

Sign Language for Beginners

Discover the Art of Sign Language



Sonia Hollis

SIGN LANGUAGE FOR BEGINNERS

*DISCOVER THE ART OF
SIGN LANGUAGE*

SONIA HOLLIS

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1

WHAT IS BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the name of the sign language which is used in the United Kingdom. It is the first language of approximately 150,000 Deaf people in the British Isles. Thousands more who are not Deaf (such as employers of Deaf people, relatives/friends and interpreters) use BSL.

British Sign Language is a visual-gestural language without a conventional written form. It has its own grammar utilising facial expressions (non-manual features), handshapes and upper body movements to convey meaning. It's also a spatial and visual language. Many beginners think it is similar to mime (which it is not). The important thing to remember is that the grammar used in BSL is completely different to that used in English.

Sign language can vary from country to country, even among those whose first language is English. For example, British Sign Language is different to American Sign Language (ASL), Irish Sign Language (ISL) and Northern Ireland Sign Language (NISL).

British Sign Language also has regional dialects. For example, some signs used in the northern parts of England may be different to those used in the south

of the country. Within some regions, you will also find 'local signs' that can be classed as slang. And just like local slang in any town or city, new phrases and words come in and out of fashion or just evolve over time.

British Sign Language users successfully campaigned for BSL to be recognised as an official British Language. It is now recognised like the other languages of the United Kingdom such as Scottish, Welsh and Gaelic.

Components of British Sign Language

British Sign Language is a visual-gestural language which uses various components. Let's have a look at some of its features...

Finger spelling

Finger spelling is a manual code for representing the letters of the English alphabet and is not a signed language.

Finger spelling is generally mixed in with signing and is especially used for spelling nouns (place names, people's names, names of everyday objects, etc.) and for spelling words that have no direct signed equivalent.

British Sign Language uses a two-handed manual alphabet system whereas other countries like the USA use a one-handed system.

The speed and clarity of finger spelling also varies between different signing communities. Generally, older Deaf people use more finger spelling than younger Deaf people which is often connected to their educational upbringing.

When someone fluent in sign language reads finger spelling, they don't usually look at the signer's hand(s), but maintain eye contact and look at the face of the signer.

People who are learning finger spelling often find it impossible to understand using just their peripheral vision and end up looking at the person's hand rather than their face. Look directly at the person's face and lip pattern and you will gradually find it easier to understand.

Normally one of the first lessons students learn is to finger spell the alphabet.

Spatial grammar and simultaneity

Sign languages exploit the unique features of the visual medium. Oral language is linear. Only one sound can be made or received at a time. Sign language is visual; hence a whole scene can be taken in at once. Information can be loaded into several channels and expressed simultaneously.

For example, in English you might say “I drove here”. To add information about the drive, you’d have to make the phrase longer (“I drove here along a winding road”) or even add a second (“I drove here. It was a nice drive.”) In British Sign Language, however, you can convey information about the shape of the road or the pleasing nature of the drive by inflecting the motion of the hand, or by taking advantage of non-manual signals such as body posture and facial expression, at the same time as you sign the verb ‘drive’. Therefore, while in English the phrase “I drove here and it was very pleasant” is longer than “I drove here”, in British Sign Language the two may be the same length.

Placement

Placement is used in relation to the placing or establishing of signs in space. The signer locates or places particular referents within the signing space in different types of relationship with the signer and with the other referents. Once a signer has set up the ‘placement’ of a particular sign - ‘the house is over there’ by signing the word ‘house’ and ‘putting it in a space in front of you’ (‘placing it’) then the signer can use his eye gaze and directional verbs to refer to this particular sign.

Don’t worry if this seems complicated! It will become a lot clearer as you start to learn British Sign Language and put what you see and learn into practise.

Non-manual features

Non-manual features are actions produced by any part of the body other than the hands. They include actions of the eyes, mouth, cheeks, face, head, shoulders and torso.

They have different types of function within the structure of the language and are an extremely important aspect of BSL.

Handshapes

There are numerous handshapes that are individually categorised in BSL. Groups of handshapes are known as 'classifiers' which incorporate specific details of the referent by the handshape itself.

A few examples of different classifiers can be described as:

- **Handling/grasping:** You can use different handshapes that show how you physically hold or use something. For example, sewing with a needle, or doing the ironing. These are described as 'iconic signs' as they often 'look' how you actually perform something.
- **Flat surfaces:** You can have a different handshape that will indicate if something has a flat surface such as 'floor', 'door' or 'wall'.

- **People and vehicles:** This group of classifiers has a function that is similar to the use of pronouns in English. For example, different handshapes can indicate if you are looking up at something, if one person is involved in an action or many people. There are also various handshapes that indicate if you are talking about a vehicle or other mode of transport.

Signing structure

All languages use different kinds of sentence structure, but usually one type is used most often. In English, this is the SVO sentence (subject-verb-object). In the sentence 'Sophie bought a car' for example, 'Sophie' is the subject, 'bought' is the verb, and 'car' is the object.

Another type of sentence structure is called 'Topic Comment Structure'. This type of structure is not commonly used in English. It is used so often in BSL that people tend to describe BSL as a Topic Comment Structure. The signer gives the topic first and is then able to focus and give more detail on the comment that follows.

So the sentence 'Sophie bought a car' would be signed:

'Car (you would point to it after signing it) who bought? ... Sophie.'

2 LEARNING THE BASICS OF BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE

Your complimentary DVD shows you the basics of British Sign Language and will help you get started.

One of the first aspects of sign language that people learn is to fingerspell the alphabet.

They often find it easier to learn from videos because the visual nature is difficult to convey in a book.

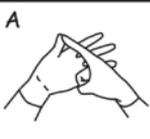
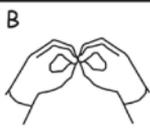
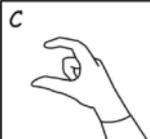
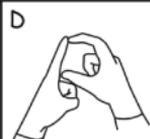
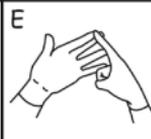
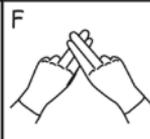
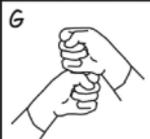
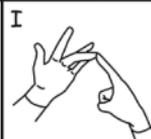
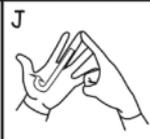
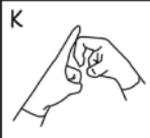
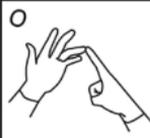
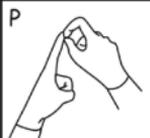
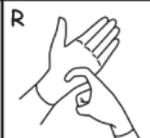
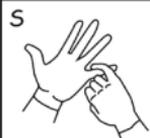
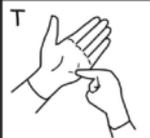
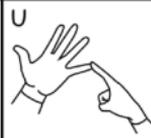
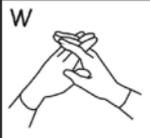
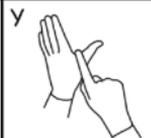
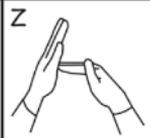
With the DVD you will:

- Learn what British Sign Language is
- Learn how to sign the British Sign Language alphabet
- Develop your receptive skills with a finger spelling quiz
- Learn how to sign basic numbers
- Learn how to introduce yourself to a Deaf person
- Learn how to sign the days of the week
- Learn how to sign basic questions

As explained earlier, sign language does have regional differences. You will also find that there are slightly different signs for numbers and some alternatives to the days of the week depending on whether you are

based in the North or South. However, this should not cause you a problem because they are all right.

**BRITISH
FINGERSPELLING
ALPHABET
RIGHT-HANDED VERSION**

		A 	B 
C 	D 	E 	F 
G 	H 	I 	J 
K 	L 	M 	N 
O 	P 	Q 	R 
S 	T 	U 	V 
W 	X 	Y 	Z 

3 ETIQUETTE NEEDED WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH DEAF PEOPLE

Sign Language Etiquette

When you are communicating with Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, there are various communication strategies that you need to remember.

For communication to flow naturally and smoothly, be aware that a signer needs space for making his own signs and he needs to be able to see other signers from the waist upwards to get the full visual message. That's why signers tend to sit or stand further apart than speakers of spoken languages do. A benefit of this of course is that signed communications can carry on at a distance or other situations that are impossible for speech!

Communication can be affected by 'visual noise' such as dim lights, glare, dazzle, bold wall patterns and anything in the physical visual background that may be distracting. This is the same as trying to have a spoken conversation as a loud motorbike roars past, or if you are in a group of people and everyone is talking at the same time.

There are rules and etiquette for smooth communication and conversation that need to be followed with sign language. So let's begin with how you can get the attention of a Deaf person to begin communicating with them.

Getting attention

To start communicating with a Deaf person, it is necessary to get their attention. This can be done in various ways... If the Deaf person is quite close to you and is looking away, you can gently tap him on his shoulder or arm (tapping anywhere else is considered rude). If he is further away, you can wave your hand. Another possibility is to make a vibration that will reach that person - for example, banging your fist on a table. The first two options (tapping the person on the arm or shoulder or waving your hand or an object to get his visual attention) are quite common when dealing with individuals.

In a group, it is slightly different. You could tap a bystander and ask them to relay your tap to the person whose attention you want to get. It could result in a whole chain of people tapping each other in order to get the attention of the desired person.

With larger groups, you could flick the lights on and off. This is a useful way to make announcements to a whole group.

Some ways of getting attention are considered impolite. For example, you may see children trying to get the attention of their Deaf parents by trying to turn their heads or tugging at their chin. This form of attracting attention is unacceptable - unless the Deaf people concerned are in the middle of an argument and NEED the attention!

Flicking the lights on and off purely to get the attention of only one person is also considered rude. Only use this method if you want the attention of a group of people.

Once the person has been contacted by a tap or a wave, and it is evident that communication is desired then the person receiving the signed message is expected to keep eye contact until a natural break occurs.

It is normal for the signer and the recipient to be engaged in signed conversation and at least for one of them to be nodding (the equivalent in the spoken language of saying, "Okay. I understand.")

Both signed language and spoken language still follow the same rules of etiquette and turn taking but obviously in a slightly different way. For example, in signed languages, it is customary to 'catch' the signer's attention when you want to interrupt, make a contribution or take your turn by just raising your

hands ready to sign. If the other person is happy for you to take your turn then his hands will drop down.

The receiver can interrupt the sender by looking away or by waving for attention. He may also catch the sender's eye by shaking his head or using a sign to indicate disagreement.

The sender shows that he has finished by dropping his hands from the signing space and looking at the receiver.

4

IS SIGN LANGUAGE EASY TO LEARN?

Sign Language is a visual language and the best way that you can learn it is to see it in action and watch the positions of the hands and the facial expressions.

When I first started to learn sign language back in 1992, I found it very addictive and just wanted to know more. I even used to practise in the mirror!

I tried to get my hands on anything to do with sign language, whether it was videos, books about Deaf people or watching the signers on TV...

I must confess that in the beginning, I found the signers on TV went way too fast for me to understand, but I enjoyed watching their facial expressions.

Once I started to learn sign language, I wrote down the things that I had learnt and practised them each week. Sometimes, I found it difficult to decipher my writing and the pictures that I had drawn. Watching an instructional video was much easier because I could see exactly how it should be done.

I started with the initial level which lasted about 30 weeks (this is equivalent to the Level 1 British Sign

Language DVD - www.learnsignlanguage.co.uk - in content).

I found the more I practised, the easier it became. I used to write down sentences and then see if I could work out how to sign them using BSL rather than Sign Supported English (explained in a different chapter).

It also helped to practise with a friend.

As with many sign language beginners, I found it very difficult to receive sign language back from a Deaf person. If you're finding it hard, be assured that it DOES get easier!

It's crucial that you look at the Deaf person's face rather than their hands. This may seem surprising but it is easier to understand the signs when you do this because you will automatically see the signs in your peripheral vision.

When I first starting learning sign language, I used to attend regular Deaf club meetings to practise but I didn't dare look at Deaf people in case I didn't understand them! Gradually, I learnt to sign basic stuff, which enabled me to have simple conversations with Deaf people. My confidence grew and I began to feel more comfortable having eye contact with different Deaf people.

When you learn more sign language you will also learn some coping strategies, like how to rephrase certain things if the conversation is not being understood. You'll also learn how to ask a Deaf person to repeat themselves. These are all taught in the Level 1 BSL DVD set.

I know how daunting it can feel when you begin. My advice is to keep practising and use all the resources you can whether it's from your Deaf friends, hearing friends who sign, DVD's, books, the internet, etc.

5

DIFFERENT SIGN LANGUAGE SYSTEMS USED IN SCHOOLS

Signed English (SE)

This is a system that is often used in schools to teach Deaf children the grammatical aspects of English, such as using word endings and plurals, etc. For example, for the word 'walking', the sign for 'walk' would be used and then the ending of that particular word would be finger spelt. Past tenses would also be shown along with other features. This is not a language in its own right - it is just a tool for teaching English.

Sign Supported English (SSE)

Sign Supported English is similar to Signed English, although it doesn't finger spell or fully represent the endings of words, 'ing', 'ed', etc. BSL signs are used but follow the format and structure of English. For example, if the phrase "I went shopping today and it was busy" was signed in SSE then the signs would follow the same structure as the sentence. However, if this was signed in BSL then the order of the signs would be slightly different and would most likely follow this format: "Me shopping today...busy". This would

be accompanied by the appropriate facial expressions to show that it was busy.

The balance of BSL signs to English varies greatly depending on the signer's knowledge of the two languages. A single sign is often differentiated into a number of English words by clearly mouthing the word. To understand SSE, you need good lip reading (speech reading) skills, as well as a thorough knowledge of English grammar.

Paget Gorman Sign System

The Paget Gorman Sign System was originated in Britain by Sir Richard Paget in the 1930s and developed further by Lady Grace Paget and Dr Pierre Gorman. It was designed to be used with children who had speech or communication difficulties, such as Deaf children.

It is a grammatical sign system which reflects normal patterns of English. The system uses 37 basic signs and 21 standard hand postures, which can be combined to represent a large vocabulary of English words, including word endings and verb tenses. The signs do not correspond to natural signs of the Deaf community. The system was widespread in Deaf schools in the UK from the 1960s to the 1980s, but since the emergence of British Sign Language and the BSL-based Signed English in Deaf education, its use is now largely restricted to the field of speech and language disorder.

Makaton

This is a system of communication that uses a vocabulary of “key word” manual signs and gestures to support speech, as well as graphic symbols to support the written word. It is used by and with people who have communication, language or learning difficulties. This includes people with articulation problems (for example, people with cerebral palsy); and people with cognitive impairments which might be associated with conditions such as autism or Down’s syndrome, and their families, colleagues and carers. It can be used to help the development of speech and language in children, or by adults as a means of functional communication for everyday use.

Communication using Makaton involves speaking (when possible) while concurrently signing key words. The sign vocabulary is taken from the local Deaf sign language (with some additional ‘natural gestures’), beginning with a ‘core’ list of important words. However, the grammar generally follows the spoken language rather than the sign language. Makaton does make limited use of the spatial grammatical features of directionality and placement of signs. It is used in over 40 countries worldwide and Makaton Keyword Signing varies from country to country.

It was developed in the early 1970s in the UK for communication with residents of a large hospital

who were both Deaf and intellectually disabled. The name is a blend of the names of the three people who devised it: Margaret Walker, Kathy Johnston and Tony Cornforth.

Makaton is run by the MVDP (Makaton Vocabulary Development Project) which controls the copyright to Makaton and depends on the associated income for its funding. This restricts the use of Makaton pictograms to licensed educational programmes and home use.

Other simpler forms of manual communication have also been developed. They are neither natural languages nor even a code that can fully render one. They communicate with a very limited set of signals about an even smaller set of topics and have been developed for situations where speech is not practical or permitted, or secrecy is desired.

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES USING SIGN LANGUAGE

Some people who learn sign language may be interested in building a career working with Deaf people or children.

There are a variety of choices depending on your level of interest. You could work as a sign language interpreter, social worker, support worker, a teacher... you could work in a care home for Deaf people, in a special school, in a hospital, in an audiology department...the list is endless.

The first most important thing is to become skilled at the language itself. Like anything, it will take dedication and practice. Sign Language cannot be learnt from a book because it is a visual language and needs to be seen in action to help you see where you need to place your hands, what speed you need to do the signs, the facial expressions you need, etc.

As discussed previously Sign Language is a recognised language and as such there are standards that need to be met when you want to learn it as a career choice.

In the UK, there is a governing body called Signature <http://www.signature.org.uk/> (previously known as the Council for the Advancement of Communication with

Deaf People - CACDP). It is a UK recognised awarding body and registered charity whose aim is to improve communication between Deaf and hearing people.

Signature offers a portfolio of qualifications in sign language and other forms of communication with Deaf and Deafblind people, including qualifications in:

- British Sign Language (BSL)
- Irish Sign Language (ISL)
- Deaf and Deafblind Awareness
- Communication Tactics with Deaf and Deafblind People
- Lip Speaking
- Note Taking
- Sign Language Interpreting (BSL/English)

All of Signature's qualifications are accredited by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and appear on the National Qualifications Framework.

Courses leading to Signature qualifications are provided at over 850 colleges and other centres around the UK.

Signature also works alongside the NRCPD (the National Register of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People <http://www.nrcpd.org.uk>) which is the UK registration body for professional British

Sign Language Interpreters*, Lipspeakers, Deafblind Interpreters (Manual) and Speech to Text Reporters.

An online directory is available for service providers who require a Language Service Professional (LSP).

*excluding Scotland

There are various levels involved in learning sign language (and if you want a career using sign language then you need to aim for quite a high level). The levels are:

- Level 1 award in British Sign Language
- Level 2 certificate in British Sign Language
- Level 3 NVQ Certificate in British Sign Language
- Level 6 NVQ Certificate in British Sign Language (recently changed from NVQ 4)

As you might expect, going through these different levels will take time and effort but the result is worth it.

7 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SONIA HOLLIS

I started learning to sign because at the time I worked as a Nursery Nurse in a Montessori nursery school and there was a Deaf child attending who only communicated using basic sign language.

Once I started to learn, I knew that I wanted to work with Deaf children.

I attended the local college for 30 weeks and passed my Level 1 in British Sign Language. Since I wanted to work formally with children through the County Council, I decided to continue my studies.

I then continued on a two-year course for the Level 2 (the same content is in the Level 2 British Sign Language DVD), and once I had achieved it, I could work as a Communication Support Worker with the same Deaf child who had attended the Montessori nursery school. By then, the child had moved to a local mainstream school.

Finding the language extremely rewarding and knowing there was more to learn, I started a Level 3 course. This was done over monthly weekend courses and was more intense with the need to submit video evidence of competency in both signing and understanding

the language. I had to prove in my filming that I was able to converse using more technical and complex vocabulary. After a year, I passed this level and decided I wanted to work with Deaf adults and become a professional sign language interpreter.

I enrolled on a University Course in Wolverhampton to study BA Hons British Sign Language/English Interpreting which I decided to do part-time whilst still working at the school. The travelling was quite intense...but worth it.

At the same time, I was also teaching sign language Level 1 and Level 2 at a local college and some nearby work establishments.

Five years later, I graduated from University and was able to work as a Trainee Interpreter, although I still needed to continue my studies for interpreting to get to the highest level and qualify as a Member of the Register of Sign Language Interpreters. Whilst working as a Trainee Interpreter, I began my Level 4 NVQ in British Sign Language (the current highest BSL qualification) and BSL Interpreting and after more studying and weekends away and proving of competence, I was finally able to register as a fully qualified sign language interpreter. This happened in 2000.

Once I had become an interpreter, I decided to leave education and set up my own sign language

interpreting agency called BSL Communication, which is still thriving and provides access to sign language interpreters on a nationwide basis.

I wanted to find a way of passing on my knowledge and help the students that I was teaching at college and those who did not have the time to go to college or who just wanted to learn sign language at home.

People often asked me how to sign, which inspired me to create the Learn Sign Language Series (www.learnsignlanguage.co.uk). This has evolved from the Level 1 British Sign Language DVD to a complete series of British Sign Language DVDs. I've now added an American Sign Language Level 1 DVD to the series. These DVDs allow you to learn at home at a pace that suits you.

I hope this has inspired you to learn sign language, and I wish you luck in your chosen path.

Best wishes.

Sonia Hollis

8 SPECIAL READER'S OFFER

For a limited time, if you buy the British Sign Language Level 1 DVD and Level 2 DVD together, you'll receive:

- a FREE copy of the 404-page "Let's Sign" Pocket Dictionary (worth £9.99)

PLUS

- a FREE two-disc DVD set called "Learn British Sign Language The EASY Way" (worth £39.99.)

The "Let's Sign" Pocket Dictionary contains 1000 illustrated signs covering baby and early years, school and work settings.

The two-disc DVD set "Learn British Sign Language The EASY Way" covers all the Level 1 content plus bonus sections covering extra fingerspelling practise with over 90 names and the six major handshapes in BSL covering an additional 400 signs.

To order, simply visit:

www.learnsignlanguage.co.uk/offer.html



DISCOVER THE ART OF SIGN LANGUAGE

A quick and easy way to learn basic sign language so that you can communicate more easily with your Deaf friends and family.

Inside, you'll discover:

- What sign language is
- Different sign language systems
- How to communicate with Deaf people
- Sign language career opportunities

You'll also receive a FREE DVD to learn the basics of sign language.

Author Sonia Hollis has been working with the Deaf Community for over 10 years and co-ordinates widely used interpreting services. As an MRSLI qualified interpreter with a Bachelor's Degree in British Sign Language & Interpreting as well as an NVQ4, Sonia taught British Sign Language across business and education organisations. Passionate about widening participation with and for the Deaf Community, she developed "*Learn Sign Language – The Easy Way*" to give everyone access to this beautiful and important language.

"You are a brilliant teacher. I just work in a shop, but I often have Deaf customers, and now I can at least communicate a little bit with your help." **Catherine**

"I was born Hard of Hearing but wasn't diagnosed until I was 8, but I have profoundly Deaf student friends at University. Simple words like these really help our communication, so thank you." **Cara**



Learn Sign Language Ltd

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