

The Future of British Sign Language in an Inclusive Scotland



15 November 2010

Introduction

As part of the 2010/11 seminar series, in partnership with Edinburgh Beltane, a Futures Forum was held on 15 November 2010 bringing together around 70 delegates to explore what is understood by 'an inclusive Scotland in 2020' in relation to minority languages and, in particular, what the future might be for British Sign Language. This Forum was followed up by a lunchtime briefing for MSPs, researchers, Scottish Parliament corporate staff and members of the Deaf community.

This short note records for MSPs some of the main learning points to emerge from these two events.

Key Learning Point

- BSL is a language, with a unique grammar and syntax and Deaf people are a linguistic minority. However, Deaf children in Scotland are not taught BSL. There is a need for forms of bilingual education to be formally implemented, and significant cognitive, educational and social gains to be made by doing so. At the same time there is a need for hearing people to learn BSL – and there is a strong appetite for this. Importantly, there is a need for Deaf people to be better able to access services in BSL. To ensure this, there is a need in Scotland for more high-quality, professional BSL-English interpreters.
- BSL is the preferred language of an estimated 6000 people in Scotland and used daily by thousands more.
- There are over 100 minority languages being used in Scotland. Half of the world's 4000 – 6000 minority languages are predicted to die over the 21st century: it has been argued that signed languages could be among these.
- The view that bilingualism causes language confusion and delays in children's development is a myth without foundation.
- There are real advantages of hearing children learning BSL as part of the mainstream curriculum and the evidence is that children enjoy learning to sign. They would gain skills for employment and accrue cognitive benefits as well as enhancing the inclusivity of the Scottish community and providing a platform for meeting the country's long-term social obligations.
- It was suggested that there may be a growing appetite from Scotland's Gaelic community to share experiences with Scotland's BSL community. This should be explored.
- There is real economic benefit to the wider community if Deaf people are able to be fully involved in their community, both in employment and at home. BSL users are perfectly able to be net contributors to the wider economy with appropriate access to education, employment and public services.
- Now is very much the time to introduce a BSL Bill both as a powerful symbol and to help promote equality of rights and access for Scotland's Deaf community.
- Existing legislation, particularly Human Rights legislation, already acknowledges that BSL needs to be addressed. Therefore it is incumbent on the Scottish Parliament to look at this seriously.
- A realistic timetable, if a Members Bill was reintroduced post May 2011, might see a Bill ready by Christmas 2011.

Part 1

On 15th November, discussions were seeded by four short presentations by Professor Graham Turner and Tessa Padden (both Heriot-Watt University), Professor Antonella Sorace (University of Edinburgh) and Dr Bernadette O'Rourke (Edinburgh Beltane Fellow, Heriot-Watt University).

Tessa Padden gave a personal account of what it was like growing up deaf, how things had changed and why further change is now needed. Tessa reflected the fact that the vast majority of Deaf people are still cut off from opportunities by the lack of access to BSL and especially by the lack of good educational opportunities for Deaf children. One of Tessa's key messages was that if BSL was the language of the classroom for Deaf children, as Gaelic is for the children of those who want it, then Deaf people growing up would have the best opportunities in life. Tessa was very supportive of Cathie Craigie's proposed BSL Bill and was very clear that BSL not only has to be protected as a language but must be encouraged and promoted, especially in schools.

Professor Graham Turner made clear the view that communication is core to the experience of living. For that reason, communication through language is of central importance. Denying Deaf people (to whom no other language is biologically accessible) full access to BSL and, through BSL, to the wider society, is a denial of humanity. It is absolutely necessary to develop Scotland's BSL strategy. It is also clear that the way forward must be to put in place long-term systemic change through the removal of barriers to access to BSL. However, historically, authorities have played 'pass the parcel' with this issue: it is not a purely educational, legal or occupational issue, and it is certainly not a matter for the health professions. Graham maintained now is the time for action, supporting the proposed BSL Members Bill.

Professor Antonella Sorace discussed the linguistic and cognitive benefits of bimodal bilingualism, noting that bilingualism in a signed language shares many characteristics and advantages with hearing bilingualism. In addition to learning two languages, there are wider advantages, including better reading skills, empathy, enhanced attention, adapting to new tasks and better mental flexibility. These advantages accrue throughout life for both hearing and Deaf signers.

Dr Bernadette O'Rourke, noted that the issues facing BSL were similar to those facing other minority languages. It is estimated there are 4,000 – 6,000 languages spoken in the world and there are many more that are not documented. In terms of linguistic science, BSL does now have the status of a language. 95% of the languages spoken are used by 5% of the population. This is a sobering truth. However, language diversity is being compared to biodiversity. When a plant or animal dies out, the biodiversity of our planet is reduced. This is the same with a language that dies out. Each and every language embodies a culture of people so a loss of a language reduces the rich diversity of humankind.

Forum Discussion

Delegates were asked to imagine what an inclusive Scotland, in relation to BSL, might be like in 2020.

Delegates reflected on why change was very badly needed in Scotland now, what doors a BSL Bill might unlock, and what key lessons could be learned from users of Gaelic and from Scotland's other linguistic minorities.

The following thoughts emerged from the discussion:

- BSL should be available on the school curriculum. That would clearly impact the status of BSL as a language. With the advent of the Curriculum for Excellence, there can be no better time.
- Many learners find that BSL is at least as interesting to learn as foreign languages, because there is much greater opportunity to use the language in everyday life.
- The increased use of the Welsh language can be attributed to its promotion in the school system. If BSL was better promoted in Scottish schools, the same outcome might be achieved.
- There was a good bit of discussion on the advantages of a signing school, in the way there are Gaelic schools.
- It was argued that the best way to learn English for Deaf children is through BSL. English needs to be taught as a second language. It was also noted that teaching BSL from the nursery stage is also important as languages are learned most effectively by the infant brain.
- There was a feeling of frustration that, when a child is born Deaf, learning to sign is often left as the responsibility of parents (90% of Deaf children have two hearing parents) without adequate support.
- As with ensuring the effective teaching of any language, whether the learners are children or adults, there needs to be high quality, professional BSL teaching. Otherwise, the benefits would not accrue. Providing such teaching has to be a statutory obligation and should be supported by the policy and political centre as a way of ensuring the legal and human rights of Deaf children.
- More Deaf people should be enabled to go into teaching. However, currently, they are, in practice, effectively excluded due to barriers to teacher-training courses. This must be changed if we want more Deaf teachers in any part of the system (particularly crucial as long as hearing teachers of Deaf children are not required to sign fluently).
- There is a responsibility on the part of the Deaf community to continue to welcome those who want to come along and learn. Such an attitude will always be needed if Deaf people want the wider community to get involved in sign language.

Part 2 *It's always the right time to do the right thing*

At the Scottish Parliament briefing Lilian Lawson, Director of the Scottish Council on Deafness, opened by rehearsing the key points to arise from the Forum.

BSL is a language, with grammar and syntax and Deaf people are a linguistic minority. However, Deaf children are not taught the language and there is a need for forms of bilingual education to be formally implemented. At the same time there is a need for hearing people to learn BSL – and there is an appetite for this – and there is a need for Deaf people to be better able to access services in BSL. To ensure this, there is a need in Scotland for more quality interpreters.

The Parliament's Non Executive Bills Unit challenged the Forum to consider why now and what specifically the proposed Bill would seek to address. It was noted that proposals for Members Bills are most successful when they are very focussed.

Professor Graham Turner took up the challenge to explain that 'it's always the right time to do the right thing', enumerating educational, economic, social, moral and intellectual reasons for making Scotland the first part of the United Kingdom to take a truly enlightened approach to BSL. He went on to point out that, whilst BSL was in some respects a very vulnerable language, that it would not be difficult to give BSL proper recognition in Scotland; there are several good models of sign language recognition from around the world (eg New Zealand) that could be adopted.

It was also noted that existing legislation, particularly Human Rights legislation, already acknowledged that issues around BSL need to be addressed. Therefore it is incumbent on the Scottish Parliament to look at this seriously. There was also a strong argument that there is real economic benefit to the wider community if Deaf people are able to be fully involved in their community, both in employment and at home.

It was considered that much could be learned from the Gaelic community and it emerged that there may well be an appetite and willingness from the Gaelic community to help the BSL community to consider some of the issues the former faced when developing proposals for the Gaelic Bill.

Maintaining Momentum through the next Holyrood elections

As things stand, Cathie Craigie MSP's proposed Bill is very unlikely to be taken up before the next election and will therefore "fall". The Forum heard that it would be very important that any future Members Bill had a very strong policy statement, had fully costed proposals detailing benefits and savings and that its aims are realistic. That said, it would be possible to bring forward a Members Bill in the next Parliament, which would not have to repeat the consultation process undertaken on Cathie Craigie's Members Bill proposal. Delegates heard that a realistic timetable might mean a Bill being ready by Christmas 2011

Scotland's Futures Forum
December 2010