategies. The students learn to introduce themselves properly, how to draw attention and how to participate at a sign conversation and watch deaf people telling stories, which helps them to develop role switching skills, which, though difficult to learn, are most important in narration.

## VIDEOTEXTS AND WORKBOOK LEVEL I, II AND III

Are conceived to revise and put into practice what has been learned in class as well as to increase the comprehension of signed narrative. Each student should have a copy of the *Videotexts and workbook* these materials provide students with a way to review, practice and retain what they have learned in class. Our Experience with Sign Language books led us to conclude that video is a most effective medium for sign language materials. We found that students use books as a reference for remembering signs, but unfortunately, most Sign Language books associate Italian with signs. This defeats the purpose of the curriculum, which encourages students to think only in sign.

There are many advantages in using a video and workbook:

- In the video you can see the movement of the signs exactly as they are used in the sentence.
- You can see the way in which the shape of a sign is influenced by the preceding or following sign
- You can learn how the movement of a sign can be modified to change the meaning
- You can see how a facial expression appears
- You can observe how the movement of the body, of the head and the eyes can be used to open or close a sentence and to express grammatical concordance
- You can see how language is used in a context
- You can see how a visual language like LIS can be used creatively in poetry, theatre and narration
- Last but not least you can watch the video as often as you wish
- The video are devoid of audio.

Each unit concentrates on one of the main functions of language, such as introducing oneself, talking about one's family or everyday life – what we do and when we do certain things, how to complain or make requests,

describe objects, speak about furniture, talk about the weekend, about events of life or family life.

By means of this functional approach the language learned is the one that is used in everyday conversations. Learning the functions of language in an interactive context also leads to the improvement of conversational skills by using various aspects of time (recurring and continuous), inflected verbs and role-switching, as well as various kinds of classifiers and references to space.

The units are divided into various sections:

### **CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICE**

Each unit of the video begins with some conversations which, in the workbook, are accompanied by dialogues that stress the functions of language and key expressions.

### **GRAMMAR NOTES**

The notes on grammar explain the grammatical structures introduced in the unit and may also include some notes on the narrative structure, the principles referring to sequence and to various shifts in a story. They are usually followed by the subsequent section in which they are applied.

### **COMPREHENSION EXERCISES**

These exercises are comprehension activities to test the mastery of the vocabulary and linguistic functions you have learned.

Other activities are based on answering questions, making summaries or filling in blanks in the Workbook. Last but not least pair-work activities are a means of putting into practice what you have learned together with a partner.

### **GRAMMAR EXERCISES**

The parts of the video containing grammar exercises draw our attention to grammatical structures in a pre-established context, demonstrating specific aspects of grammar.

### **CULTURAL/LINGUISTIC NOTES**

In order to understand a language you have to understand its cultural context. The cultural/linguistic notes provide a view on the history of values and social rules of the community of deaf people.

### **STORY CORNER**

This is a story, either humorous or simply informative, created and filmed for the purpose of training reception skills, learning vocabulary in a context as well as developing strategies to grasp the meaning of the stories even without understanding all signs.

### **CONCLUSION**

We hope that by using this book, in the future students of LIS will be able to sign naturally, to interact in a relaxed way and that they will get to know and respect the community of deaf people. The aim of this manual is to preserve the integrity of the language and to encourage

more deaf people to become teachers of LIS. This programme, together with linguistic research on sign language in process and original works of literature produced within the community of deaf people, will continue to demonstrate that LIS is an ingenious, elegant and effective expression of a fascinating culture.