

Introducing British Sign Language in a Scottish Secondary School

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Abstract: British Sign language (BSL) was formally recognised as a language by the UK government in March 2003 and by the Scottish government in March 2011. This paper reports on an innovative project involving the introduction of BSL as a language option in a large secondary school located in the Highlands of Scotland. The experiences as reported by pupils, staff and parents raise questions about inclusion and the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence including the wider implications of BSL in schools, the impact that BSL has had on the school community and in particular the Deaf pupils and staff.

Keywords: British Sign Language, community language, inclusion, language learning, language policy, Scotland

Historical Background

Prior to Dame Mary Warnock's report on special education (1978) all children, from the age of three years, living in the north of Scotland and who had any kind of hearing loss were sent away to deaf schools located in Aberdeen, Glasgow or Donaldson's School in Edinburgh. From talking to many older deaf people who grew up throughout the Highlands it is clear their experience of being sent away was common practice. Local priests, ministers and school teachers all assisted in the families in helping find appropriate school for them¹.

This practice continued until 1980 when, in line with the Warnock report, parents of deaf children decided that they didn't want to send their children away and started to campaign for the rights to educate their deaf child at home. After pressure from parents living in and around Dingwall, and with the support from experienced mainstream primary teachers and the local social worker for the Deaf, the primary unit was opened in the early 1980's.

In August 1983, and with backing from the rector, Sandy Glass, a strong supporter of special education, the secondary unit was opened. He believed that all children apart from those with profound and multiple disabilities could be educated if not in the same class then in the same building (Glass, personal communication, 1989).

At that time, BSL was viewed not as a language but a means of communicating with deaf people (Lawson, 1981). Parents and the teachers of the deaf were keen to promote communication strategies so a basic deaf studies course, was offered to senior hearing pupils. The course was accredited by the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) and

¹ cf. <http://bit.ly/1mgUPZ6>

taught mainly by hearing people although visits from deaf adults were included in the content of the course. As far as we know, this was unique to Dingwall Academy.

Introduction

Prior to the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence in 2010, Dingwall Academy continued to offer senior hearing (and a few deaf) pupils the opportunity to study Deaf Studies. This course comprised several units: Deaf Awareness, Fingerspelling and Introduction to BSL. Whilst the course has evolved over the years, in line with changes to the SQA units, its primary aim has always been to improve communication between hearing and deaf pupils.

The numbers and reasons for taking this course have varied over time but one comment has remained consistent: why can we not learn BSL and Deaf Awareness earlier? Comments at parents' nights also supported the interest in learning BSL in lower years.

Deaf pupils at Dingwall Academy are educated alongside their hearing peers with sign language being used in many of the mainstream classes and in everyday situations, so there was a wider interest in BSL from the local community.

The Pilot

Following the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence, several members from the Deaf base approached the rector with a proposal to introduce BSL as a language option sitting alongside the traditional languages of French, German and Gaelic.

The new S1 BSL course was written and taught by qualified teachers of the deaf who had additional sign language qualifications; one was a registered BSL /English interpreter with the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters. A qualified BSL tutor who is also Deaf works collaboratively with mainstream staff in the course content and delivery of the lessons. The convention of using a large D for Deaf indicates that a person is a member of the Deaf community and uses BSL as their preferred language (Parasnis, 1998).

Priority was given to deaf pupils and to pupils who had a deaf or hearing-impaired relative. Some viewed the inclusion of deaf pupils in these classes as unusual, believing they did not need to learn about sign language. However, Deaf pupils need to learn how their language works just as hearing children need to learn their first language or mother tongue, if they are to become "successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens" (Education Scotland, 2014a).

Astonishingly, 87 pupils out of 240 applied for the 20 available places during the first year the course was offered (Numbers had to be capped due to staffing and other work constraints). Over the following three years the numbers requesting to study BSL remained at three to four times the allocated 20 places.

As part of the school's inclusive practices, deaf and hearing pupils as well as mainstream staff are offered courses in deaf studies to develop their understanding of deaf culture, hearing loss, specialist equipment and language; sign language, receptive skills and issues relating to deafness.

Not everyone shared the vision; doubts and questions were raised during informal conversations with teachers, parents and other professionals, about whether BSL was a language despite the widespread publicity of BSL gaining formal recognition in the UK in 2003 (Stiles, 2013) and in Scotland in June 2011 (Scottish Parliament, 2011).

Content

The pilot course follows the CfE Modern Language Experiences and Outcomes (Education Scotland, 2014b). Unfortunately, this framework does not take account of the visual and spatial dimensions of BSL and consequently reinforces the notion that all languages are auditory / oral. It is difficult to understand why the BSL adaption was not included into the CfE framework.

However, the framework for the National Centre for Languages (Centre for Information on Language Teaching, 2010) comprises categories showing sign as being included in the understanding and speaking / signing categories. As a result staff adapted the Scottish CfE terminology to include BSL.

Table 1

CfE terminology	BSL Adaptation
Listening	Watching (receptive)
Talking	Signing (productive)
Speaker	User
Talk	Presentation
Text	Source
Writing	Production
Reading	Reception

Pupils learn a new alphabet; in BSL the letters of English are formed using both hands (unlike other manual alphabets from other sign languages which commonly use one hand) enabling people's names, places and terminology which has as yet no established sign to be conveyed. The pupils master hand shapes to form signs and also learn grammatical rules of BSL. The grammar of BSL is different to English; for example it has a rich system of signs to represent referents, its signs move in space and they can be produced simultaneously (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999).

Using BSL font on the SmartBoard allows pupils to develop their reading of fingerspelling and to produce appropriate signs depending upon the context. Alongside the learning of vocabulary there are lessons based on deaf awareness and cultural

differences. As with other languages, this course follows the Principles and Practices which outline the importance of embedding skills in practical context (Learning Teaching Scotland, 2009).

Staffing

In order for BSL to appear on the mainstream curriculum there is the question of availability of qualified teaching staff. Today, more Deaf adults are involved in the delivery of the SQA BSL courses. Many Deaf people have low levels of literacy because of late identification of their deafness and having experienced their own education only through oral methods; teaching SQA BSL courses and liaising with the exam board can often be challenging for Deaf BSL tutors.

In 2009, the Scottish Government funded a 'Training of Trainers' ('ToTs') course, based at Heriot Watt University, training deaf tutors to train others (Scottish Council on Deafness, 2011). However, it is acknowledged that it will take time to see an increase in numbers of Deaf tutors of BSL. Teachers of the deaf are not sign language teachers and do not have BSL teaching as part of their post-qualification course.

Not all organisations support the idea of teachers of deaf children teaching BSL in schools. The National Deaf Children's Society, for example, (NDCS 2012) is concerned that staff may be moved from supporting deaf children accessing the mainstream curriculum to teaching BSL. This has not been the case in Dingwall Academy as additional staffing has been provided and the number of BSL classes has been capped.

Health and well-being

Deaf pupils often face low self-esteem, isolation and poor mental health when there are difficulties in communication (NDCS, 2013). As well as opening doors for hearing children, the development of BSL at Dingwall has been little short of a revelation for deaf pupils in mainstream classes. It is clear that having others able to communicate in BSL breaks down barriers and opens up the possibility of new friendships. The school has a strong and positive link with the local branch of the NDCS and supports the NDCS's vision of a 'world without barriers for every child'.

'At break time, I can go with the others to the canteen. It's noisy and really difficult to hear. B is learning to sign so we talk in BSL. It's slow but now I know what's happening. Before I would tag along but felt left out. Some of the others want to know what we are saying in sign.... she sometimes tells them. I feel good and happy. It doesn't matter now if I don't get it all.' (Deaf pupil, age 14)

Pupils who have siblings or relatives who are deaf have the opportunity to enhance their communications skills and awareness of the issues they face in a supportive and positive environment. At parents' nights several parents have reported that their child has a more positive feeling towards their deaf sibling or relative and no longer feeling

embarrassed or fear being bullied if they sign. Instead there is a sense of pride that they can communicate using a language which many others cannot understand.

Recently one of the Maths teacher reported catching one pupil 'whisper' an answer through signing the answer to his friend.

'He's no different to the others in the class: pals wanting to help their pals out of a tricky situation.'

The fact the answer was wrong is irrelevant. The pupil sees himself like his peers, sometimes striking it lucky with the right answer!

'Language learning is life enhancing'

In May 2011, the first European sign language interpreter student arrived in Dingwall for a six-week work placement. She worked alongside pupils and staff sharing her knowledge and expertise of Spanish sign language (which has different fingerspelling, different signs and different grammar from BSL) as well as exchanging linguistic and cultural differences. Nearly all pupils from the BSL classes and deaf pupils were able to provide basic information about themselves, their family, use numbers and colours in a meaningful exchange of information using Spanish Sign Language. Several were also able to speak simple words and phrases in Spanish. During the activities, role play, group work, picture and story boards, pupils were encouraged to interact with others including the Spanish student, think about what the task was asking them do, identify how they would achieve the goal and reflect on the process. This demonstrated that intercultural and linguistic skills can be developed through active learning.

The following year another Spanish Sign Language student arrived and surprisingly, all the pupils were able to recall their names in Spanish and in Spanish Sign Language. Nearly all were able to recall family signs, colours and numbers in both Spanish Sign Language and spoken Spanish. It is fair to comment that where pupils see a reason for the learning then they will engage, learn and achieve success.

Both students came from the Valencia area of Spain and were studying to become interpreters and translators. The college has links with the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (EFSLI) of which the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters (SASLI) is a member. Students in their third year of study in Spain go on placement to another country to develop their language and cultural skills. Both students expressed their interest in learning BSL and improving their spoken English. Contact via the professional bodies resulted in this successful partnership between these trainee interpreters and Dingwall Academy.

The recent report, 'Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach' (Scottish Government 2012) makes clear that young people's language skills are highly important for the economy and community.

'Miss, will I be able to go abroad to study like Viviana, the Spanish student did when she came here?' (hearing pupil age 16)

Prior to these exchanges, this pupil thought studying was confined to Scotland or to the UK.

With the national concerns about the sharp decline in the uptake of the traditional languages (Scottish Government 2012), it is interesting to note that there is no decline in the uptake of BSL and continuing commitment to improve their skills from the current pupils. There is real concern that young people are not always sufficiently challenged and motivated by current language learning approaches. There is no reason why learning more than one language cannot be achieved. The key question which requires to be addressed is how to make the link from the classroom to real life. When that link happens then true learning will follow.

Skills in daily use

Traditional language teaching relies on an auditory /oral approach. BSL is a 'language of movement and space, of the hands and of the eyes, of abstract communication... does not rely only on spoken words,' (Kyle & Woll , 2000).

Learning BSL at Dingwall offers young people a unique opportunity to use their new language on a daily basis in school with deaf pupils, an opportunity other modern language pupils may miss unless they travel overseas or have native speakers within the family home. This lack of opportunity to use their new language may explain why the interest in learning other languages is on the decline.

At Dingwall Academy, S1 deaf pupils are matched up with senior buddies who have basic sign language, whilst their peer group is fellow deaf pupils, not always from the same year. Now as a result of this pilot there is real choice about who deaf children can communicate with in school. The sight of two or three pupils using simple sign conversation along the corridor is a pleasure and reinforces the school's inclusive ethos.

Transition from primary to secondary school can be daunting and unsettling. Deaf pupils can feel more vulnerable, moving from a one-teacher class in their primary to the many teachers they meet at the secondary school. There is now an established pattern created by deaf S1 pupils for primary seven deaf pupils: the production of a signed DVD: 'Welcome to Dingwall Academy'. It is unscripted, with essential information entirely produced by the previous year's recipient towards the end of their first year. They review the DVD they were given when they left primary, identifying omissions and additional information they believe would improve the DVD and they go on to produce their own version of the DVD. It is not polished but very much appreciated by the primary 7 pupils.

Dingwall Academy promotes volunteering in the community. In addition to offering their services as volunteers, pupils find further opportunities to practise and develop their BSL skills. Several pupils are actively involved in the National Deaf Children Society (NDCS), befriending other deaf pupils and hearing siblings. A request from the local Brownie pack looking for help with communication resulted in a senior pupil volunteering and the deaf Brownie being able to join in without relying on her mother.

'E is great. She tells me what Brown Owl says at the same time as all the others. I don't need ma mam anymore to come to Brownies.' (Deaf child age 7)

Every year, at prizegiving the task of signing the awards ceremony falls to one of the deaf base staff. It was therefore a surprise to the audience to see two S3 pupils assist in signing the evening's performance. In the audience was the retired rector who had agreed to pilot the BSL course. Without a doubt pupils learning BSL are active learners using their newly acquired language skills in and around the community; the impact has been significant for everyone concerned.

Future

Since the pilot started in 2010 the course has been oversubscribed with continuing very positive responses and feedback from parents. Many have requested further information about progression to examinable courses including the move to see BSL included in the Nationals 4 and 5. SQA has updated several BSL units but have so far not converted these to Nationals 4 and 5. In contrast, SQA does offer the new N4 and N5 exams and Highers in other community languages, e.g. Urdu, Mandarin and Cantonese (SQA, 2014).

Although, Dingwall Academy acknowledges the status of BSL as a language, it is disappointing to note that the advice from the Highland authority on teaching languages, linked to the latest Scottish government policy does not recognise BSL as a language option. It is only acknowledged as a community language and as a result does not have the same status as other languages and does not appear as part of the local authority's language strategy. Yet, there is an option on the Highland council website to access a few policies in BSL. Furthermore, the strategy itself says, 'There is no hierarchy of languages. Any language may be chosen by schools as L2 or L3, according to their own local circumstances.' (Highland Council, 2014, Appendix 2).

Pupils from Dingwall Academy have recently engaged in local and national campaigns raising the issues of the lack of equality in qualifications. The passion for BSL and the lack of formal qualification resulted in pupils filming a signed DVD letter to Alex Salmond, First Minister for Scotland. Three pupils travelled to Newcastle to participate in The Guardian's school competition: 'What would your school do with £5000?' Dingwall Academy won the Scottish heat and went through to semi-finals. Equality was truly evident when the three girls (two hearing and one Deaf) delivered their Powerpoint presentation and answered questions using a mixture of sign and voice over English translation from BSL. The judges commented on it being truly remarkable seeing the three girls competently and confidently presenting in both languages.

The original group of pupils are currently working towards completing their SQA BSL 2, which is at Level 5 on the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework. By learning BSL, pupils will be able to accumulate cognitive benefits as well as gaining skills for employment. The recent report, 'Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach' (Scottish Government 2012) makes clear that young people's language skills are highly important for the economy and community.

A number of senior pupils have part time jobs in local shops. One deaf lady apologised for being late to a meeting but was excited about her experience in the local supermarket where she was served by a former pupil who had learnt some BSL:

‘ She asked me how I was, told me eating cakes would make me fat! And then told me the cost of my shopping. It was great.’ (Deaf lady)

This personal account supports comments found following the research project on the ease of accessing public services (Scottish Executive Social Research 2005) and the importance of hearing people learning to sign.

The increase in the number of sign language interpreters on television and in vision with the popular soaps and on the news has helped promote the status of BSL. Pupils continue to request information about university courses and careers where they can use their sign language skills and deaf awareness. The new degree in BSL / English interpreting at Heriot Watt University is a possible progression route for the Dingwall pupils (Heriot Watt University, 2014).

The parents of a deaf child report that she is more confident with English skills: producing longer utterances using more age appropriate English and stating it is ‘okay to make a mistake’. The deaf support team feels this is a positive by-product of seeing her hearing peers struggling to grasp basic BSL grammatical structures.

Deaf people should take their place in society and go on to lead fulfilling lives, yet they are hampered by poor communication and linguistic access to further and higher education. The new 4 year BSL interpreting degree course at Heriot Watt, Edinburgh will help address the chronic shortage of qualified BSL / English interpreters in Scotland and reduce the educational, social and employment inequalities facing deaf people. In the Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 approach; part 5 Pupil Qualifications, (Scottish Government 2012) the recommendation is for universities to increase the suite of languages offered to take account of future increase in the number of languages being taught in schools. In addition, courses allowing Deaf people to study their language would enable many to have the opportunity to enhance their linguistic abilities and if they wish go on to teach and research BSL.

Conclusion

The Curriculum for Excellence strives to enable young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. The original group of BSL learners has been on an incredible journey challenging the national decline in language learning. This pilot carried out in Dingwall Academy shows that there is potential to achieve a fairer and more equitable society through the learning of BSL.

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