



Abi PROJECT 2023/25

A brief outline on a project to help support schools introduce BSL/IAC in mainstream classrooms.



Where Wales is in terms of BSL learning

Wales moved ahead of any other UK nations and introduced BSL as an international language for all children to access ages 4 to 16 years.

So why is it not happening?

Based on the original roll-out plan, all parties have vastly underestimated the infrastructure needed to roll this out. There is a lack of trained teachers and next to no textual reference essential for children's learning.

A solution

COS will invest in expanding training teachers and helping children learn for the benefit of our community by developing Signed learning in mainstream schools.

Brief history

Since 2014 BSL has been formally recognised as a language in Wales.

In 2018, COS was commissioned by the Welsh Government of how British Sign Language could be introduced into schools as part of the new Curriculum Wales as an international language.

The study included many aspects, but the following areas highlighted key findings that would significantly impact introducing an effective teaching method. They were as follows:

- How BSL is currently taught in the UK
- Why is it not taught already
- International efforts to do similar
- The benefit to children

As part of the report, COS widened its sphere of study to include not only BSL, but also Sign Supported English (SSE) and Makaton. Again this would impact significantly on the report's findings.



How BSL is currently taught in the UK

Until recently, there were two authenticating bodies in the UK for BSL accreditation, and rather than an update saying this has increased, it has decreased to Signature being the sole accrediting body in the UK.

Accredited courses introduce a basic level of BSL all the way up to a professionally accepted standard where users can become interpreters, translators, teachers and accreditors. Courses have a clear method of not only identifying BSL as the language of Deaf people but also a

language that is taught to people who want to support Deaf people with their communication needs. It is predominantly a course for adults, specifically adults considering to or working with and supporting Deaf people.

Teaching children a language should be to introduce them new styles, idioms, cultural references and heritage. Children who are exposed to these features; the ideas they represent, the new vocabulary and the grammatical variation, are equipping themselves with the tools to understand the world in completely new ways. Teaching them signed languages will do that, but the current structured method for teaching is not appropriate.

Why is it not taught already?

Perhaps it is strange that in 2023 we are discussing a project about introducing sign language educational support and resources to schools, but we are. After all, sign languages are used by both children and adults who are Deaf, hard of hearing, have ALNs, have late or no vocal acquisition or are family members and friends of people who are first language sign users. It is the latter of these which highlights that not only are sign languages already socially present but also culturally relevant. We have a very multilingual overlap and have done for a long time. When we consider that some people, both children and adults, culturally cross three 'official' languages here in Wales, it is strange that we do not culturally represent them in our classrooms more. We have a language that is socially and culturally present within our community but not in our schools. So why not?

Children who predominantly use sign language as their primary communication have been effectively excluded from the mainstream classroom for lack of capacity to provide sign language provision, or they are culturally excluded from 9 am to 3:30 pm.

International efforts to do similar

Efforts internationally have always been on teaching children based on their need to use sign language as a dedicated communication method rather than teaching it to all children as an international language. However, there has been a much more dedicated and considered academic study of the effects of using sign language for other than 'prescribed reasons', such as using it as a sign-supported learning tool to aid other language learning and vocal development.

Sign language, particularly one as structured and developed as BSL, can help children in other language development. This would be of particular benefit to children who would otherwise struggle in a mainstream environment. Studies have shown that sign-supported learning methods improve vocalisation and grasp of a child's native language, increasing confidence and social skill.

The classroom Catch-22

Most children who predominantly use sign language are either not in mainstream education or use secondary language skills, while in mainstream education, there has never been an urgent need to have BSL learning or resources, for example. What has this meant?

This means children could develop a better understanding of English and Welsh with the introduction of sign support in other non-sign lessons.

The benefit of sign-supported learning in schools

Sign learning of any type in mainstream schooling is new. The idea of a simple introduction similar to what can be achieved with French, Spanish or German, for example, is next to impossible. Where it is new for international languages to be taught in mainstream primary settings, they have been institutionally taught for a significant amount of time, where their introduction and application are more straightforward. However, this apparent simplicity is only due to what is institutionally recognised as mainstream education in the UK.

Significant study has been done on the method of introducing sign systems in education settings to support children with a wide range of additional needs, from deafness to autism, as well as children with later developing speech. The benefits can vary in success, but while many examples have had a significantly positive impact, there is never a negative one. Many mainstream schools have introduced a basic sign methodology into aspects of learning which enrich children's knowledge and appreciation of storytelling, song and poetry, for example.

Where there is a place for dedicated BSL lessons, this must work alongside a methodology that will allow children to repeat and retain the signs they learn like they do in Welsh and English.



Combined Communication Approach

Sign-supported learning can help children develop their other language skills. Signs learnt through the programme should be repeated in other lessons throughout the school day. Colours in art, numbers in maths etc.

The signs are used alongside speech and do not replace the spoken word. Evidence suggests that signing does not stop children from using the spoken word, but can provide them with a valuable communication tool and the opportunity to put more words together.



How the Abi project works

Why use BSL or any sign language?

The inclusivity aspect alone means children with no sign knowledge can to some degree, communicate with a child who uses sign language. It removes the fear and stigma of interacting with someone you can not communicate with.

This stigma is caused because of a language barrier rather than disability, yet it is often felt, from all involved, that it is due to a disability which can have a profound impact on everyone.

This is not the only reason we use signs in the classroom setting though. There are other significant benefits.

We use signs to:

- ✓ Support understanding of spoken language. Since signs are more visual and less transient than the spoken word, they can help children to process meanings.
- ✓ Facilitate interaction. Signs help children to communicate their options and build relationships with others.
- ✓ Slow down and simplify adult language.
- ✓ Help children to learn and remember new words.
- ✓ Give children a tool to communicate with others
- ✓ Support the development of literacy skills.

BSL and Iaith Arwyddion Cymraeg IAC (Welsh Sign Language) can help children learn English and Welsh. Introducing the trilingual method can support the bilingual approach long established in schools.

How is BSL/IAC are used in this project?

We work through three stages of signing with the children.

COS is providing all schools with 20 Catrin and Abi books (10 English/10 Welsh) which, through the characters, introduce children to BSL/IAC. These are illustrated picture books which use the written word while the online provision uses BSL/IAC and audio to connect the two together. Children and adults will learn a basic child friendly version to Introduction to BSL/IAC.

The benefits are as follows:

- ✓ Uses tried and tested methods of images and animation for education.
- ✓ Has a visual and written source encouraging both sign and reading development.
- ✓ Allows adults to learn alongside.
- ✓ Has further resources available to encourage and develop learning.
- ✓ Dedicated Education Support Specialist are available to attend the school and give further lessons.



How does it work: States of learning

STAGE

1

Functional Signing

A single sign is used to communicate the main idea. This starts with the alphabet and single words e.g. name, home, drink, food, happy, sad etc.

Books: Alphabet, number and signal word resources are provided via the accompanying videos which have extra elements.

Children who are first learning to sign are encouraged to use functional signing of words which are important to them and help them to have their needs met. The adults working with children will sign the main idea to help them understand what is being said. Staff working in the lower language level classes model signing using keyword signing.

STAGE

2

Keyword Signing

All of the key words (information carrying words) are signed e.g. I am, I want I have, I like, I don't like etc.

Books: Children will be able to not only sign their name but introduce themselves and ask for basic information.

This level of signing can often be used across the school day during other language lessons for example.

STAGE

3

High Signing

All words in the sentence are signed.

Books: Clear signed story telling with audio support.

Signs for grammatical structures are taught by ESS and can work alongside the development of their other language and literacy skills. As children's sentence structures increase in length and complexity, grammatical information can be learnt through the additional visual cues given in signing.



Resources



Each book introduces and encourages the following:

My very special dog - BSL Alphabet | Deaf Awareness

My best friend's birthday - BSL numbers | Inclusion

I need paint - Colour signs

So many people know me - Profession signs | Family signs

The mystery of the missing shoes - Clothing signs

Pirates of the Menai Straits - Nautical signs | Imaginative play



Moving to the zoo - Animal signs

There is a dinosaur in the garden - Home signs | Family signs

Trip to the moon - Sky and celestial signs | Imaginative play

Ready to race - Sports signs | Deaf Awareness

While all by default have a degree of inclusivity and awareness lessons some specifically encourage thought and learning in this area.

The website also provides additional resources: www.catrinandabi.com



Education Support Specialist (ESS)

We would encourage you to use our education support specialist to further your children's and staff interaction with the language. This can be for BSL, IAC or a combination of both.





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