



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Student Disability Service

Some facts about British Sign Language (BSL)

What is BSL

'British Sign Language (BSL) is a natural language with its own vocabulary and grammar, which has emerged from Deaf people's communication over centuries, and is not a representation of English on the hands.'ⁱ

Is sign language universal?

There is no universal sign language: each community has its own language but these are not manual versions of the spoken or written language used by the hearing communities around them. Because of Britain's colonial history, closely related languages can be found in Australia (Australian Sign Language or Auslan), New Zealand (NZ Sign Language), Malta (Maltese Sign Language) and in some parts of South Africa, India, and Canada (Maritime Sign Language).'

History of British Sign Language

For a brief summary, see: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/british-sign-language-history/>

Moray House (The University's School of Education) has special place in the history of BSL, being one of three places of UK research which proved that BSL is a fully-fledged language. In fact, the name 'British Sign Language' was first published in 1975 in an article by Dr Mary Brennan who led the Moray House teamⁱⁱ.

In 2015, the Scottish Parliament passed historic legislationⁱⁱⁱ which formally recognised BSL as a minority language and puts a duty on Scottish Ministers and public bodies, including the University, to promote the use and understanding of BSL through organisational 'BSL Plans'

The University of Edinburgh was the first university to appoint a BSL Officer to oversee the implementation of its BSL Plan: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/about/british-sign-language-plan>

How many people use BSL in Scotland?

In Scotland's Census, 2011^{iv}, 12,533 respondents reported using BSL at home.

What is Sign Support English?

Sign Supported English is a broad term for the use of sign vocabulary from BSL to supplement spoken English. There are many informal variants, which borrow from both languages in different ways and for various reasons.

ⁱ History of British Sign Language (2016) *Deafness and Cognition and Language Research Centre, University College London.* <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dcal/bslhistory> [Accessed 14 November 2016]

ⁱⁱ British Deaf Association (1975) *Can Deaf Children Acquire Language?: An Evaluation of Linguistic Principles in Deaf Education.* British Deaf Association.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 (2015).* Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2015/11/contents?section=4-5> [accessed 14 November 2016]

^{iv} Census (2011) *Scotland's Census 2011: Shaping our future: Household Questionnaire.* Available at: http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/Householdpre-addressed27_05_10specimen.pdf [Accessed 10 October 2016]