Teaching Sign Language to Parents of Deaf Children

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**Introduction**

First of all I would like to say how pleased I am to be asked to give a presentation about teaching Sign Language to parents of deaf children. In my view it is vital for parents to learn Sign Language to communicate with their deaf children.

Your experiences may differ, but I would like to share my experience and ideas with you all. In the past, and even now, many parents have found it difficult to communicate with their deaf children and there are frustrations on both sides trying to understand each other at home. How can we improve the situation and influence those who can make a difference?

My presentation has four main sections. I feel it is important for me to talk about these areas:

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# Background

I was born Deaf, with Deaf parents and family. British Sign Language is my first language and English is my second language. These were some of the reasons I was employed to work at a mainstream nursery school with a deaf boy called Ben and his family who are hearing. It was filmed as the documentary special, "A Language for Ben". A book has also been published, written by Lorraine Fletcher (1987) - Ben Fletcher's mother. This was very unusual at that time in Britain. I taught BSL to the nursery staff, parents, and to Ben's sister and friends who live in the village and join the class. I also taught, signing to the hearing nursery children, for them to be able to communicate with Ben and myself. My work also included story telling, encouraging the children to learn through play and supporting the teacher in other activities.

This showed other parents and school that it is possible for a deaf person to work and teach, that deaf children can and do learn equally well as hearing children through sign language and that parents can learn sign language and communicate with their deaf children.

I also joined a parents' group, with deaf children from other mainstream schools. They became aware how important BSL is important for their deaf children and to the parents and family.

Other schools also started to employ deaf adults. Like me, they also had no previous experience of teaching and they needed to be supported and learn from other Deaf people. I joined a small group of other Deaf people and we formed a group to teach Deaf adults who work in schools.

We shared the experience of working in schools, how to co-operate with teachers, parents and children.

Before I move on, I want to mention that these issues relate to the UK and may be different from issues in your countries. However, I want to share them with you. Some of you who are deaf can do the job working in schools or colleges, working together with hearing teachers and professionals. And, also you - Deaf people, can do this job. Get together, "self-help" and learn from one another.

# My experience in schools and with parents

I have worked with deaf pupils across the full age range, pre-school to further education. After teaching Ben, I moved into different schools and colleges. I have experienced working in different educational areas. Some of their attitudes were not good and they still ignored using BSL in education. These Local Education Authorities (LEAs) influenced parents to use the so-called "oral method" to teach their deaf children even though this was failing them. In one college I was even told that I was not allowed to 'talk about BSL' - this was a College for Deaf People! Of course, BSL is the native language Deaf students at the college wanted to know about BSL and needed to 'talk' about what it means to them. I was stuck in a very difficult situation.

Then I went to work in mainstream schools in Leeds. I taught children from pre-school age up to high-school age. My special responsibility was with ethnic minority deaf children and their parents. In this situation the deaf children were treated as minority language bilinguals.

My responsibility was in classroom support for the deaf children, mainly from minority language speaking homes (especially Punjabi) in a Leeds primary and middle school. In Leeds, all deaf children are placed in mainstream. I was a member of the family support school, primarily teaching BSL to mothers of deaf children. BSL is used with Punjabi lip parents where appropriate. I also on home visits and worked with pre-school children.

We had an experimental play group for young deaf children, situated at Leeds University, involving the early development of Sign Language in a BSL environment for very young children. Teaching BSL to hearing teachers was part of the in-service training programme.

**Video Language Assessment Techniques**

Assessment of the children's Sign Language development was part of the service's annual report system. The need for a fluent native adult user of BSL in these assessments is made explicit in guidance notes from the Department of Education and Science.

"It is hoped that LEAs will be able to make special arrangements to bring in a person with knowledge of the language and cultural back-round of the child and his parents in the various stages of assessment".

# Liaison with hearing parents and family

I worked with the Asian mothers' group - men where not in the group for cultural reasons. A man came to my class and watched what I taught to the mothers. He then taught fathers and older brothers in a men's group. In this way, the males in their families also developed knowledge about Deaf people and how to communicate with their deaf child. The support for the other parents of deaf children was mixed and their deaf children joined them during time. This allowed them to have a full session learning BSL without breaking off to look after children.

During the first sessions with the Family Support Group a woman bilingual in Punjabi and English came to class. When I signed, a peripatetic teacher who could sign interpreted into spoken English then the Bilingual Asian interpreted into Punjabi and I then repeated what I had signed. It took ages and it was very difficult to build up a relationship. The mothers were not educated in England. They came over to Britain from Pakistan and they knew very little English. We had to carry on using the Bilingual Support until the mothers were confident enough to learn directly and communicate with me.

I saw how very positive it is to have a family support group (we met once a week) to teach parents BSL and how to understand and encourage their children. For the beginning session mothers learnt BSL related to the home (every day leaving) and the curriculum subjects taught in schools. In this way we covered what children were learning in the classrooms so parents would know what their children learnt at school and could understand them better at home. They could then ask their child what they were doing at school and they could sign to their child story about their home. We encouraged the children to join the family support group during class break, and showed the parents what they learnt in the class. Sometimes we asked the children to sign to mothers during activities. We also encouraged them to ask about what signs were used in the story book to prepare them for signing communication with their child at home.

It was also important for the Family Support Group to get together and also invite deaf parents to join the group.

I used the "communicative language teaching method" and this had a very positive influence in language teaching in class. It gave them confidence and they did not worry if they did not understand. Give people time to learn Sign Language. I allowed and encouraged them to feel comfortable during their learning. Some of them were frightened or nervous about signing so I gave them some humour and activities to allow them learn natural Sign Language. When I was signing naturally to them, they learnt without thinking or pressure.

Since the mid-1970s Communicative Language Teaching has expanded. Both American and British proponents now see it an approach (not a method) that aims to make communication competence the goal of language teaching. In this approach:

* Procedures are used where learners work in pairs or groups, employing available language resources in problem solving tasks.
* Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language.
* There is a goal enabling students to communicate using the target language.
* The problem of students knowing the rules of language usage, but being unable to use the language is reduced.
* Students can apply their knowledge in negotiating meaning.

**Task-based materials**

* A variety of games, role-play.
* Exercise handbooks (handouts, cue-cards (e.g. cue-sign: tutor-sign - office student sign - know where office), activity cards, pair communication practice materials and student - interaction practice booklets).
* Pair communication materials, there are typically two sets of material for pairs of students, each set containing different kinds of information.
* To expose students to natural language in a variety of situations.
* Picture story, students share information or work together, this gives student practice in negotiating meaning.

I became very aware of their cultural use of right and left hands. The taboo associated with the use of the left hand led to some weaknesses learning BSL. They had to accept to learn BSL and our culture. When I taught shapes "related to the deaf children's maths and science lessons" the mothers' group said they found it hard to use the left hand at the same hand at the same time as using the right hand. They needed to use both hands to sign the shapes "square", "circle", "triangle" properly. It was a two way process - I learnt from them and they learnt from me - but they also learnt form their deaf children using BSL and also Deaf culture.

# Home visits

As I mentioned above, part of my responsibility, was to visit the homes of the children. I visited Asian and Afro-Caribbean families. How important is this for parents with very young children if their child is found to be deaf? I will discuss the issue from an English perspective.

Health visitors should quickly contact a peripatetic teacher and a Deaf adult to get to know the parents and their baby over time and support them in how to respond to their baby's developing communication needs. Native users of BSL can teach parent how to respond to their baby in basic signs. In this way, Deaf adults are encouraging the child to develop their language. It is important to have on-going home visits. The child then learns BSL at the very early stages of language acquisition. We also encouraged these parents of very young deaf children to join other parents with older deaf children. They could then share the experience and information from other parents who have been through the same stages.

Every week we had the university play group. As deaf adults, we took responsibility for activities in the play group ourselves. There was a mirror to see through from the next room for parents to come and watch how deaf adults communicate with pre-school teachers. For example: using eye-gaze, pointing, use of BSL, all in a Deaf cultural environment. The parents learnt by watching us how to develop a rapport with their deaf children at home. They could also sign about what the deaf children were doing at the play group. This shows how vital it is for parent and children to be able to communicate to relate together what is happening at school and at home.

In my view, it is vital for parents of deaf children to learn BSL for their own family's sake. It is also important because they will be a strong influence on other parents - as in the past influence has always been from "oralists". Many parents and deaf children are so frustrated because they find it difficult to communicate with each other. I have seen how they dramatically improve when they are encouraged to sign to each other. Asian parent said they were much happier because they could communicate with their deaf children they felt that they did not have rapport because it was so hard to understand each other. Both parents and deaf children were frustrated as they could not communicate with each other and deaf children became left out in the family home.

**Conclusions**

I believe that fluent signing deaf adults should be present in schools to interact with deaf children, teachers of deaf, other staff and parents.

Parents have the power to influence Education Authorities and to influence other parents' groups and to show them how vital it is to have Deaf role/identity models for deaf children. Deaf adults understand deaf children - it is important for hearing parents to see this and to see how deaf adults live their lives. I can remember parents asking me if I could drive a car! I said directly to them from me a deaf person, "Yes I can drive a car". That simple thing is perhaps what parents want to know for their deaf child when they are imagining how s/he will grow up.

Finally, it is also important that deaf adults know how to teach. They need to have been to training/education courses. If they are trained and encouraged, teachers of the deaf and parents will see that deaf signers can be as good teacher as anyone.

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