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Using bilingual methods to train teachers of British Sign Language

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Abstract
During the 1980s British Sign Language (BSL) went through a revival led by the Deaf community[1], which stimulated demand for BSL tuition from hearing people in Further and Adult education settings. In response to the demand, several tutor-training courses for Deaf tutors were developed. This paper discusses issues raised in a teacher-training course where bilingual (BSL / English) teaching and assessment methods were used with Deaf students. The development of bilingual study skills and structuring of signed video assignments are examined.

Introduction

British Sign Language is a minority language used by approximately 60,000 people as a first or preferred language. In the 1960s the American linguist Stokoe studied Deaf people's communication and recognised that sign language was a recognisable language. American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual-gestural language which makes uses of space and body movement as part of its vocabulary, syntax and discourse structure (Crystal, 223).

The effects of academic recognition spread throughout the world, and many more sign languages were investigated. Researchers found that sign languages were completely different in grammar and vocabulary; ASL and BSL were not closely related to each other. In Britain, Durham University and Moray House in Edinburgh took the lead in researching BSL. Deaf people were crucial to this research, and some, like Clark Denmark, became language activists, touring Deaf centres in the mid 80s to raise awareness of the threats to the survival of the language. The language was traditionally transmitted to young deaf children from older children at residential schools; the most important language teachers were the small number of deaf children of Deaf parents who used BSL as a first language. When deaf schools closed, deaf children were moved to units attached to day schools, and during the 80s the momentum for mainstreaming deaf children gathered pace.

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[1] In this article Deaf is used with a capital D to indicate the cultural identification deaf people have with each other as members of a linguistic minority group of BSL-users.

Although BSL was widely used in schools for the deaf informally, it was banned from the classroom for most of the period 1880 – 1975. Today a wide range of methods is used to teach deaf children, including bilingual methods (BSL / English) in some local authorities such as Leeds. More often deaf children are taught using oral methods, which today means using powerful hearing aids from as early as possible to give the deaf child exposure to natural conversational English. Deaf people over the age of 25 did not have this experience of learning to speak; more often spoken language was taught in a laborious way at school with the teacher modelling English through amplified headphones. Deaf adults today have often had the experience of failure in their education: the lack of exposure to spoken English means that the grammatical rules of the language never fully developed. Their use of BSL was not allowed to help them learn bilingually in the classroom. They left school functionally illiterate; the average reading age of deaf school leavers is around 9 years. The writing of deaf people often shows an extreme concentration of grammatical errors which many teachers attribute to the use of BSL, but the more important factor must be the lack of English input. In some educational settings this means deaf children develop no language at all. [2]

The revival of BSL in the mid 80s had an energising effect on the Deaf community. Fishman (1991) outlines the stages minority languages need to pass through to move from a threatened to secure status. The revival of BSL followed this community-led 'bottom-up' approach. Older Deaf people still often saw their language as 'broken English', but younger Deaf people became fascinated by their language. A weekly TV programme in BSL, See Hear, began broadcasting in 1983, providing a model of BSL in more formal and creative contexts: debates, discussion about education issues, poetry. The vocabulary of BSL started to expand as Deaf people gained jobs where they used BSL in the media, education, the health service and with new technology. Over the past 10 years discussions in Deaf clubs have often focused on new signs or regional variation. Hearing people started to ask for classes in BSL from the early 80s, and many Deaf people decided to become BSL teachers. For Deaf people in low paid, routine jobs, teaching BSL in an evening class was stimulating and also supplemented their income.

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[2] An overview of language acquisition in the deaf population can be found in Bochner and Albertini (1988). Although the population considered is American, the situation in the UK is very similar. See also Woll (2005) in this volume.

The development of qualifications in BSL and tutor training
From the mid 80s Durham University ran a course for Deaf tutors to teach language teaching methods and lesson planning techniques. The course was taught in BSL and assessments were held by observing teaching practice and signed video assignments (Denmark, 1994). It was not possible to use extensive English course materials because many of the Deaf participants were not functionally literate in English. However, the course was expensive and only a few Deaf tutors from each city were able to go.

The exam body for BSL, the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP) runs qualifications in BSL at stage 1,2 and 3. Stage 2 is approximately equivalent to GCSE and Stage 3 to an A level. In the early 90s CACDP sent out a new tutor policy saying that all BSL tutors should have Stage 3 BSL themselves as well as a tutor training qualification such as the City and guilds 7307 certificate. The exam board also wanted BSL tutors to have a qualification in sign linguistics, so that tutors would be able to discuss and teach grammatical features confidently.

The reason for the tutor policy was that the number of BSL classes was growing dramatically, and there was huge variation in the standard of tuition. BSL is now second only to First Aid in the number of people gaining certificates. The vast majority of BSL tutors are Deaf themselves, and many of them have no formal educational qualifications.

The tutor qualification policy presented a challenge to Deaf tutors and to colleges who wanted to continue to enter students for CACDP exams. In many colleges Deaf tutors joined hearing groups of 7307 students with an educational interpreter. This presented problems for some Deaf students who found that their learning needs were not being fully met: the written course materials were not accessible and writing assignment in English was outside their experience.

Several colleges developed City and Guilds 7307 tutor training courses for Deaf tutors: City Lit in London, Hull College and City College Manchester. The 7307 is a generic tutor training course to train tutors to teach any subject in adult or further education, so the course has limitations for BSL tutors who may want to learn specific language teaching methods. It does, however, have the advantage of flexibility in accepting assessment in a wide range of formats. Students who are dyslexic have achieved the qualification by submitting taped course work, and the exam board was prepared to accept Deaf students submitting assigning in BSL on video tape.

The Deaf tutors' course at City College Manchester
The teaching team consisted of a Deaf and a hearing tutor, both fluent in BSL and English. We met regularly with the team leader in teacher education to plan the course and make sure that assignments and the course content closely followed the other 7307 courses run at the college.

The course was delivered in BSL to a group of initially twelve students over two years of one evening a week. The course for hearing tutors is usually four terms rather than six; the longer course was needed because for many of the Deaf students the course was also a type of access course, introducing them to study skills. The additional costs of the course were funded by the Further Education Funding Council[3]; each deaf student was assessed at the start of the course and their additional needs recorded. the college gained additional support units of funding to meet these needs.

An important member of the team was the Communication Support Worker who acted as a notetaker in every class, watching the BSL and producing English notes, which were photocopied and distributed at the end of each session. It is very difficult for students to watch BSL and take notes at the same time, and also many students in the class did not have adequate English to write notes, although they could read them if the English was straightforward. A second way of recoding the sessions was through video: all lectures were videoed so students could borrow the tapes to revise important concepts.

All the course materials from the teacher education team had to be rewritten so that the English was modified and new educational terms were clearly defined. Language modification involves simplifying clause structure, using vocabulary which is frequent, defining new technical terms and presenting as much information as possible visually. Commonly used English words were not known by some of the students at the start of the course, for example *vocabulary, method, disadvantage, objective.* In many cases the students didn't know the BSL terms for these concepts either; but through a process of networking with other Deaf tutors, the teaching concepts were discussed and started to be used in BSL discussions in class and at the Deaf centre. An independent Deaf community network of tutors meets regularly to discuss teaching, the meetings running late into Friday night. This is one way that new BSL terms for teaching are spread throughout the region.

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[3] Now the Learning and Skills Council

All new technical terms were defined in English and BSL. Many students made their own dictionaries, which they added to throughout the course. The students' confidence in using written materials increased. At the start of the course some students were reluctant to accept English handouts because they felt they would fail in reading them. Several students reported that going through the notes immediately after the class helped them gain confidence with reading English.

We did not accept all assignments in BSL: we wanted lesson plans and schemes of work in written English. We expected this to be correct English because as tutors they are working with hearing colleagues, preparing for inspection and are part of a department where there should not be errors in written English. We allowed students to book a Communication Support Worker to check the grammar of the written assignments, and most students made use of this support. In the workplace tutors can use Access to Work staff to perform a similar proof reading function (see website in References).

BSL assignments on video
BSL differs from most other languages used in Britain in that it doesn't have a written form. There are several notation methods for recording signed languages, but these are not widely used outside university linguistics departments. Deaf people often record BSL on video, and in many ways video functions as the equivalent of writing for the language. It allows users to record carefully thought out language, to review it and modify it and to pass it on to an unknown audience.

On the Deaf tutors' course we ran a session early on in the course about video production. Several students had experience already of producing videos for the CACDP stage 3 exam, and this proved a great advantage to them. The project of the stage 3 exam requires a 20 minute assignment in formal BSL, reporting on an issue and providing a conclusion. The students quickly passed on information to each other about the technical aspects of producing a video assignment. However, learning the discourse features of formal BSL provide more difficult.

BSL is used in many formal contexts in community settings, for example AGMs of Deaf centres, public meetings about educational policy, and on the signed breakfast news on BBC 2. However, not all the Deaf students on the tutor-training course had experience of participating in these types of discourse. In addition, BSL has some stylistic features which differ from the English that is used in

educational settings. For example, story telling is an important feature of Deaf community life. When a Deaf BSL-user tells a story there is often an implicit message. Several of the Deaf students on the tutor training course used this device in their assignments: they gave an example which illustrated a point well, but they didn't make any generalisation at the start as a native English user would in an essay.

Reviewing the course we discussed whether we should teach the discourse features of English essays more explicitly. For example, perhaps in future courses we should teach how to structure an essay using the conventions of written English, but with the language changed to BSL. This dilemma arises for ESOL teachers when they see their students writing English with the discourse features of the first language influencing the structure of the piece of English. However, it is easier to decide that English stylistic features, for example putting the generalisation first then backing it up with facts, should be the target when the student is writing in English. For Deaf students who are using their first language, BSL, what should the target discourse features be? [4]

An alternative would be to teach students to use the discourse features of formal BSL, which may include more widespread use of narrative and implication than would be found in English. There may be specific ways in which cohesion is used in formal BSL, which a Deaf course tutor could encourage students to use in video assignments (Winston, 1991). Unfortunately, there are not enough examples available on video of a range of formal styles of BSL for students to use as models in constructing video essays.

Drafting and redrafting is also much more difficult on video than on a word processor. This meant that students often gave in a first draft, then added a second draft which might include an introduction which was then in the wrong place. Ideally the student would have edited the video, but we did not have the time to teach editing on this course. Perhaps it is a study skill which deaf students need if they are going to use BSL assignments.

We found that the students rapidly developed useful study skills for this higher level course which built on their BSL skills: they interviewed people and recoding the Deaf person or interpreter on video to prepare for project work, they were skilled at reporting factual information, ideas and opinions objectively in BSL. They

[4] Ryan (1994) discusses a similar issue about whose values should be accepted in educational discourse with a group of adult learners from a native American background.

became confident at evaluating their own teaching practice in BSL using structured self-analysis. Their assignments had introductions, conclusions and lists of sources. The debating and discussion skills which are so valued in the Deaf community came into the classroom: the class sat in a circle and the student who wanted to contribute stood so everyone could see them, the video camera was moved to this students.

There were features of video assignments which the students found more difficult: keeping to the point, giving advantages and disadvantages, structuring an argument and making a synthesis of several new ideas. We think that these difficulties are related to the lack of opportunity to study on higher-level courses using English because of the students' experiences at school. In addition, if Deaf people could learn bilingually then there would be more chance that they could practise these advanced language skills in BSL.

Outcomes of the tutor-training course
Six of the twelve original students gained the full 7307 qualification and three gained part 1 only. This was a long course, which required considerable commitment from students. They had to log 36 hours teaching with lesson plans and evaluations and pass four teaching practice observations.

Over the course we saw the students develop a wider range of teaching methods, use more visual language teaching materials and become more confident in working with colleagues and line managers in a college or adult education settings. Many of the tutors moved from teaching stage 1 BSL to teaching Stage 2 or stage 3. When teaching higher levels of BSL the bilingual skills of the tutor became more important, and we hope that the Deaf tutors' course encouraged confidence in the use of English as well as of BSL in more formal contexts. The teaching competencies we saw develop over the course matched closely the results of a US survey of ASL tutors (Newell 1995). The American ASL tutors, over half of whom were Deaf, rated practical language teaching skills, knowing about ASL and bilingualism in ASL and English as very important skills for their occupation.

One of the most successful parts of the course was the equal opportunities module which challenged many of the tutors to include the cultural experience of a wider range of students in their classes. The theory module was also tackled successfully: some students read about educational and psychological theories independently and others used a Communication Support Worker to

translate key texts into BSL for study purposes. Video essays on behaviourism, cognitivism, humanism and experiential learning when translated into spoken English convinced the internal and external verifiers that the standard on the course for Deaf students was equivalent to that for other students.

The tutor training course allowed the support team for Deaf students to test out several ideas about bilingual teaching methods which we are now applying to other courses for Deaf students: using dictionaries of technical terms on video, teaching study skills for making video assignments and using a Communication Support Worker to produce notes in every session to increase students' confidence in reading English. We were able to explore the use of video assignments and consider ways of teaching BSL essay construction skills for future courses.

Conclusion

This discussion of the tutor-training course has shown that higher-level courses can be made accessible to Deaf BSL users by using students' existing language skills and building new ones in both first and second languages. We have considered the strengths in BSL which students brought to the course, and their extreme lack of confidence in using English. BSL tutors need to be bilingual to teach the language effectively to hearing people, and bilingual skills also give tutors confidence in relationship with hearing colleagues. To develop bilingual teaching and assessment methods for Deaf learners, colleges need bilingual resources and bilingual staff who have knowledge about language in both BSL and English.

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