

Response

I am responding as a lecturer in deaf education, with a particular interest in British Sign Language. I am an applied linguist and a member of BAAL, the British Association of Applied Linguists. I have spent most of my working life teaching deaf students using BSL as the medium for instruction for those students who prefer this language. I have also worked as an English as an Additional Language tutor in adult and community settings.

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 Scotland? If not, why not?

Not entirely. I was pleased to see that your report gave status to BSL as a language. It did not explore in any more detail the implications of recognition as a language by the UK government in 2003. The Scottish Executive's commitment to increasing the number of BSL / English interpreters is laudable, but it is likely that more initiatives will be needed to achieve this goal. In addition there are other, very important developments which would promote BSL and ensure linguistic access for Deaf children and the wider Deaf community.

The establishment of the BSL and Linguistic Access group, the report investigating access to public services using BSL and the Creating Linguistic Access reports are all excellent achievements of which the Scottish Government is rightly proud. The Deaf graduates of the BSL teachers' programme at Heriot Watt (TOTS) will, I am sure, be the leaders of many of the developments I outline below.

I am concerned as a lecturer who trains teachers of deaf children that current initiatives do not address the real issues which face parents of deaf children about communication and educational options. The idea of Informed Choice is current in deaf education since the introduction of early newborn screening has led to parents discovering their baby is deaf at a much earlier age (1). In England there has been a large DfES initiative to support parents with information about language development in spoken English and BSL. This initiative has not been matched in Scotland. In particular there is a need for:

Language entitlement for families of deaf children

1. Clear information for parents in English, BSL and other community languages about the development of deaf children from 0 – 5 focusing on language development.
2. Training for a new profession of Deaf BSL role models to visit the homes of hearing families who don't sign yet to teach BSL to families and to enable deaf babies and pre-school children to acquire BSL naturally. These workers could also work in nursery settings and should liaise closely with school services for deaf children. Since there is a low incidence of severe or profound deafness, this new profession may need to work across Local Authority boundaries but in partnership with school services for deaf children.

Language entitlement in schools

3. BSL training for teachers of deaf children so that at least a third of the teachers of deaf children in any local authority are fluent in BSL. This would mean that an educational placement where BSL is used is a real possibility. It usually takes 500 hours of sign language instruction to reach fluency in the language, or SVQ Level 3 BSL.

4. Advanced training at postgraduate level for qualified teachers of deaf children so that they are able to better support the development of BSL and spoken English for young deaf children in the 0 – 5 age group.
5. Opportunities to be made available so that deaf children have the opportunity to mix with a variety of other children and adults who use BSL to develop their language skills.
6. Ensuring that BSL is preserved and promoted through the education system by the creation of Standard Grade and Higher Grade in the language.
7. Training more Deaf people to teach BSL as a language in schools and also to teach through the medium of BSL. This would mean hearing children at school could become fluent in the language before leaving school, and thus go on to university to study BSL at degree level and eventually use the language in professional roles such as teachers, social workers or interpreters.
8. Embedding BSL as an option in B.Ed. initial teacher teaching and offering rewards to graduates who achieve fluency (i.e. Level 3 SVQ BSL). This would mean there would be a group of young teachers qualifying each year who are ready to start training as teachers of deaf children with the appropriate language skills.
9. Using the developments in Gaelic language preservation as a model for establishing BSL units and schools where native BSL users will be teachers in leadership positions.
10. Training BSL / English interpreters to work in mainstream educational settings and paying them appropriate salaries which are commensurate with teachers, not classroom assistants.
11. Establishing BSL as an undergraduate degree subject in at least one Scottish University. Some graduates of these degrees may decide to take a PGDE and teach BSL as a school subject.
12. Producing SQA exam papers centrally in BSL on DVD.
13. Continuing to fund the collection and standardisation of BSL terms for curriculum terms across all subject areas and producing an online dictionary for deaf children and staff working with them.

I am not proposing that all severely or profoundly deaf children be taught in BSL; this is a decision for parents when they have information about the possible outcomes for their child. If parents

see bilingual education in practice, they are more likely to consider it as a real option. Being bilingual can give children positive advantages in using languages and thinking flexibly.

I am drawing attention to the situation at present where BSL is rarely used fluently in school services for deaf children. The current view is that deaf children have a language deficit, but in fact it is often the teachers and classroom assistants who have a severe BSL deficit. This is not the individual fault of any teacher but a structural problem arising from a very short period of training. Learning to teach in another language takes time. This structural problem has also affected teachers of Gaelic and modern foreign languages in Scotland. In these cases initiatives have been put in place to improve teacher training. For example: Scottish Continuing International Professional Development Study trips to boost language skills of modern language teachers, Dundee University's Diplomas in Spanish and German for Language teachers which includes online course to boost language skills (2) and the two distance-learning courses offering training for Gaelic medium teachers - based at Aberdeen University and Stornoway's Lews Castle College.

The Chartered Teacher initiative provides incentives for excellent classroom practitioners with collaborative skills. However, additional learning of BSL does not fit easily into this scheme as it is presently organised.

The skills and talents of members of the Deaf community have not been adequately drawn upon to educate deaf children. Some research shows that children who have established sign language before the age of five have higher levels of literacy (3). Within the Deaf community this is very obvious, but it is often not so clear to wider hearing society.

It is likely that with early cochlear implantation many deaf children will also use speaking and listening and acquire spoken English or their home spoken language. It is important that deaf children have both options available to them; for example cochlear implants do not cope well with background noise or when children are talking to each other in group work. The strategy for Scotland's languages should consider how, practically, deaf children can be offered a route to fluency in both English and BSL, and other languages in their community (4). This will allow deaf children to take their place in Scottish society, literate and respected for their language choices they make in particular situations rather than marginalised because of their low educational achievement.

3. Do you agree that the key principles listed on pages 14 and 15 should shape language activity in Scotland? If not, why not?

I would like to add the principle:

British Sign Language will be protected and promoted.

There is now a general commitment to ensure that BSL thrives within Scotland. In support of this, the teaching of BSL will be encouraged by local authorities as well as its use in daily life. The Executive will encourage authorities to extend BSL medium education and to increase the profile of BSL in public life in Scotland.

4. Are there any other comments you would like to offer on this strategy in relation to the promotion of languages in Scotland?

This consultation has come very late in the life of this parliament. I hope that the ideas raised by the consultation will be fully considered by the next parliament, with opportunities to implement real changes to improve the linguistic abilities of Scottish people.

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?

Moray House could contribute towards the development of all the initiatives proposed above, in partnership with other organisations such as Heriot Watt University, Queen Margaret's University and the national umbrella voluntary organization, the Scottish Council on Deafness.'

References

1. Young, A., Carr, G., Hunt, R., McCracken, W., Skipp, A. & Tattersall, H. (2006) *Informed Choice and Deaf Children: underpinning concepts and enduring challenges*. In *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*. 11:3 pp 322 – 336.
2. Dundee university's Diploma for Language Teachers: www.dundee.ac.uk/languagestudies/spandip/structure.htm
3. Padden, C. & Ramsey, C. (2000) American Sign Language and Reading Ability in Deaf Children. In: Chamberlain, C., Morford, J. & Mayberry, R. (Eds.) *Language Acquisition by Eye*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. pp 165 – 190

4. Swanwick, R. & Watson, L. (2005) Literacy in the homes of young deaf children. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. 5:1 pp 53 – 78.