



Teaching British Sign Language in schools

Final Report, July 2016

Main objectives and context

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act passed in September 2015 with the aim of promoting British Sign Language (BSL), a visual-gestural language used at home by over 12,500 people in Scotland (Scottish Census, 2011). The Bill requires from Scottish Government a national plan outlining an action framework for promoting BSL as a language. “Promotion of BSL in an education setting” was identified by the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament as one of five areas requiring particular attention in the national plan.

At the same time, schools and Local Authorities are currently half way through the implementation stage of the 1+2 Languages Policy: by 2020, each child starting primary school in Scotland will learn an additional language (“L2”) from P1 to the end of the broad general education phase in secondary school, and a second additional language (L3) from P5.

The teaching of BSL *as a language* in Scottish schools therefore meets both these policy objectives. This project aimed to bring together key stakeholders from sign language and from education, to explore how BSL could be sustainably taught in the mainstream Scottish education system. In the long-term, the aim is for an inclusive society where Deaf BSL users can communicate in BSL with their friends, peers and colleagues.

Academic project partners	Centre for Interpreting Studies in Scotland, Heriot-Watt University Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh School of Philosophy, Psychology & Language Sciences, University of Edinburgh
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Non-academic project partners	British Deaf Association National Deaf Children’s Society Scottish Council on Deafness
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Programme objectives:

- Identify challenges and potential blocks, maximising time available to work on solutions
- Identify priorities, assessing which can be dealt with using existing frameworks, and what actions are required for this to happen
- Engage with and learn from international perspectives on sign language provision
- Explore where existing resources/ projects could be expanded, adapted or more widely promoted and identify gaps where new initiatives are required
- Identify possibilities for partnership working between authorities to create an engaged and informed community of practice

- Contribute to mapping work on BSL provision currently being undertaken
- Publish a Recommendations Paper to be followed up by workshop participants and the BSL National Advisory Group to the BSL Act

Key insights

The programme brought together key stakeholders from the sign language community and Scottish education. The focus of the events was specifically on teaching BSL as a language; we hope the links between participants will also push forward other important topics such as education of Deaf children more generally.

At the start of the programme, each participant brought considerable knowledge and expertise of one of two areas: (mainstream) Scottish education system; or British Sign Language teaching and Linguistics.

However, there was limited cross-over in these areas of knowledge. For example, some participants from the education sector were not aware of the distinction between British Sign Language and Makaton. Likewise, some participants from the Deaf sector were not aware of regulations that teachers and Local Authorities have to follow.

The first event (26 November 2016) therefore aimed to reach a shared understanding of issues involved in teaching of BSL as a mainstream language option. This event was open to invited participants only.

We framed the discussion using international perspectives from two Deaf keynote presenters, and followed with small group discussion focussed on the Scottish context:

Maartje de Meulder	The British Sign Language Act and the promotion of sign languages
Prof. Rusty Rosen	British Sign Language in Schools, Colleges and Universities in Scotland: Lessons From America
Facilitated small group discussion	By 2020, what is it realistic to achieve in terms of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who could/should teach BSL • who could/should learn BSL • which schools could/ should offer BSL • what could/ should structure of BSL teaching look like

These discussions highlighted several key points. (1) the importance of including Deaf teachers at the heart of any BSL teaching programme; (2) the difficulties faced by Deaf people trying to qualify as teachers; (3) the lack of teaching resources (including curricula/ progression frameworks) in place for BSL in schools; (4) the absence of school level qualifications in BSL; (5) the need to start with small scale pilots in the near future, and build an iterative process towards longer term aims.

The points formed the basis of the agenda for the rest of the programme.

The aim of the second workshop (2 February 2016) was to expand on and clarify the challenges identified in session 1, using the following expert input:

Prof. Christian Rathmann	Establishing Sign Language Proficiency Standards
Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT)	Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach
Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)	SQA Qualifications and BSL
General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS)	British Sign Language and GTC Scotland Registration
Dingwall Academy	Case study 1: secondary school currently teaching BSL
Windsor Park primary school	Case study 2: primary school currently teaching BSL

In the afternoon session, participants split into three groups and rotated between in-depth Q&A with Dingwall Academy, Windsor Park school, and GTCS. This was especially useful in raising awareness of barriers faced by Deaf teachers (e.g. the requirement for a Higher-level qualification in English). GTCS arranged follow-up meetings with British Deaf Association staff to continue these discussions.

From these two workshops, the group achieved a good understanding of key challenges to widespread teaching of BSL in Scottish schools. To clarify a realistic timetable for key agencies to work towards, we arranged an additional roundtable discussion bringing together SQA, GTCS, Education Scotland, Scottish Government Languages team, and Scottish Government Equalities unit.

The product of these discussions, including potential timelines, were presented at the third meeting (26 May), which was open to the public.

Over the course of the programme, we were able to achieve remarkable agreement over the three seminars in the co-ordinated actions needed to develop a teaching force to teach BSL in schools. GTCS, Education Scotland and SQA particularly made great progress in prioritising these discussions and realising that they could together work towards a very different landscape for teaching BSL as a school language.

Main outcomes and (expected) impact

Discussion between key agencies and practitioners

The National Advisory Group (NAG) has been developing draft Aims and Ambitions for what might be included on first National BSL plan.

Aim 2.3 now reads: *2.3 Children and young people will have the opportunity to learn BSL through the "1 + 2 languages" programme.*

- ➔ Discussions and learning from the programme will feed into NAG discussions and planning around the first National BSL plan
- ➔ "In the context of the SUII project, I want to thank the funders and say what great timing this has been... we welcome it as a contribution to what we are trying to do, to make real, practical changes that will make a difference to the lives of deaf and deafblind users in future." – Hilary Third, Scottish Government (Equalities Unit)

<p>GTCS open to new registration category for teaching BSL</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Would increase perceived validity of BSL as subject in school curriculum ➔ Opens possibility of Deaf BSL tutors in schools to achieve same professional recognition as other language teachers (further discussion and planning needed around Initial Teacher Education and Probation year)
<p>Initial registration may be possible by 2018-19; full registration by 2020-21 (further discussion with GTCS needed)</p>	
<p>GTCS open to reducing Higher-English requirement as entry to Initial Teacher Education (ITE)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Would increase opportunities for children to learn BSL from Deaf native user of the language ➔ Would increase opportunities for Deaf adults to qualify as teachers in all subjects, not just BSL (further discussion needed around teaching placements with hearing children)
<p>(further discussion with GTCS needed as to what acceptable criteria would look like)</p>	
<p>Scottish Qualifications Authority commit to improving BSL provision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Would increase uptake of BSL in schools due to recognised qualifications and university tariff points being available ➔ Would provide opportunities for Deaf pupils with BSL to gain qualification in their first language
<p>Reviewing current unit provision and tariff points for university entry immediately after workshops; Start to develop new Award in BSL, to launch circa 2018; Open to developing a future National qualification in BSL provided their criteria are met (including funding)</p>	

Key recommendations for end user / policy communities

The BSL (Scotland) Act, the BSL NAG and the Scottish Government could use the results of this seminar to consider ways in which BSL could be taught in schools.

A recommendations paper is being produced outlining the key actions identified plus possible timelines.

Other specific recommendations include:

Exploring the possibility of secondments for suitably qualified Deaf BSL users to work in key agencies (SQA/GTCS).

There are models for the development of ITE with the Education / Gaelic MA at the University of Edinburgh. The advantage of this model is that it would produce teachers, deaf and hearing, fluent in BSL who could support the development of BSL as an L1, as well as L2 and L3.

Planned follow up activities

The project team, lead by Professor Graham Turner in consultation with all team members, is working on a recommendations paper outlining suggested actions and timelines. Project funding has been reserved to provide a BSL version of this paper.

Partners are exploring potential for future funding opportunities and collaboration.

Partners are following up with key agencies e.g. SQA and GTCS to support them in working towards the steps outlined above and to discuss possible funding opportunities and future collaboration. For example, follow up meetings between Heriot-Watt and SQA, and between Moray House and Scottish Funding Council.

Scottish Government will shortly be gathering more information about teaching of BSL in schools and have agreed to share this data with the project group to check its accuracy and inform further planning.