

Is it best to have a native BSL user and a hearing high level BSL user with experience in interpreting or communication support work 'team teaching' to improve BSL teaching practice?

DET Action Research Paper

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1. Identify an area for research, using a problem area for you which you want to explore further. Discuss your reasons for choosing this area of study and how it is going to be of benefit to you in your own teaching practice. Explain how action research is appropriate for this study and describe the key features of Action Research, detailing the action research cycle.

British Sign Language is unique in that there is no complete written form. It is a recognised language with its own grammar and syntax, very different to English. It is a visual language creating pictures in topographical and syntactic signing space.

British Sign Language is the language of the Deaf and belongs to the Deaf community. Therefore when it comes to teaching the language it is only right that a native BSL user should be the tutor. This would give the best approach both in teaching not only the language but the culture and deaf awareness as well.

This creates unique problems in teaching the language, particularly for beginners who really struggle if the tutor only uses BSL. It can also be difficult for the tutor in that they may struggle to understand the learners, a lot of Deaf BSL users cannot lip read and have low English skills. If the learners are not confident to try and bridge the communication gap and the tutor is not confident to attempt writing, miming or other communication techniques the class will not be successful.

A hearing tutor, although they may have good qualifications in BSL they will not have the background in Deaf culture and will undoubtedly speak more than sign which will hinder the learners progress. They will also not be able to give first hand knowledge of deafness or deaf awareness. They will however be able to communicate easily with the learners.

Rather than choosing between the two, I would like to research whether it is best to have a native BSL user and a hearing high level BSL user with experience in interpreting or communication support work 'team teaching'. This, to me, means that the learners have the 'Deaf cultural approach' but also can learn hints and tips from hearing BSL users on what helped them learn. Communication would be smoother with the learners also seeing how interpreting works in BSL.

I feel this would benefit my teaching as it would give me full communication with the learners via the 'interpreter' (hearing high level BSL user), the learners would be more confident seeing they can fully communicate, it would also give them support to try and communicate with the tutor independently.

The difficulty may be that the learners gravitate to the hearing person to ask all the questions and get support as it is easier for them to communicate rather than trying to communicate with the deaf tutor.

What is Action Research?

According to the Institute for the Study of Inquiry in Education, Action Research "is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the "actor" in improving and/or refining his or her actions." (Ascdorg, 2018)

The term 'Action Research' was first mentioned by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. Lewin was a German-American social psychologist. The seven step cycle is still based on Lewin's theory.¹

As the researchers are also primarily involved in the area being researched, the outcomes will always be relevant and can help the educators to be even more effective in their teaching. Action research is a seven step cycle which can be endlessly repeated. The seven steps are as follows:

1. Selecting a focus
2. Clarifying theories
3. Identifying research questions
4. Collecting data
5. Analysing data
6. Reporting results
7. Taking informed action



1. Identify the focus

It is important to spend time deciding on the focus for the study. It needs to be something that the researcher feels is important enough to use their valuable time on researching.

2. Clarifying theories

¹ Partnership, G.S. and Concepts, L. (2013) *Action research definition*. Available at: <http://edglossary.org/action-research/> (Accessed: 13 February 2017).

² General Teaching Council Scotland 2017. Gtcsorguk. [Online]. [18 August 2017]. Available from: <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/professional-update/research-practitioner-enquiry/practitioner-enquiry/how-practitioner-enquiry.aspx>

Once the focus has been decided it is necessary to reflect upon the various theories and approaches that are used to determine which will be more effective. Researching for similar projects or papers may be helpful.

3. Identifying Research Questions

The next step is to identify the key questions that are to be answered and think which research methods will work best.

4. Collecting Data

All research projects need data. It is important to carefully think what data is needed and how this might be collected. Any data must be valid and reliable, it also needs to support the research. Data must not only be from one source pool but a wide variety of sources including articles, questionnaires, case studies and more. It is best to use at least three different sources (triangulation) thinking how best to collect, arrange easily for analysis and identifying trends.

Different methods for collecting data

- **Questioning** – this can be used in different ways; either face to face or the use of electronic/paper question sheets. If face to face questioning is used it is important to keep the questions exactly the same and the tone of questioning neutral in order not to influence the responses. It may be that a team of questioners are used which would also need to be controlled with the same questions.
- **Observations** – these can be a good way to observe a group of people at the same time or observe one person in a certain situation. For example it may be observing a group of learners or by observing the tutor. Unfortunately no matter how hard the observer tries their presence will affect the learners and tutor meaning any data collected will be tainted.
- **Feedback** – feedback can be verbal or written and can also be given to the tutor or an uninvolved person. If the feedback is given to a person involved in the learning situation such as the tutor this may influence the feedback given. If it is given to an uninvolved person then the person giving the feedback may feel more free to be open and honest. Written feedback is also preferable as the givers have more time to collect their thoughts and be more in depth.
- **Assessments and tests** – while these can be a very good way to collect clear and conclusive data the fact that it is under ‘exam conditions’ can affect the results due to nerves and pressure.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data is based on methods that are human-centred such as opinions, feelings and experiences about a certain topic. It cannot be calculated precisely and is concerned with theories. Due to the nature of qualitative data the methods of collecting this data are usually face to face through interviews, questionnaires, focus groups or observations³.

Quantitative data

Quantitative data is more focused with numbers such as how many, how much and how often. This means it can be calculated and measured, used to predict and control outcomes. Quantitative data

³ Surreyacuk. 2018. Surreyacuk. [Online]. [2 January 2018]. Available from: [http://libweb.surrey.ac.uk/library/skills/Introduction to Research and Managing Information Leicester/page_54.htm](http://libweb.surrey.ac.uk/library/skills/Introduction%20to%20Research%20and%20Managing%20Information%20Leicester/page_54.htm)

is less detailed than qualitative however it is more reliable and objective. Methods of collecting quantitative data are interviews, questionnaires, rating scales, direct measurement, tests (in controlled situations) and electronic monitoring⁴.

Action research is appropriate for this study as I can collect data both from the learners themselves and also from their ILPs and learning targets. As I have two BSL Level 1 groups I can compare the data from the group with team teaching and from the group with a Deaf BSL tutor.

Selecting a focus

The area or problem I am focussing on is communication between those beginning to learn BSL and the Deaf BSL tutor. At this point I have dismissed the idea of having a hearing BSL learner to teach as they do not have the cultural awareness and native ability of the language necessary to teach it. During my years of teaching BSL at Introduction and Level 1 I have had lots of feedback from learners concerning their ability to communicate with me and how they can ask questions easily. They feel overwhelmed by the tutor using full BSL throughout the lesson and struggle to follow what is happening. This in turn affects their confidence and can lead to learners dropping out of the course. From the tutor's point of view, it can be frustrating to not be able to explain what the learners need to do clearly and can, in some instances, lead to risks in Health and Safety (for example needing learners to let the tutor know if the fire alarm sounds, where the group needs to congregate should they need to exit the building). This could be overcome using written English but this can add more barriers for those who are dyslexic or have English as an additional language and having to write everything is both time consuming and frustrating for both sides as the Deaf tutor may not have a good level of English.

Clarifying theories

Signature, the accrediting body for BSL qualifications used by the college, do not recommend BSL tutors but leave it to each individual centre to decide who has the appropriate skills. They do however, suggest that BSL tutors hold the PTLLS qualification and are qualified in BSL to the next level above the one they will be teaching. For example a tutor wishing to teach BSL Level 1 qualifications should have both a PTLLS qualification and BSL Level 2 qualification.⁵ Most BSL users, both Deaf and hearing (high level or interpreters) will insist that BSL should be taught only by Deaf BSL users. Whilst I agree with this totally for those learning Level 3 and above, the reality of having a Deaf BSL user with no oral English trying to teach people who have little to no experience of BSL, perhaps not even knowing fully what it is, creates barriers between the learner and the tutor. This is not conducive to a good teaching environment which needs to be based on trust and communication. The ideal teaching situation seems to me to be team teaching with one Deaf BSL user with teaching qualifications and one hearing BSL user who has the skills to interpret. This gives both the cultural Deaf teaching and also a hearing person who can give their perspective on what helped them learn and also break down any communication barriers.

Ethical considerations

⁴ Surreyacuk. 2018. Surreyacuk. [Online]. [2 January 2018]. Available from: [http://libweb.surrey.ac.uk/library/skills/Introduction to Research and Managing Information Leicester/page_43.htm](http://libweb.surrey.ac.uk/library/skills/Introduction%20to%20Research%20and%20Managing%20Information%20Leicester/page_43.htm)

⁵ (No Date) Available at: <http://www.signature.org.uk/becoming-a-teacher> (Accessed: 13 February 2017).

Before deciding on a method of and beginning to collect data it was important to revise the ethical considerations involved. Whilst gender may have an influence on the overall question (men and women have different coping strategies when communication difficulties arise) there are fewer men in BSL classes than women overall. Also I didn't want to make the questionnaire too long and wanted to keep complete anonymity so questions on age and gender were not included as well as no names or ages. Due to the nature of social media I could not ascertain the reliability of those returning the form although it was only shared via BSL groups on social media and the questionnaire did ask for Level of BSL.

All those who completed the survey did so of their own consent and free will. There was no obligation for anyone to participate and were informed of the reason for the research and that only their answers would be used. Once the Action Research is completed all returned surveys will be deleted and paper copies shredded.

Identifying research questions

The questions needed to be asked were connected with how learners felt about communication whilst learning Introduction to BSL, level 1 and level 2 BSL qualifications. The questions needed to be clear and easy for those to respond without any ambiguities. It was also important to understand the position of those who were answering – were they now learning BSL; what level were they; were any family members Deaf BSL users. All of these points would have an effect on their answers. Then it was necessary to ask about their BSL tutors for the lower levels – deaf or hearing, native BSL users, CODAs (children of Deaf Adults), deaf oral etc. The next question would be when did they learn, how many years ago or are they learning now and then how did they feel about communication in their lessons – were there any barriers, did they feel they had full communication with the tutor, how could things have been improved (focusing on the tutor and communication points). To note the choices on the questionnaire were Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4, Level 6, CODA and other. Currently there is no Level 5 BSL qualification. Originally the levels were 1 to 4 but Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations) deemed that as the Level 4 was equivalent to degree level it needed to be changed to Level 6. Signature then changed the Level 3 which was previously an NVQ qualification and has added a Level 4. It is likely that a Level 5 qualification will be added in the future.

Collecting data

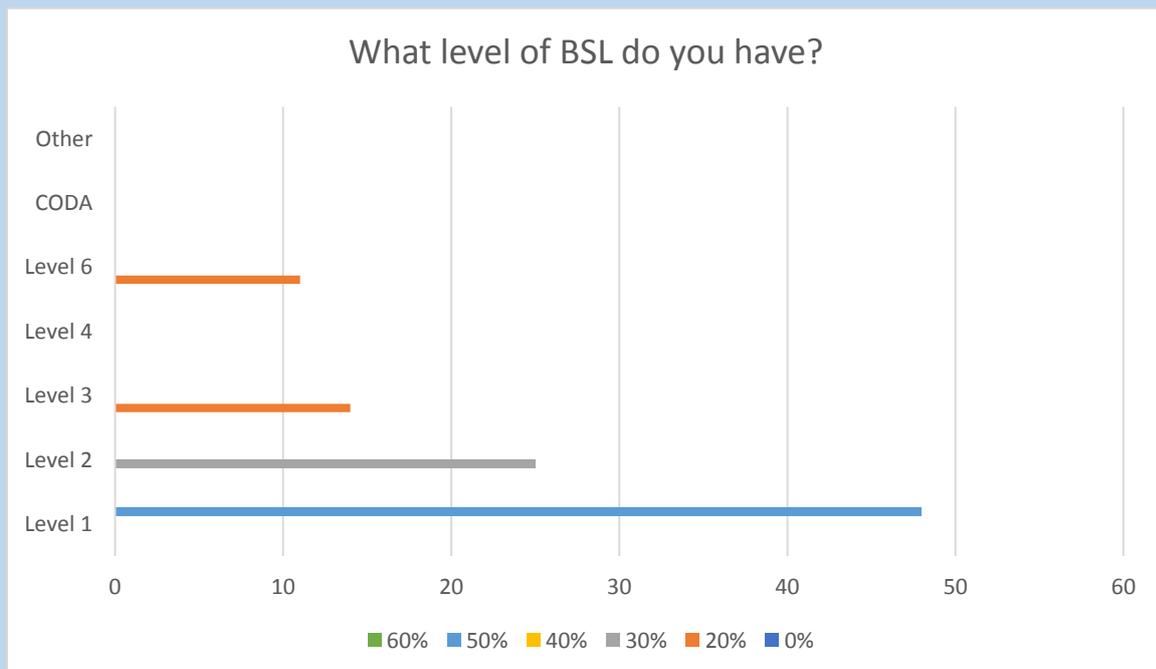
In order for the data to be both reliable and valid the data needed to be collected from more than one source. A questionnaire (see appendix A) was sent to BSL Learners, both those who had just started learning and those who were qualified interpreters, asking their opinions on the teaching of BSL. The questionnaire was also set up on SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey, 2018) which had further reach through email, social media and the website. A major benefit of social media is being able to contact a wide variety of BSL learners across the country on groups for BSL learners. Unfortunately I could not guarantee the validity of those answering however I cannot imagine many people taking the time to answer the questionnaire without being BSL learners. It was interesting to note that most replies came from those who were Level3-Level 6 and had taken their Level 1 qualifications a number of years ago (at least 4). This group were emphatic that BSL tutors should be Deaf BSL users only and should teach in full BSL with no English. Those of the lower levels who responded said they felt more comfortable with some spoken English as it helped them understand more clearly and feel more confident in their learning. Only one person who responded had any experience of team teaching with a Deaf BSL tutor and Hearing high level BSL learner working together. They enjoyed

the experience and found it very beneficial due to having complete access, cultural Deaf and also the benefit of how a hearing person had learnt BSL.

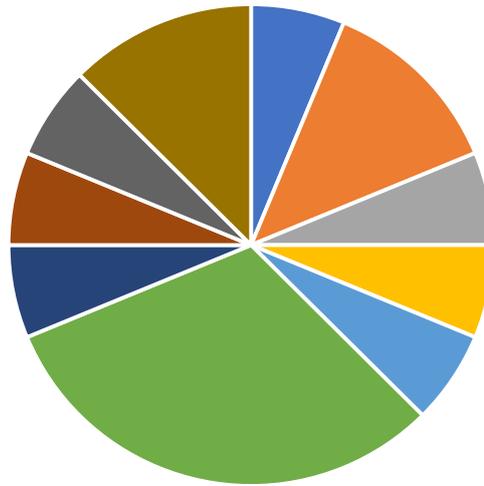
Time Scale

It was decided to begin the survey at the end of September and have six weeks to run. The end of September was chosen as the new courses begin in September therefore we would have new learners as well as those who completed the summer before or started the next level. This was important to have a wide variety of learners from the very new to those at level 6 or qualified interpreters. If I had begun the survey in May the new learners would already have more experience and it was important to get the views of very new learners. Six weeks for the survey to run was decided because the survey was not only handed out to groups but also shared on social media through BSL groups and emailed to other BSL tutors for their groups to complete. It was necessary to give enough time for it to be further shared via social media and to be completed and returned. After the six weeks the survey was ended and a further three weeks allowed for all completed surveys to be returned before analysis began.

Reports of analysed data

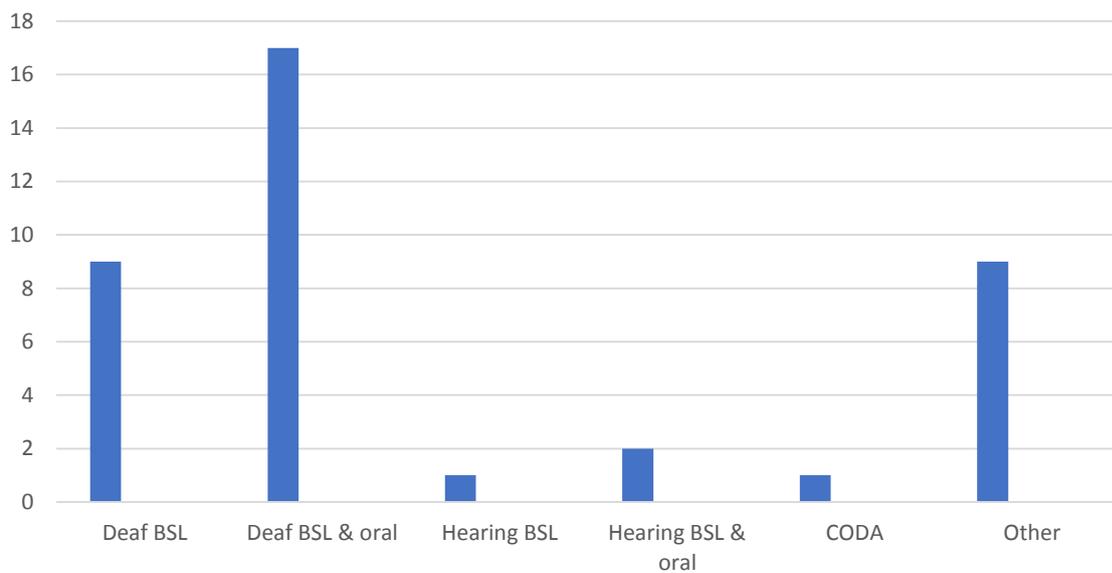


When passed Level 1



■ 1986 ■ 1995 ■ 1997 ■ 1998 ■ 2004 ■ 2005 ■ 2009 ■ 2010 ■ 2011 ■ 2014 ■ 2016

Who should teach BSL

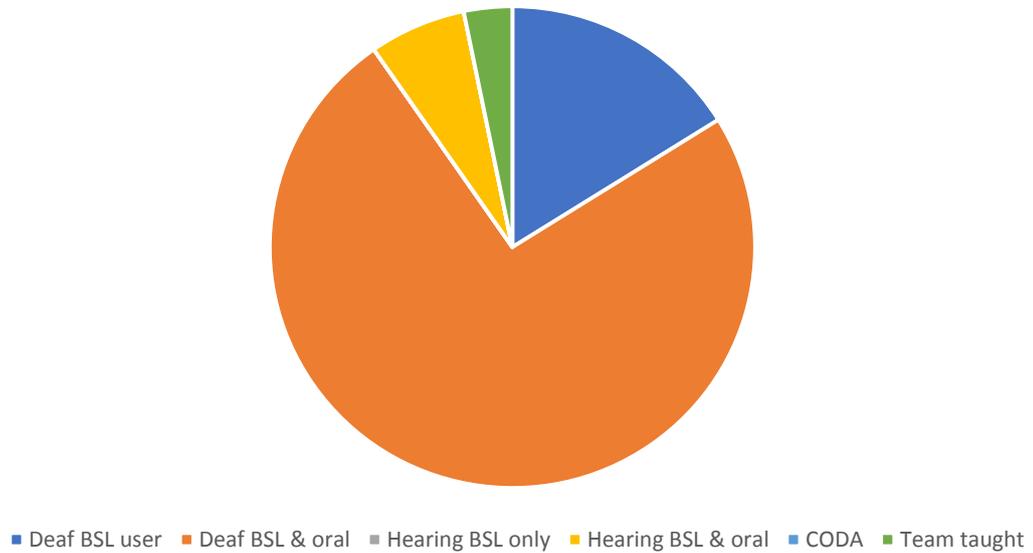


*Note: some respondents gave more than one answer.

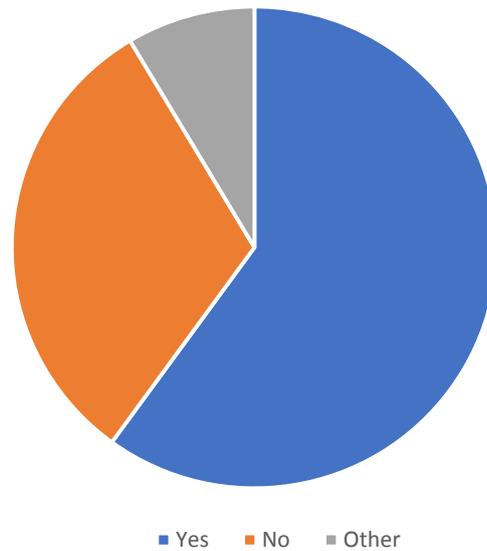
The following comments came under 'other':

- Either but a team of hearing and deaf is better
- Just needs to be good!
- Must be oral – deaf or hearing isn't important
- Anyone who loves the language and can teach
- Either deaf or hearing, BSL and oral
- Doesn't matter but must be fluent BSL
- Anyone

Your Level 1 BSL tutor was



Is spoken English important in learning Level 1?



Respondents answers to 'other':

- Could be helpful at times
- At times
- Helps but not necessary

Responses to the final question, 'Would team teaching with a Deaf BSL user and a hearing high level BSL user would have made your experience of learning Level 1 helpful?'

- YES, DEFINITELY! Hurrah! I have always thought this would be the ideal way, if it could be done. Of course, it would also be more expensive (unless one of the teachers is a volunteer!). Hearing teachers start the year well, signing most of the time, but by the end of the year they are tired and talk English most of the time. A Deaf BSL user would not get tired of signing, which is good - but on the other hand the students would not be able to ask him complicated questions because they wouldn't know how to sign them! If there was a hearing tutor present as well, they could put those questions to him.
- No
- I think one tutor is fine, I understand and I am learning and developing (BSL & oral tutor)
- I liked that our teacher would talk and sign. As long as the teacher is deaf and can sign that is all that is important. If the teacher wasn't deaf there is a risk that we would talk more than sign.
- Only if there was always a deaf BSL user for experience
- Not sure
- Perhaps, not sure, sorry
- Would help getting a real understanding of deaf culture for deaf BSL and hearing high level can help explain to a hearing learner because they understand the difficulty of learning
- It would be interesting and a good development for both tutors. There are so many other factors to consider: group size, level, would the tutors share interpreting, teaching, teaching assistant responsibilities?
- Don't think it's required but to see it for experience may be interesting
- Difficult to say as not experienced teaching with an interpreter
- No too much to concentrate on I would imagine. My BSL instructor has very good oral skills so feel BSL is very accessible for a complete novice like me
- Could be helpful for some. Quality of teacher more important
- More helpful, practise in signing
- Being seen but not heard makes it more important to sign as it's not only helpful for the learner but also the teacher
- No not really. You expect the teachers to be deaf. Also you see things from a different point of view.
- I have always been taught by a deaf tutor on one with oral skills. I can see the benefits of one of each
- No. My BSL Level 1 teacher made it easy to learn without needing anything interpreted. It was a good way to get the learners fingerspelling often, and a projector with resources to help with the rest.
- Yes please see last answer.
- No. I had a great teacher.
- No. I would have potentially relied on the hearing person to my detriment. A skilled Deaf BSL user teaching me the language, even now, is my preference. Team teaching at a higher level with interpreting and translating is something I would value as it gives two skilled perspectives on the languages being interpreted. Promoting a strong culture of 'Deaf can' is important, a good teacher with proper training is valuable. In my experience team teaching is rarely balanced and equal and I feel strongly that inexperienced learners would unfavourably weight it further if a hearing tutor was present.
- I think it would have been helpful. I think there are certain elements of/concepts within BSL that hearing people generally find challenging, as they are totally new to us. A hearing BSL user would be better able to relate to these difficulties and explain what helped them to

understand, as apposed to a deaf person who, having been surrounded by the language and culture, would not have the same experiences to draw upon. Having said that, it works both ways. I don't believe you can effectively learn BSL and about deaf culture solely from a hearing person. The two working together would give learners the best possible experience.

- That was what I had but all questions had to be directed to deaf tutor; interpreter wouldn't answer us directly- she often had to interpret what we had asked to the tutor for her clarification.
- That was what I had but all questions had to be directed to deaf tutor; interpreter wouldn't answer us directly- she often had to interpret what we had asked to the tutor for her clarification.
- I had a Deaf BSL user as my main tutor, with a hearing 'teaching assistant'. I liked this as the main tutor was very good, but rarely she would struggle to understand what I was asking/saying, which was helped by the assistant.
- It was hard at the start of the course because the tutor was bsl. Having a mix of tutors would have helped with confidence
- Yes but more so for higher levels. I think you need the experience of bsl with a deaf user but to build confidence a hearing person to be able to chat easily about ways to remember the signs you are learning.
- I never took level 1 as I was a coda
- No, it would have been more useful the higher qualified I became to explain the more complicated areas such as syntax etc.
- No all that was taught was done in pictures or on the white board.
- It could potentially help as at level one your signing is limited but i personally fee that students will become dependent on the hearing person and miss out on the basics of deaf awareness and the begging for stages of signing as it may encourage the student to be more oral than Concentrating on signing.
- No, tutor was easy to understand
- Maybe, but I think it is important to have a Deaf BSL user for experience of life.
- I learnt in a deaf school where everybody practically signs so I had no issues and it did help me learn new techniques very quickly.
- Yes. Can see the benefits of both teaching together - 1 with everyday fluency in BSL working with 1 who can understand the hearing side of trying to learn BSL and able to communicate pupils' questions to the Deaf teacher if the pupils are unclear. (But needs to be done carefully so that it doesn't come across as the Deaf teacher needing an assistant to do the job)
- Yes because it is too easy to slip into sse from the get go. The more bsl you are exposed to the more you understand and productive and receptive skills.

Analysing data

The first question is why didn't more high level BSL users answer the questionnaire than beginners? This could be partly because more of the people in the social media BSL groups are lower levels looking for support maybe and those higher level BSL users may not use the groups very often and possibly thought the questionnaire was only for lower levels due to the questions about Level 1.

There are also higher numbers of Level 1 learners than other levels because Level 1 has larger class sizes, also more learners enrol on this course than on the higher levels.

I was also interested to note that there were no respondents who have the Level 4 qualification. I believe this is because most learners go from Level 3 to Level 6 as they feel the Level 4 qualification is of no real benefit. As a BSL tutor I do not teach the Level 4 qualification and feel comfortable that those who achieve good passes in Level 3, mix with the Deaf BSL community and use BSL for work or home are competent to enrol on a Level 6 course.

Next I wondered about these high level BSL users and their responses that teaching at all levels should be full BSL with no spoken or written English. Were their lessons really like this from day one or was it so long ago that they have forgotten? I know that most Introductory and Level 1 tutors do use spoken English and certainly written English so why are these high level BSL users insisting that none be used? I can only think it is due to their lack of remembering their early learning experiences of BSL.

Having confidence in their lessons was directly related to being able to communicate freely with the tutor. Being able to ask questions easily and having contact with others who are learning or have learned BSL was also something that new learners were wanting.

There was a definite response that it was right for BSL to be taught by a Deaf BSL user only and not by hearing people from all levels of learners.

One thing missing from the data is the ages of the respondents, this could have an impact on their answers. It may be possible that older learners and younger learners have different approaches with either group being more confident with only BSL and the other group preferring full and easier communication.

It is also important to note that in 2001 the courses changed, meaning the way they were taught and the assessment procedures also changed. This will also have an impact on the data as those who took the old course could cope far better with no English than those who take the current courses. Looking at the dates given for when they passed their Level 1 course these range from 1986 through to 2016. The courses have changed a lot in that time, both in teaching styles and assessment process.

Reporting results

Looking at the results it seems that learners of Introduction to BSL courses and BSL Level 1 qualification courses would benefit from team teaching with a Deaf BSL user and a hearing high level BSL user as this would ensure full and uninterrupted communication, incorporating Deaf culture and being able to ask hearing people what helped them to learn. It would also help their confidence to know they have someone who is fluent in spoken English.

Learners at BSL Level 2 and above are able to access enough BSL to have a Deaf BSL tutor and be taught in full BSL.

Taking informed action

The Introduction to BSL courses are now team taught with myself using full BSL and a colleague (interpreter) voicing over for me and translating any questions into BSL.

The feedback from these has been extremely positive as the learners feel able to fully access the information given from me, ask any questions they have without communication barriers, ask my colleague about learning BSL as well as gain an insight into how interpreters work and seeing full BSL being used naturally.

It is also useful for me to have an interpreter working with me for the Level 1 course as it means we can have more 1:1 conversations as needed. Having someone who can give a hearing perspective on learning BSL is useful for the learners and having someone who can explain why certain linguistic skills are difficult for hearing people to understand is very useful for me as well.

To date the group who have team teaching are happier and more confident than those who have a Deaf BSL tutor. (Information taken from their weekly feedback forms).

Self Evaluation

Analysing my own effectiveness on the task of Action Research I have realised I need to put more time into organising both the time and the tasks better before I begin. I need to have all paperwork and surveys organised and a clear timetable mapped out to keep to the deadlines. I need to keep to the point and not digress, I tend to lose focus and go off topic.

My strengths lie in my knowledge of BSL and also the Deaf community. I have a lot of experience in teaching and know the curriculums for the qualification courses very well which means I can understand areas that learners will struggle in and where a hearing tutor or assistant would be beneficial. I also have the privilege of knowing EAL teachers as well as English and MFL teachers with whom I can discuss methods of teaching languages. This was important for pinning down the area I wished to focus on for Action Research and also in differentiating between the unique language of BSL and teaching other languages.

My weaknesses are in paperwork and working in a language that is not my first. My low level of English hindered my research as reading articles, books and web content in higher level English was very difficult and hard to pick out the facts needed. I am also very unorganised with paperwork and keeping to a timescale is problematic. I have recently employed a PA to help keep my personal and business paperwork organised and to assist with routine admin.

Conclusion

It has been interesting to attempt this Action Research on who should teach BSL classes, native Deaf BSL users or hearing English speakers with a knowledge of BSL? This is a long argued question between the Deaf and hearing on learning British Sign Language and will probably continue to be argued for years ahead. I do believe that having a team of experienced Deaf BSL tutor with hearing high level BSL communicator support works very well for Levels 1 and 2, for higher levels just the Deaf BSL tutor should be teaching as the learners should be at a competent level to understand the signing.

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