



Inclusive approaches to maintaining breadth in Key stage 1 and 2 communications

White Paper

In association with

Signature
excellence in communication
with deaf people

Introduction

Sign Language is a term that is typically associated with deaf communication. Sign language is the use of a hand shape, movement and placement to represent a word or concept. This paper considers a range of evidence and study in relating to whether sign language in the classroom offers inclusive language and literacy development benefits.

Many teachers are discovering that using sign language is an effective tool in inclusive and stimulating learning and supports the wide range of learning styles present in any classroom. SignSpell is a new and exciting initiative focused on how British Sign Language (BSL) alongside other tools can aid better development and reinforce learning of language skills in a variety of ways.

Contemporary challenges to diversity in communications skills

It's well documented and researched that a significant minority of children are failing to achieve the expected level at Key Stage 2 in our primary schools.

According to Jean Gross CBE, 6% of children leave primary school at 11 with literacy levels of a seven year old – or less.

Literacy has been identified as a particular issue in boys, they are clearly demonstrated to be lower than girls in recent studies in the Boys Commission Report. There is ample evidence regarding this issue, and with government data published as part of secondary school league tables, just 1 in 15 (6.5%) pupils starting secondary school in England, flagged as "behind" for their age, goes on to get five good GCSEs including English.

The Literacy Trust highlights that issues are complex, including gender and culture, as well as broader complex social influences. Clearly finding methods of including all abilities in one class is challenging.

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- Two thirds are boys (see further evidence in the Boys Commission Report)
 - More likely to have been born in the summer
 - Twice as likely to be living in poverty (eligible for free school meals)
 - Some have 'real' special needs
 - Start school hopeful but soon lose that hope
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If we then consider that the policy landscape is changing significantly, pressures on teachers to find a resolution become increasingly apparent.



Limitations of early reading and prevalence of phonics

There is clearly a debate ensuing regarding how best to use tools in combination, to optimise the value and results of phonics in application. The UKLA (2010) review on teaching reading provided evidence that classrooms where children are taught to read most effectively show a balanced approach in which word recognition skills are matched by attention to comprehension.

The results of various studies referenced suggest best results are obtained by:

- Widening the range of communication and literacy skills taught
- Focusing on the needs and interests of individuals
- Offering engaging reading media
- Encouraging high levels of engagement with reading

In application this creates challenges for teachers given time and spending cut pressures, the nature of tools available, the need for inclusive education, and practicalities of planning lessons all sited as constraints. Clearly time constraints for planning and implementation of study are an issue in creating personalised learning experience across diverse capabilities, cultures, literacy and reading levels.

'With resource constraints in mind, SignSpell covers a wide range of learning/teaching skills. Whilst the signs are not phonic based it complemented the teaching of phonics which also includes actions, as well as the retention of spellings and overall communication/literacy development.'

'The use of the IWB worked very well with a large group, it was excellent for inclusivity enabling all pupils of all levels of ability to join in successfully.'

Katharine Whitehouse, Director, Rainton Education Ltd

Further compliance with changing demands such as revised teaching standards, and the curriculum for English, which includes a strong emphasis on use of systematic synthetic phonics create additional pressures. Year 5 and 6 pupils with poor decoding skills are expected to be taught through a rigorous phonics programme to catch up with peers.



Evidence for the use of British Sign Language to enhance inclusive learning in KS 1&2 literacy

Australian studies demonstrate that we all use physical expression before we can vocalise our demands, and that babies can readily learn Sign Language. Before children speak any words they will develop signs for many things – juice, milk, the desire to have nappies changed.

According to Dr. Marilyn Daniels, a professor at Penn State University

'One benefit of pre-schoolers learning Sign Language is that it is fun and interactive. They will be using their hands and body to communicate and that stimulates their brains, making it easier to learn all languages!'

Just trying to learn words or shapes can work, it is the most often way used, but by associating the words and symbols with actions, the children can remember things faster and better. This means teaching Sign Language facilitates the teaching of regular language.'

Her research shows the range of benefits of learning sign for hearing children and her book 'Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy' considers several studies involving over 400 pupils. These studies show children go through phases where they enjoy mimicking, verbally and physically. In addition, almost all children go through a phase or more where they appreciate learning sign and are very receptive to it.

Arguments made by the research include:

- Theory that sign affects synaptic networking, making it is easier to learn (sign and song/ sign and maths studies)
 - That when children learn two languages at the same time they learn both languages better.
 - Sign Language utilises the hands and eyes in addition to the ears and mouth.
 - Sign Language develops more of the brain than learning a spoken language alone. In effect reinforcing spoken language learning with visual and tactile information (stored in other aspects of brain). The benefit of using this system is the representation of information through seeing, hearing, and movement. The more pathways created in the brain, the stronger the memory.
 - Supports and accommodates a wide range of learning styles. A "verbal linguistic" child loves the process of learning another language. The "kinaesthetic" child is motivated naturally by movement. The "interpersonal" child loves being involved in a group activity.
 - Sign Language promotes oral language development, providing strong visual clues to words contextual meanings. Concepts are often acquired quickly when paired with iconic signs.
 - Multi-modal imprinting and repetitions strengthen a child's recall and enhance the development of oral language for reading comprehension. When a teacher says and signs a word, the child hears and sees the word repeated through two modalities.
 - Hand shapes are based on sounds, regardless of the spelling of a word. Sign Language can be considered a form of Visual Phonics and teachers have reported the positive results of seeing children apply these skills in their daily reading and writing activities.
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In fact the 19th century Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet advocated the use of Sign Language to increase language development in hearing children. He noticed that the hearing siblings of deaf children showed academic advancement in language (Felzer, 2004). Continued studies verify his thoughts; classes that incorporate sign consistently score higher academically on various tests than their non-signing counterparts (Daniels, 1994).

Practical benefits in the classroom

All the research identified supports evidence of benefits for hearing children who learn sign. Further, that the use of Sign Language supports many children in enjoying communication, and developing vocabulary. Teachers are observing that children are interested in Sign Language and tend to acquire it easily.

Key benefits identified in the classroom:

- A broader sensory compliment to phonics based learning (visual phonics)
- Increasing the likelihood of remembering the meaning of the word through multi-modal imprinting
- Supporting extension of vocabulary when learning to read
- Promoting faster learning through attentiveness and fascination (simultaneously speak and signing)
- Improving motor skills
- Broadening communication tools and encouraging inclusion
- A tool to be used when spoken language is inappropriate or impossible
- Facilitates communication with deaf peers
- Ability to communicate with people of different spoken languages



'As tools to "extend communication skills through the use of British Sign Language" SignSpell had a powerful impact on the intended age range who were motivated, engaged and fascinated by the concept of "another language" and wanted to learn more.'

EDS, the Learning Organisation

SignSpell as a solution

While British Sign Language can integrate easily into most reading programs, the challenge remains that teachers are often too busy and have limited resources to either undertake additional study, or to build Sign Language into their classroom curriculum.

Reading is an acquired skill that requires a planned sequence of skill development and any solution needs to be effectively designed around teachers needs.

Signature is a nationally recognised body which promotes excellence in communication with deaf and deaf blind people. The organisation has sponsored development of SignSpell with specialist educational practitioners to encourage inclusive learning and in recognition of the weight of evidence demonstrating enhanced results in literacy.

SignSpell is a series of educational resources to develop communication and literacy skills in children aged 4-11. By teaching simple British Sign Language (BSL), SignSpell encourages children to enjoy reading and develop their language and literacy skills. It's a unique and exciting learning strategy with straightforward resources that teachers can trust.

'SignSpell is a very interesting approach. Signing / fingerspelling make sharing stories with an adult a more active experience, which fits in well with this age group.'

'In addition, it extends their understanding of communication and gives them another route to remembering how to read and spell words.'

Dr Rona Tutt OBE

The SignSpell system includes 52 lesson plans, 12 themed storybooks, 140 additional fun activities, flashcards and an online video dictionary with 340 BSL signs and phrases to support learning.

No prior experience of British Sign Language is required to teach SignSpell. Children and adults can learn together.



Further Reading:

- Using Sign Language for Teaching Sight Words. Teaching Exceptional Children Carney, J., Cioffi, G., & Raymond, W.
- Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice, P.Wolfe
- Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy. Marilyn Daniels
- Development of Sign Language into a child's development, Vollaton Research
- Effective teachers of Literacy, Leeds University
- How Manual Sign Acquisition Relates to the Development of Spoken Language. Theresa Kouri
- Let Your Fingers Do the Talking, Hands-on Language Learning Through Signing. Childhood Education Goode, L., Feekes, J., & Shawd, B.
- Literacy and Sign Language by Carmela Pitmen
- National Institute for Literacy. (2001). Put Reading First.
- National Literacy Trust: The Literacy Guide for primary schools 2012
- Phonological Awareness: One Key To The Reading Proficiency of Deaf Children. Luetke-Stahlman, B., Nielsen, D.
- Research on How Signing Helps Hearing Children Learn to Read. MBR Beginning Reading Program Laura Felzer
- Sign Language and Hearing Preschoolers: An Ideal Match. Childhood Education. Kate Reynolds
- Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers L. Moats
- Teaching Sight Words with Sign Language, Tammy Wurm
- The Effect of Sign Language on Hearing Children's Language Development. Communication Education. Marilyn Daniels
- The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction, Roskos, K., Christie, J., Richgels, D.
- Using Sign Language in Your Classroom. East Lansing, MI: National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. Constance Lawrence
- Using Sign Language with Hearing Children as a Tool to Facilitate Language and Vocabulary Development in Preschool and School-Aged Populations. Lindsay Forhan, University of Denver





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