

An Introduction to the BSL Progression Step 1 Resources

*Note that this is a transcript of the content of the Teacher's Guide video

British Sign Language (BSL) forms part of the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience in the Curriculum for Wales. Guidance for planning, designing and teaching BSL is available [on the Hwb website](#). These resources have been developed for learners at Progression Step 1. Descriptions of learning for BSL are available [on the Hwb website](#).

British Sign Language (BSL) is a visual language made up of manual signs, which are created by the hands, and non-manual features which are created by the face and shoulders. These Progression Step 1 resources are designed to support a child's first steps in learning and using BSL.

South Wales BSL is used in this resource. There are variations in BSL and children, or teachers may have seen or learnt signs that are not in this resource.

In using these resources with learners, you might find the following explanations useful.



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The Process of Learning

Children learn differently, and some children may require specific help and support to learn BSL. However, in general, learning BSL is achieved through copying. To copy accurately, it can be helpful to identify:

- The specific handshape that is being used (e.g. this handshape – Name);
- The specific starting location (e.g. forehead)
- The specific orientation of the wrist (e.g. correct orientation of the wrist)
- The specific movement of the sign (e.g. show movement)

This is the sign for 'name'.



Sentence Structure

BSL has a different sentence structure to both English and Welsh. As the most basic linguistic analysis, BSL is described as having a topic-comment sign order. Throw the ball being signed – Ball, throw.

Using commonly applied linguistic terminology to identify sentence structure, English, Welsh and BSL have the following sentence structure:

- English: Subject – Verb – Object
(The boy rides a bike)
- Welsh: Verb – Subject – Object
(Reidia'r bachgen feic)
- BSL: Object – Subject – Verb
(bike the boy rides)

More complex sentence structures will be addressed at later Progression Steps.



Dominant Hand

When using BSL, left-handed and right-handed people use different hands, but this must be consistent. Whilst BSL uses a 2-handed signing system, the dominant hand does most of the movement. Sometimes this can be described as the dominant hand being the pen, and the non-dominant hand being the paper.

Using the BSL sign for writing as an example, when signed like this (right hand dominant), you can see that the right hand does the writing, and the left hand takes the form of the paper. When signed like this, (left hand dominant), you can see that the left does the writing, and the right hand takes the form of the paper.

It is important to establish right and left-hand dominance at the outset and to ensure learners understand what they are watching. In the Progression Step 1 video resources, the BSL tutor is right-handed. For left-handed learners, they will need to mirror the tutor. For right-handed learners, they will need to copy the tutor using the opposite of mirroring.

This may be challenging for very young learners and they may benefit from having the BSL signs modelled for them.



True Meaning

In English and Welsh, some words have multiple meanings. When translating from any language into BSL, it is the true meaning that must be signed. However, in these introductory Progression Step 1 resources, the multiple meaning of words are not shown, with only the most common meaning of a particular word used. For example, the word 'open' in English has multiple meanings and contexts; open mind; open the door; open for business; open the drawer; as a few examples.

'Open' in these contexts would all be signed differently in BSL, so it is important to recognise that Progression Step 1 is just a first step in the journey of learning this beautiful new language.



Numbers

We use numbers a lot in many different contexts. In BSL, the numbering system is consistent but the location of the number or the movement indicates specific meaning. The BSL guidelines show the signs for 3 years old, this is £3, this is 3 o'clock, and this is 3 years ago. The number 3 is consistent but the location changes the meaning.

Two further things to note. As single digits, one and two are signed like this. However, when you are signing 11 and 12 and then higher numbers, the one is signed using the thumb and two by the thumb and index finger like this (11 and 12, 21 and 22).

The other thing to note are the rules attached to signing 20, 30, 40 and onwards, and how the numbers in between, 21 to 29 are signed. To illustrate this, 20 is signed like this (20) and 21 like this (21) in the BSL Guide. You will see that with 20, the index finger and thumb come together like this, but for 21 to 29, the index finger and thumb remain splayed like this (show).

These rules apply to 20 to 90, show (30 and 40) and the separate rule for 21 to 20 and for 31 to 39 and upwards.



Fingerspelling

Fingerspelling using the manual alphabet is a big part of BSL. At Progression Step 1, the focus is on beginning to recognise and use full fingerspelled words, names, and places. For example, Progression Step 1 descriptions of learning:

"I am beginning to recognise fingerspelled words, particularly for familiar names."

"I am beginning to use fingerspelled signs, for example, for familiar names."

Whilst fingerspelling uses the manual alphabet, it connects letters together, rather than just uses each letter individually. For example, the English word 'Son' is fingerspelled. Using the manual alphabet, it would be signed like this S O N. In BSL 'son' uses fingerspelling and is signed like this 'SON.'

When teaching fingerspelling, it is common for a learner to be told that touching the end of the thumb and fingers on the non-dominant hand, are the vowels. This is correct, but it is better to learn A, E, I, O and U as separate letters, in the same way that the other letters must be learned, to avoid names like Louise being fingerspelled "Laeioaeiouaeise."

When first learning to fingerspell, learners will often mouth each individual letter. This is natural when first learning, but children need to be encouraged to mouth the word rather than the individual letters, as soon as possible. For example, when learning how to fingerspell Tom, at first a child will sign like this T O M (individual letter mouthing). As soon as possible, then should be encouraged to sign TOM (mouthing Tom).

One final bit of advice is for children to be encouraged not to look at their hands when fingerspelling. Looking away from the hands will improve a child's ability to fingerspell.

Using fingerspelling (productive skills) and understanding fingerspelling (Receptive skills) requires practise and perseverance.



Facial Expressions

Throughout the Progression Step 1 video resources, you will see the tutor using a wide range of facial expressions. These facial expressions are an important and sometimes vital part of BSL. The facial expressions give meaning, and they are also used to show graduations of meaning. For example, saying, "I am a little shy," is signed like this - note the facial expression. Saying, "I am extremely shy," is signed like this – note the different facial expression.

Facial expressions are just one aspect of what are called non-manual features (NMF) within BSL. NMF can make up as much as 50% of the meaning of BSL, so it is important for children to learn facial expressions and the manual sign at the same time.