

Tim: What is Dot Sign language?

Clair: We are a British Sign language organisation based in Surrey.

We teach BSL courses, from Level 1 which is where a complete beginner would start, to Level 6 which is the standard needed to work as an interpreter.

We also go to any workplace to train customer facing staff and management about Deaf Awareness. This could be a private company which is required by law to comply with The Equality Act, a public sector service which has the additional responsibility of Public Sector Equality Duty, or a NHS healthcare provider which must comply with The Accessibility Standard.

We introduce what Deaf awareness and BSL are, and get them to think about challenges faced by Deaf customers using their business. We then discuss steps that they personally can take to make the business accessible to Deaf people. The second half of the training session is when we teach them basic BSL signs relevant to their work.

And we love to volunteer in the community; visiting charity events, school assemblies, Scouts, Brownies...to sign and talk about British Sign Language.

Tim: So if I did a Level 1 course, could I have a conversation with Deaf people?

Clair: Yes, as long as they sign! On a Level 1 course you will cover greetings, numbers, asking directions, discussing food, holidays, timelines, non-manual features... All the basics that you need for a conversation.

Important to note is that not everyone who is Deaf will sign.

People who are Deaf (upper case D) are people who are culturally Deaf, usually born Deaf, and very often whose first or only language is BSL.

Someone who is deaf (lower case d) may have lost their hearing later in life, may be able to speak English, may not sign but instead relies on lipreading.

Tim: So what is British Sign language?

Clair: It's the language of the British Deaf community. It uses handshape, location, movement. Non-manual features, mouth patterns....

Depending on which statistics you read BSL is preferred language of around 70,000 people in UK.

There are also hearing families of Deaf people, interpreters and people learning BSL like me, who sign.

Tim: I've been told the order which you sign is different to the word order when you speak.

Clair: Yes. For example in BSL, question words like what, where, which, usually go at the end of sentences. Adjectives are after nouns e.g. jumper blue. BSL signs don't have 'endings' like spoken English to show if they are past, present, future; so you need to establish when something took place before you start to sign.

For this reason you can't sign BSL and speak English at the same time unless it's just a few words.

It's also one of the biggest challenges for us learners, signing in correct BSL order. I'm afraid my signing is sometimes more spoken English order at the moment.

Tim: Clair, why did you start learning to sign?

Clair: Out of interest. In a previous job I presented a lot. There was often a Deaf lady who came to presentations with her interpreters. I loved chatting with her during the breaks and I was always fascinated watching her interpreters – I thought "I wish I could do that." Later, when my children were small we watched a lot of CBeebies. At the weekends a lot of programs have interpreters, and this made me want to learn. The CBeebies interpreters are great when you start learning – nice and clear with limited vocabulary because it is aimed at pre-schoolers!

I started with a Level 1 class and am now studying Level 3.

Tim: So what standard is Level 3?

Clair: It's A Level equivalent. Level 6 which you need to interpret is Degree level. It has to be that high because of the responsibility – if someone is interpreting in a legal, medical or business setting.

Tim: Why do people attend BSL courses with Dot?

Clair: A variety of reasons – maybe they have a Deaf child or other family member, to help with their job e.g. working with Deaf children, to train to be interpreter, out of interest – to learn a new language, for social reasons, Many students form close bonds with their classmates They often meet regularly to practise signing. Deaf people also take the higher level courses to have a qualification in their own language.

Tim: Dot is based in Send. Where are the classes?

Clair: At the moment in Guildford and Woking.

We also do workplace training for businesses which we travel around Surrey and London for.

Tim: Will you teach me some signing?

Clair: On radio?! I'm not sure if that will work but we can try!

[Clair shows Tim how to sign 'My name is TIM' (NAME ME TIM with fingerspelled Tim)

We have a few tries to get the correct handshapes. Tim has a good try. We discuss that you don't speak when signing BSL.]

Tim: You have said that you have children, I also have children. You must be familiar with Justin Fletcher from the television. Is he doing sign language?

Clair: He is signing, but not BSL. What he is doing is Makaton. Makaton is designed for hearing people with learning or communication difficulties. Key words are signed alongside spoken English. Many of the Makaton signs are the same as BSL but not all. Makaton signs are chosen to look like a word and to be easy to make. There aren't regional variations in Makaton, but there are in BSL.

Tim: Really? So there isn't just one sign language?

Clair: No. Each country has its own sign language. BSL is very different to ASL (American Sign Language) but similar to Auslan (Australian Sign Language.) ASL shares similarities with French sign language.

There are also regional variations in BSL, just like with spoken English. Signs for numbers and colours vary greatly up and down the country.

[At this point Clair realises that Tim is able to change the playlist and starts making music requests. We start with a song by The 1975 as Clair tries to be trendy – influenced by her teenage niece.]

Tim: You said the Dot Sign Language also visit schools?

Clair: Yes, we love to visit schools and also Brownies, Rainbows, Scouts. We were also at the Always the Sun Festival last Summer.

Usually if we go to a school assembly the session will be 20-30 minutes. A Deaf team member will sign to the children about what it is like to be Deaf. We have a Communication Support Worker – someone who can sign- to translate. We suggest that they plan our visit to tie in with a topic they are discussing at school e.g. diversity / different cultures... We can teach them a song in BSL, "I can sing a rainbow" is popular. We encourage them to ask lots of questions. The questions we get asked are brilliant – children are uninhibited!

Tim: What kind of questions?

Clair: Paul was asked if he dreams in BSL. Kathleen was asked what it was like growing up Deaf, what it is like for Deaf children at school. How long it takes to learn BSL, whether it is hard to learn.

When we visited Brownies recently we taught them their Brownie promise in BSL.

Tim: I want to learn BSL. I've been looking at the online resource <https://bsl.surrey.ac.uk> and I saw the Facebook photo from it of Santa and the Elf.

[We have the website on the computer. We talk through the Santa and the Elf clip, which emphasises the importance of mouth patterns and non-manual features. Santa is trying to ask the Elf where the toilet is, but the elf thinks he is signing Live where?]

Tim: So it's important what you do with your face?

Clair: Yes. You can't fully get your meaning across just by signing with your hands. [We practise some questioning faces and angry faces.]

The online BSL website is fabulous for anyone starting to learn BSL.

Kathleen, Jan and Paul from Dot Sign Language put it together in collaboration with the University of Surrey. Kathleen was asked to teach the university students BSL for their Global Graduate Award in languages. Because BSL is a visual language it made sense to have a visual learning resource. It's very clearly set out and is perfect for beginners to practise at home between classes or if they are thinking about starting level 1 and want to build their confidence.

[By now we are adapting the playlist to include our favourite '90s club anthems and '80s classics.]

Tim: And the workplace training, is that different to the BSL courses?

Clair: Yes. The courses are where you go to learn BSL. The workplace training is designed to be short sessions, usually 3 hours, where we go to companies.

It's our passion to raise awareness of issues faced by Deaf people when accessing services.

We have different sessions designed for private companies, public sector services and the NHS; then we adapt these after a discussion with the company – we tailor training to their need.

Tim: Why different training?

Clair: All businesses are required to follow The Equality Act 2010. This is very important as it demonstrates that it is the legal right of Deaf people to be able to access services. Public sector services have an additional layer of responsibility, and the NHS must follow the Accessibility Standard. The problem is that not everyone (me included) is a lawyer, and the laws are confusing. We can give examples of case law – when businesses get it very wrong.

We are sometimes asked to discuss the law with senior management, but usually it is more relevant for customer facing staff to have a short discussion on what it means to be Deaf and what BSL is, then we spend the session thinking about what they can personally do in their workplace to make it more accessible – clear written information, visual signs, clear lipspeaking, learning some signs. Then we teach signs relevant to them – that's the best bit!

Very proud we have currently had the workplace training sessions accredited by CPD – Continuing Professional Development. This means attendees get CPD points. For a lot of people that's a bonus.

Tim: You said before that recently when Kathleen and you caught the train, a member of staff tried to sign.

Clair: It was great, just a tiny bit of signing. It showed us that hearing people want to learn. We were on the way to a meeting about Deaf Awareness training so really good.

Tim: OK, I want to learn to sign, how long will Level 1 take?

Clair: Typically a Level 1 course will be taught over 20 weeks. We have one starting in February next year which will be 3 hours a week on Saturdays, plus practise at home.

There is also a condensed course next June – Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for 5 weeks.

<http://www.dotsignlanguage.co.uk/course/level-1-bsl/>

Tim: meanwhile I will practise with the BSL website <https://bsl.surrey.ac.uk>

Can you teach me something else before we go?

[Tim is taught to sign “Thank you, good night” in BSL.]

Tim: Thanks for coming on the show.

Clair: Thank you for having me on.

[We then add Human League, Massive Attack, Candi Staton and Public Enemy to the playlist.]