

Deaf young people in Scotland using BSL reflect on their education

Beverley Ferguson, Rachel O'Neill, Karen Faulds and Moira Ross share an insight into their FEAPDA Congress presentation about the development of a new case study for practitioners in early learning and childcare settings, schools, colleges, and universities to support all deaf children, young people, and their families

Introduction

Education Scotland, the British Deaf Association (BDA) Scotland, Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT), and the University of Edinburgh collaborated to develop a case study that is meaningful, informed, and provides the voice of Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) using young people in Scotland. The case study builds on the work Education Scotland has already undertaken following the first BSL National Plan (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/british-sign-language-bsl-national-plan-2017-2023/>). Having completed Actions 20 and 21 in the National Plan, and published the British Sign Language Toolkit (2022) (updated in 2024) ([education.gov.scot/resources/british-sign-language-bsl-toolkit-for-practitioners](https://www.gov.scot/resources/british-sign-language-bsl-toolkit-for-practitioners/)), the next step was to have a greater understanding of the experiences and challenges deaf young people may experience while attending school, college, or university.

Having the views of children and young people in research and to influence decision-making has never been more important. This has been evident in the data gathered from previous work undertaken, as well as a legal requirement since the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scottish law in July 2024. In order to address this, it was agreed that Education Scotland and colleagues from the BDA (Scotland), SCILT (Scotland's National Centre for Languages) and the University of Edinburgh would collaborate to develop a case study. This would be for practitioners who work with deaf children and young people, their families, and parents who use BSL in education, within settings, schools, colleges, and universities.

Participants involved in the case study were identified from the BDA Scotland's Deaf Roots and Pride (DRP) Transitions service (<https://bda.org.uk/project/deafrootspride/>). The service is aimed at deaf children and young people (aged 8–25 years) living in Scotland, who are transitioning from primary to secondary education, or from secondary to further education and work. Deaf children and young adults are provided with the opportunity to learn about Deaf culture, identity, and BSL, meeting and participating in workshops and events with positive Deaf role models. Many of them become members of the DRP Youth Advisory Group, working as part of a team to support their peers. Transition training and networking events are also available for practitioners and parents, to provide the tools needed to support deaf young people.

Background

Scotland has much to be proud of in terms of its journey (<https://bslscotlandact2015.scot/history-bsl-scotland/>), transformational change, and continuous commitment to BSL. The term 'British Sign Language' was first published from Moray House back in 1975. It was one of three institutions in the United Kingdom that confirmed BSL is a language. This has been an important cornerstone which has contributed to the recognition that BSL has in Scotland today. In 1998 Moray House College became part of the University of Edinburgh.

The Scottish Government aims to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, learn, work, and visit. Across Scotland there already exists a clear commitment to early support and removal of barriers to learning for all children. The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act came into force in 2015. BSL is a recognised language within the 2015 Act. Following the introduction of the Act, Scotland's first National Plan for 2017–2023 was published in 2017. The second BSL National Plan for the period 2023–29 was subsequently published in 2023.

Education Scotland has a key role in supporting the implementation and communication of legislation, policies and strategies. It provides advice on a range of topics to settings, schools, colleges, and universities. Building the capacity of practitioners within these establishments is important to meet the challenges of raising attainment for all and ensuring every child and family has the same opportunity to thrive.

Key messages

Deaf young people were asked about their views on language learning; the opportunities they had for language learning; extra-curricular clubs, activities and societies; sitting examinations' transitions; helpful and supportive approaches in education, Deaf role models, and engaging their parents and families in their learning journey.

Participants who took part in the case study highlighted the need to ensure that BSL/English interpreters and Qualified Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People (QToDs) have the 'funds of knowledge', skillsets, and knowledge of relevant BSL terminology to be able to support deaf children and young people in classes. Attending a school that has QToDs and/or teachers who can sign at Level 3 (minimum) and are working towards Signature Level 6 was also considered essential by this group. Other key points included providing appropriate

access to timetables in college and university at an early stage to allow for BSL/English interpreters to be booked.

Some key messages that arose from the case study were about the challenges and barriers to involving parents in the wider life of the setting or school, and engaging parents and families in their child's learning. These included: providing equality of access for Deaf parents to attend school events and parents' evenings; reducing barriers that prevent Deaf parents from getting involved and engaged; providing opportunities for Deaf and hearing parents to network and access peer support; and building the capacity of parents to ensure they are supported to help their deaf child with learning at home and homework.

Another key aspect from the case study highlighted the importance and benefits of learning BSL in schools. The Deaf young people interviewed mentioned that if school learners were more knowledgeable in using BSL, this would remove barriers and fear of engaging with Deaf signing people and would help improve communication. In an attempt to raise awareness and knowledge about BSL in school, most of the group explained how they introduced and shared their learning of BSL with peers and in some cases, teachers. With most of the group teaching a basic introduction to BSL on an ad-hoc and informal basis to hearing friends, one group member, on several occasions, was invited to teach BSL to a hearing class. They found the experience so uplifting to see many 'hearing faces' within the class open to learning BSL.

In addressing the importance of learning BSL in schools, and in line with national priorities, SCILT (<https://scilt.org.uk/>) has been actively involved in supporting the teaching of BSL in Scottish primary schools. This aligns with the Scottish Government's recently published British Sign Language National Plan 2023–29 (Scotland) and Scotland's continuing languages policy, 'Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach: Report and Recommendations' (www.gov.scot/publications/language-learning-scotland-12-approach) (Scottish Government, 2012).

This policy states that in addition to their mother tongue (L1), all children attending state schools in Scotland are entitled to learn an additional language (L2) from Primary 1 onwards and another language (L3) from Primary 5. It is important to note that many children come to school with other languages used at home; therefore, L1 relates more to the language of instruction rather than learners' language of the home. The first additional language (L2) is taught progressively from Primary 1 to Primary 7 and must continue into the first three years of secondary education. There is more flexibility for schools to select an L3 language and this is often determined by staff skillsets or interests, as well as languages within the class and the school community. This flexibility allows the introduction of lesser known and lesser taught languages into the school curriculum, including BSL.

Over the last three years, SCILT has supported the teaching of BSL as a viable L3 option for several primary schools in

Scotland. In partnership with experienced Deaf BSL teachers/tutors, SCILT has created, developed and taught an online programme of engaging live-streamed BSL classes for primary aged children. These classes provide an introduction to sign language and Deaf culture, thus equipping young people with the basic skills and confidence to engage with the wider Deaf community.

The challenges faced by BSL signers wishing to access language learning in school is another key finding within the case study. Whilst there was a desire by some to attend classes such as French and German, they were unable to do so due to the spoken element within the examination. Naturally, this was a huge disappointment and highlights one of the challenges BSL users face in attempting to access the full curriculum. It is worth noting that the Deaf young people interviewed are highly skilled in a variety of languages, signed and written, and all place a great value on language learning overall. They recognise the benefits of learning other languages such as French or German, not only in terms of language acquisition but also in gaining an understanding and appreciation of other cultures as well as making connections across languages. With some having travelled extensively, the Deaf young people



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Karen Faulds is a Professional Development Officer at SCILT. As the national agency for languages, SCILT supports a wealth of language learning and diversity across Scotland's schools and communities. It promotes and supports high-quality language learning and fosters a climate that celebrates all languages.



Moira Ross works for BDA Scotland as a Transitions Officer delivering the DRP service. The BDA is a national Deaf-led representative organisation of BSL and Irish Sign Language (ISL) in the UK. BDA's work concentrates on campaigning for equal rights on a national level and working at a local level empowering Deaf people to achieve access to their local public services.

could see the importance of knowing other languages, particularly sign languages, to expand their world.

Examinations were a further area highlighted in the case study by the four Deaf young people who used BSL. In school, some of them had used the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) arrangements and signed their responses using the correct technical BSL terms for the subject. However, at college, they were not able to use these arrangements and had to write their answers in English. As a group, the Deaf young people could see the advantage of being bilingual in BSL and written English but wanted to highlight the inconsistencies between access arrangements in school and college. Some are now

at university and have welcomed the opportunity to have proofreading support for written assignments and extra time in examinations as Deaf individuals, as many of whom miss out on auditory access to English.

Publication

Following approximately ten months of developing the case study and consulting on the draft versions and videos, it was exciting to be able to publish the final case study in June 2024. The case study can be accessed from Education Scotland's website [education.gov.scot/resources/experiences-and-challenges-of-attending-school-college-and-university-as-a-deaf-young-person](https://www.education.gov.scot/resources/experiences-and-challenges-of-attending-school-college-and-university-as-a-deaf-young-person)

Research: Captions and Summaries for Deaf Students Project

About this project

Live captioning for deaf secondary school students hardly exists yet, even though the technology is available and already in schools. The experience of Covid made schools more aware of captions with online learning. Existing widely used software such as Windows 10 and 11 allow speech to text live captioning which could be turned on in classrooms. The quality of this open source software has improved dramatically over the past year.

Teachers of deaf children and young people (ToDs) often work from school to school. In secondary each deaf pupil may have 12 subject teachers. The ToD aims to find out in advance if possible what work is coming up so that they can plan for a tutorial session. Many deaf students receive regular tutorial support from ToDs to boost literacy skills and subject learning. It is rare for the ToD to receive curriculum information in advance of a tutorial from all teachers, which can lead to wasted time and lack of focus on the most demanding areas of study. A summary of the most important learning from each class is helpful for the deaf student and the visiting ToD. This will be a paragraph or two focusing on new terminology, assessment, changes of routine for the class and important associations between curriculum concepts.

Our aim is to build an AI tool which automatically produces a useful summary from the recording of the lesson. The deaf pupil receives captions live in class and a summary arrives in their email on the same day. The ToD also receives the lesson summary and can use them to focus in on the most demanding concepts to prepare for the tutorial.

To attain this goal, we need your help:

- Perhaps you are a QToD working in a secondary resource base school where the teachers are already deaf aware?
- Would some of your teachers agree to have their lessons recorded?
- Do you have deaf students who would like to try out live captions in these classes?
- Would you be prepared to use a transcript to create a summary of the information you regard as important for the deaf pupil to know? We are hoping for 5 summaries per QToD involved in the project.

If so, we would like to hear from you! Please sign up [here](#)¹ and receive our regular newsletters.

Aims of the project

1. To recruit a minimum of one council and 60 practitioners from across the UK to record live captions in secondary classrooms with deaf pupils.
2. To produce 1,000 summaries from the recordings working with teachers of deaf children and the project workers.
3. To build a summarising system and refine it with feedback from teachers and pupils.
4. To engage in a dialogue with councils, teaching unions and Educational Technology companies about the ways in which captions and summaries can support deaf students' learning.

The funding for the project is from the **Harmonisation Impact Acceleration Account**, supported by major UK Research Councils. The projects bring together researchers from different areas to address unmet social needs.

¹ <https://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/research/summaries/index.html>

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