

## **BSL QED: Common European Framework**

There have been many questions about the European Framework and why we have decided to adopt it. It might be helpful to explain a number of points, including the fact that you should remember that you do not have to follow it one hundred percent. It is a tool that offers guidance.

Currently there exist different perspectives about the framework. There are those who wholeheartedly support it because it provides a common framework. This means there is familiarity in terms of knowledge with regard to teaching and assessing British Sign Language. There is uniformity in relation to standards/levels, assessment and expectation regarding outcomes.

In the absence of this framework, it remains very difficult to compare standards of teaching in the UK with that in other European countries. This generates a great deal of disparity between standards and qualifications.

Equally, there is a school of thought which opposes the concept of a European Framework. The

view taken here is that it is simply not necessary, and that we managed quite adequately without the framework, working within our own systems. Now, as mentioned above, whilst we are aware of the opposing views and appreciate their sentiments, we have nevertheless taken the decision to adopt the framework.

Our decision centres very much on concerns that, for many years, there has been no common framework for the teaching of BSL. Subsequently, the assessment of sign language remains rather 'young' in relation to other languages, spoken and written. We see that the teaching of other languages is well established in terms of standards. The teachers had the opportunity to develop the language discipline have for many years, and as a result have agreed upon standards and academic levels. These levels have been reached through discussion and agreement, so appropriate levels have been formulated.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said when considering sign language which has been deprived of this process by which standards are developed. Here in Britain, the implications have been that instead of witnessing a rise in standards they have deteriorated. This is due to the lack of consensus about assessments.

There has been no point of reference whereby we are assured that suitable levels are being upheld. At the very least, standards are intended to provide a benchmark, a measure that one should not fall below – and should even, possibly, rise above. Lack of benchmarks produces confusion, and essentially this is not good. What is required is a system with which everyone is familiar and which guides us in terms of uniform BSL standards.

When attending conferences connected to the BSL QED project, we have found that people have often asked about the European framework. We have explained what it can offer in terms of standards, and in the main universities have overwhelmingly responded positively.

The view is that a student can approach any university with, for example, Level B2 BSL. We will know and be able to recognise immediately what level the student has attained, and we will be able to assess the grade of competence presented. The same process takes place for the student with Level B2 French.

Clearly the languages are different, but the level or standard reached is the same in terms of knowledge, ability and expectations.

This explains why the Common European framework remains such a useful tool. Previously we would have had no system in place to ascertain where students fitted in, and this in itself presented a number of difficulties.

It is because of this that we made the decision to adopt the Common European framework. There is a document available online, produced by the Council of Europe. You can access this document in PDF format and print it out by going on to the web-site: ([http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/Portfolio/?L=E&M=/documents\\_intro/common\\_framework.html](http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/Portfolio/?L=E&M=/documents_intro/common_framework.html)).

This document, designed as a reference. is titled is *A Common European Framework for Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment*. It really is a most useful reference to the learning, teaching and assessment of language. In spite of its slightly complex appearance, you will find it helpful, if you have a look at the document, and it will provide a level of understanding. We ought to bear in mind that this reference is intended to accommodate spoken and written language. Hence its content is fashioned based upon four modalities: *listening, speaking, reading* and *writing*. Clearly this will be different when applied to the teaching of BSL.

Discussion is on-going about the feasibility of removing the *reading* and *writing* elements. This would leave us with the receptive and productive elements of BSL. Here it is suggested that *BSL literature* can be equated with the third element, which is *reading*. *BSL literature* means the understanding of a specific use of BSL that is equivalent to reading English. This is an area that we intend to develop, and it may well be that we are left with three BSL elements, whilst the framework you look at will retain four elements.

The aim is to engage the European framework with the teaching of BSL. Work is required to see how this can be achieved. It does not necessarily mean that the teaching of the three BSL elements would have to follow strictly how the four elements in the guidance are set out. It is more about establishing some common areas and common ground that would be conducive in discussions about developments.

These common areas include different levels, learning, teaching and assessments. Once common ground can be established, the level of language learnt will become clear. Currently, there is no common understanding when referring to level four or five degree level. However, working with the European Framework provides an opportunity for clarity and a common understanding. You will know yourself, from experience, that the benchmarks are ambiguous in relation to BSL levels one, two, three, four and five.

There are several different levels, and the importance of a common point of reference cannot be reiterated enough. From this, the knowledge of aims, expectations, assessments and so on becomes clear, and the framework offers us a guide in order that we may establish to establishing common benchmarks. It offers this to all of us who wish to be involved in the assessment of BSL and who want to see common established standards. It moves us on professionally and, of course, as professionals we require common standards and benchmarks which we find are necessary with regard to the teaching of other languages.

You will also be able to access an additional useful document produced by the Council of Europe. It consists of six headers/columns on which I will shortly elaborate.

There is a further section which lists *six* rather than the four modalities previously referred to. *Hear, speak, read* and *write* sit alongside the three BSL elements: *reception, production* and *comprehension of BSL literature*. The additional two are *understanding* and *listening/reading* in relation to *understanding*. These fifth and sixth elements focus on understanding. The concept of understanding is particularly important when learning languages and this, of course, applies equally to BSL language acquisition.

*Reception* is only one level of the process, and in addition to receiving information the receiver has to process it and give it meaning. This is where the information received makes sense to the receiver. In essence it has been *understood*. Consequently, these two additional elements need to be added to the three BSL elements.

The same rationale is surely applicable to the *understanding - listening/reading* element, in spite of the use of the term *listen*. Although it may appear complicated, it is suggested that this element is equally relevant to the BSL modalities.

This is where the concept of **culture** is introduced. The test of whether someone has fully comprehended information in BSL is measured by the extent of their cultural knowledge. This knowledge is the decisive factor. The learner needs to have levels of cultural understanding in order to digest and give meaning to the information. This is most definitely a key factor when learning BSL.

Ascertaining these six BSL modalities will put you in a good position to develop these elements, concentrating on skills, assessments and levels of expectation. This in turn places you in a better position to discuss BSL language learning with other professionals of spoken languages. With the use of similar terms and common benchmarks, discussions are far more productive because everyone understands the nature of the conversation and the criteria being used. Furthermore, you become well equipped to attend subject-relevant conferences or seminars and contribute on an equal footing. There is no reason why you should not give presentations and lectures which will be well received, since a common understanding and appreciation of language acquisition will exist.

Significantly,, working with the European Framework raises the status of BSL, and puts it on a par with spoken languages, and other professionals will understand more easily references and discussion around BSL. It will give sign language greater prominence.

It might be helpful to use William C Stokoe's work as an example. When Stokoe first began conducting sign language research, it was clear that spoken language research was well established along with existing linguistic terms. Stokoe's research identified sign language parameters equivalent to spoken language *phonemes*, which he originally referred to as *cheremes*, a term that he had coined.

The disadvantage of using separate linguistic terms is that there was a danger of isolating sign language further. Linguists did understand the term, and yet perhaps did not afford it the linguistic value it deserved. This prompted discussion around the feasibility of creating new, separate terms rather than using existing linguistic terms. It could be argued that the use of common terms and language within the field of linguistic study and research would promote the status of sign language. The same principle applies here, highlighting the significance of using a common framework, which leads to further appreciation of sign language within the field of language and linguistic studies.

You will notice that the six columns represent different levels of the BSL curriculum: A1 A2, B1 B2 and C1 C2. In terms of skills, A1 is the lowest, which would be the starting-point, and C2 the highest.

There are two different routes to studying a language at university, and these also apply to BSL. The first example could be a school-leaver who has a GCSE and 'A' level in French and now wishes to complete a degree in French studies at university. What we have here is the traditional language student who has progressed through GCSE and 'A' level and then continues to study that language at degree level. They are classed as a 'qualified entrant' and go straight into year one at university, having already studied the language to 'A' Level standard.

Another student may only have studied a language to GCSE level, and this may even have been a different language to the language chosen for degree level study. For example, this could be a student who has reached GCSE in German or perhaps Spanish. They do not have any language 'A' Level. More importantly, they have not studied French at any level but they now wish to complete a French language degree. They are '*ab initio*' students.

Both these types of students are able to study a French degree together, and are expected to graduate with the same qualification. Now we can consider how this applies to the BSL student who may have BSL Level one, two or possibly three. These qualifications are the same as Foundation BSL, or Intermediary BSL or Advanced BSL. This student would be classed as a qualified entrant, as opposed to the student with no BSL or perhaps level one BSL, who is an *ab initio* student. As in the previous example, these two types of students are able to study a degree together, for example in BA (Hons) Deaf Studies or BSL, as we offered at UCLan, and they are expected to graduate at the same level.

The way the curriculum is designed is the key to facilitating the different levels of language. The established levels A1 to C2 accommodate differing language levels and provide a way of carrying out assessments and establishing universal expectations. The levels facilitate the students' studies through to the end of the degree, so they all leave with the same

qualification. The degree does not have to be pure BSL. In the case of a Deaf Studies degree, students study different modules which include BSL. There is also a two- year Diploma course available, and a BSL degree. The courses are designed to offer a range of modules to suit those students who would like to go on and qualify as interpreters.

Consideration should be given to the framework and how it fits in to the courses and levels of study within your university. As previously explained, not every aspect of the framework has to be incorporated. There may be certain elements which can offer much benefit to your courses and it works best as a guide.

All the work we completed as part of the BSL QED projects is offered as a guide to assist teachers of BSL and universities in providing the best courses with uniform and clear standards, levels and expectations.

Teachers and students alike can benefit greatly from the framework because it offers guidance about the differing levels. Students will be far clearer about their own levels of language and what will be expected of them as they continue through their degree.

You will find most universities' BSL courses will only go up to an equivalent of Level four rather than Level five; the latter is considered to be a much higher level of BSL. Similarly, C2 is quite high, so most universities' degrees will take students up to C1, at which point they will have reached the end of the degree course. Those students who wish to study further would look at post-graduate studies.

ACD/BSL QED/Common European Framework for Reference/March 2008