

British Sign Language and Literacy in the Educational Setting

There is accumulating evidence that profoundly deaf children learn sign language (BSL) as efficiently as hearing children learn an oral language. There is also evidence that deaf children are able to think in a visual- gestural code and thus use sign language as form of internal speech.

The task faced by child BSL users when they are introduced to written English is quite different from that faced by hearing and oral deaf children. BSL has characteristics that are especially suited for deaf people's processing skills. For example, BSL is a multi channel visual language drawing on deaf BSL users' superior ability to process simultaneous visual information. It does not follow the grammatical norms of English.

Pupils whose preferred language is BSL may have experienced difficulty in acquiring English as an additional language. For many the acquisition of BSL itself has come at a relatively late stage of development but has been acquired with greater facility than English due to its visual modality. Every child has the right to develop a full language unimpaired by the lack of sensory access so that they can participate as fully as possible in all aspects of life.

The route to success with educational outcomes must take account of the students' linguistic needs which necessarily differ from those of hearing students for whom English is a first language. The teaching of English Language through the medium of BSL will be necessary for many students. An important part of this work will be vocabulary building but it will also include the direct teaching of the grammar of English language which differs from that used in BSL. Topics such as word order, the use of articles, conjunctions, prepositions and verb tenses will be a more important part of the educational programme than would normally be the case for hearing students.

Pupils may have well developed transactional and expressive skills within their first language which do not transfer to the written modality of the second language. Translation between English and BSL is a strategy that can help to build greater confidence with the use of English language in written form. The teaching of grammatical knowledge and skills for English can usefully exploit the grammatical differences between BSL and English. Similarly students may have good receptive skills in sign language but experience considerable difficulty with text. Translation into BSL can be used as a strategy to ensure that text is invested with meaning.

At the same time many older pupils will bring a wealth of linguistic experience from their preferred language into the classroom while for others their linguistic development may be heavily dependent on the quality and use of sign language in the classroom. For example students' awareness of cultural diversity and regional variations in language will initially arise from their own experience of living within two cultures –deaf and hearing - and from regional variations in the signing of other deaf people as well as their peers within the college. They will have developed strategies for effective communication with the hearing world which should be respected and developed.

If an enquiry based approach to learning, featuring discussion rather than instruction, is to be successful, the existing communicative and linguistic abilities of the students must be exploited. This has become particularly important in schools which are now embracing and implementing the ideas and standards of *A Curriculum for Excellence*

Receiving explicit instruction in English Language is a right of all sign bilingual students but it must be placed firmly within recognition of their linguistic status and its related culture in order to be meaningful and to meet their needs. It is particularly critical that the difference between the two languages, BSL and English, is made explicit. Manually coded English will be useful tool for supporting written English skills but its use must be carefully matched to the student's ability to process English Language meaningfully.

In Secondary Schools many deaf pupils achieve a range of National qualifications from Access 1 to Higher levels with the programmes of study delivered in BSL and with the pupils taking their exams in BSL, which is then translated back into English by staff with the support of interpreters to ensure accuracy.

There is evidence that the lack of consistent good quality BSL provision in education can result in deaf pupils having a low self image, and being disengaged from the learning process. In settings where this is provided they find an environment in which they are accepted and valued – and can communicate and be understood by a bi-lingual team of staff, and peers.

Deaf Studies as a school subject teaches pupils to understand and embrace Deaf culture and pupils are taught the history of Deaf Education as well as the value of being part of the Deaf community. The study of BSL is an intrinsic part of the study of Deaf Culture.

Diversity amongst staff members: both hearing and deaf, can provide pupils with the opportunity to naturally acquire both English and British Sign Language, and to work with staff who have BSL as their first language.

A higher profile for BSL within Scottish Culture, including the development of its curriculum and the associated curriculum of Deaf Studies has an essential part to play in raising the currently low levels of literacy and educational attainment of deaf individuals. This would also help to address the issues of marginalisation and disempowerment currently experienced by many in the Deaf Community.

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Sources:

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Janice MacNeill (Principal, Donaldson's College)

Diana Burman, Terezinha Nunes, Deborah Evans
Writing Profiles of Deaf Children Taught through British Sign Language

Consultation Questions

Section 1

1. Do you agree with the reasons given for promoting and learning languages on pages 4 and 5, and that these are the main reasons for supporting current language initiatives in Scotland? If not, why not?

Yes

2. Do you agree that the language initiatives described on pages 6 – 12 and elsewhere are the key areas for language promotion in

Yes

<i>Scotland? If not, why not?</i>	
3. Do you agree that the key principles listed on pages 14 and 15 should shape language activity in Scotland? If not, why not?	Yes
<i>4. Are there any other comments you would like to offer on this strategy in relation to the promotion of languages in Scotland?</i>	See separate email attachment
5. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, how do you think you may be able to contribute to the success of the strategy?	We are currently developing the BSL Curriculum and the Deaf Studies Curriculum but require more support