



Department
for Education

British Sign Language

GCSE subject content

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The content for British Sign Language - Introduction

1. This document sets out the subject aims and content coverage required for GCSEs in British Sign Language (BSL). The GCSE subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all GCSE specifications in a given subject. Together with the assessment objectives, it provides the framework within which awarding organisations create the detail of their specifications, so ensuring the possibilities of progression into further academic and vocational study, training or employment.
2. The GCSE in BSL assumes no previous knowledge of BSL. GCSE specifications in BSL will provide a foundation of how sign language works, building a core of commonly used vocabulary from the established lexicon and developing an understanding of grammar and the productive lexicon of BSL¹.

Subject aims

3. GCSE specifications in BSL should provide a knowledge rich, coherent, satisfying and worthwhile course of study. The knowledge and skills acquired through the study of BSL will be of direct value and relevance for immediate and future use in social, academic and work-related settings.
4. Through studying a GCSE in BSL, students should develop their ability to communicate using BSL with other signers on a range of themes and topics which have, for example, social, cultural, political, work-related and personal relevance (see paragraph 8). The study of BSL at GCSE will enable students to develop ways of expressing and negotiating meaning through a visual spatial language, communication and visual memory skills that will be of advantage to them throughout their lives.
5. GCSE specifications in BSL should allow students to demonstrate accurate use of BSL, including the use of accurate non-manual features (e.g. facial expression, eye contact and body position). GCSE specifications in BSL should also enable students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the history of BSL.

¹ Signs in BSL can be divided into those that are part of the **established lexicon** and those that are part of the **productive lexicon**. Paragraphs 1 – 5 of Annex A of this document set out the parameters of the vocabulary requirements for the subject content for BSL at GCSE.

Subject Content

6. GCSE specifications in BSL should enable students to:

- a) understand and apply the principles of a visual spatial language, including the grammar of BSL and the structure of the lexicon: visual motivation², the forms of signs, manual and non-manual elements and finger spelling³.
- b) recall, understand and produce a range of signs of commonly used vocabulary from the established lexicon⁴.
- c) be able to use knowledge of grammar, including the productive lexicon⁵, to produce accurately articulated signs and construct grammatically appropriate sign sentences in order to communicate and interact. Students should be able to understand and use standard BSL⁶ receptively, productively and interactively in a range of scenarios (see paragraph 8).
- d) understand BSL is a language with a distinct grammar (syntax and morphology, including the productive lexicon), semantics (sign meanings/vocabulary) and pragmatics (rules of use).
- e) demonstrate the use of BSL through communication and interaction, apply their knowledge and skills, and gain an understanding of how language is used by providing information clearly and effectively in response to questions. For example, the use of regional variation, name signs, interaction strategies and use of appropriate social conventions when communicating with deaf and hearing individuals, including eye gaze, gaining attention and turn taking. Students may use regional variation that fulfils task requirements, as appropriate.

7. GCSE specifications in BSL must be based on the grammar, including the productive lexicon, set out in the subject content but may use reasonable flexibility in their selection of vocabulary, topics and scenarios to remain within the parameters set for the established lexicon required. Topics and scenarios should relate to those of social,

² See Annex A Paragraph 6

³ These requirements of BSL subject content are set out in Annexes A and B.

⁴ Parameters for specifying the core vocabulary are given in paragraphs 1 to 5 of Annex A. A list of commonly used BSL vocabulary from the established lexicon is given in Annex C which can be used as an advisory list in selecting vocabulary when writing GCSE specifications in BSL.

⁵ See Annex A Paragraph 3

⁶ See Annex A Paragraph 12

cultural and personal relevance to students, taking into account the needs and interests of a wide range of students.

8. GCSE specifications in BSL must require students to:

Comprehension

a) Follow and understand signs, signed sentences and signed texts in standard BSL where signs are accurately articulated, applying their knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar (including the productive lexicon), in order to:

- i. identify the topic of discussion and understand main points from signed texts, including conversation between two proficient signers in which information and views are exchanged in BSL;
- ii. understand and recognise the relationship between past, ongoing and future events;
- iii. infer, by using knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar, plausible meanings of single signs, encountered in signed texts dealing with everyday topics, by making use of visual motivation and an understanding of the overall meaning provided by the context.

Production

b) Produce signs accurately and construct clearly articulated BSL sentences, accurately applying their knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar (including the productive lexicon), such as to be understood by a proficient BSL signer, in order to:

- i. sign simple sentences, using familiar language to provide straightforward factual information on personal details, everyday topics and routines;
- ii. describe people, places and things;
- iii. tell a story⁷, linking simple sentences into a text⁸ as a series of points, conveying past, ongoing and future events, as appropriate. The narrative may be real or imagined but should enable students to demonstrate their ability to use BSL productively.

⁷ A fictional or non-fictional (at the student's discretion) narrative of a student's own construction.

⁸ Definition of BSL terms. Signs refer to individual lexical items. A signed sentence is defined as a sign, clause, or phrase, or a group of clauses or phrases forming a syntactic and semantic unit. Signed text in this context means a sequence made up of simple sentences articulated accurately at a moderate pace.

Interaction

- c) Interact in BSL, in structured and unstructured scenarios, articulating signs accurately, using their knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar (including the productive lexicon), such as to be understood by a proficient BSL signer, in order to:
 - i. initiate and take part in a conversation, asking and answering simple questions and exchanging information on familiar and routine matters;
 - ii. express likes and dislikes in simple terms and give basic reasons for a point of view.

History of British Sign Language

9. GCSE specifications in BSL must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the development of BSL, from its origins and the first references to signing in Britain, to the present day, including:

- how the use of BSL has evolved over time;
- how new vocabulary enters BSL; and
- understanding that BSL is distinctive from, has influenced, and has been influenced by other languages, including American Sign Language and English.

The definitions and parameters, vocabulary and grammar requirements for the BSL GCSE are set out in the following annexes.

Annex A: BSL Definitions and Parameters

Annex B: Grammar requirements for BSL at GCSE

Annex C: BSL Vocabulary

Annex A: BSL Terminological Definitions and Parameters

1. **Vocabulary:** BSL is a visual spatial language. The vocabulary of BSL can be divided into signs that are part of the **established lexicon** and signs that are part of the **productive lexicon**.
2. The **established lexicon** in terms of BSL signs codified in existing dictionaries is relatively small in comparison with other languages, but there are no limitations on signs in the productive lexicon. Items in the established lexicon answer the question: What is the sign for x? These signs are fixed in the mental lexicon; they can be self-standing and understood out of context. Vocabulary from the established lexicon which students will be expected to know and use as they demonstrate their ability to understand, produce and interact in BSL will be prescribed in GCSE specifications in BSL.
3. The **productive lexicon of BSL** describes meaningful units which are only partially specified at the lexical level and in which new meanings and forms are created through the combination of components according to grammatical (morphological) rules. Classifier constructions form part of the productive lexicon. In order to create meaning, the signer must know the meanings and rules of assembly of the components, including semantic and grammatical properties associated with elements of sign formation such as handshape, movement, and non-manual features.
4. **Vocabulary size and range:** Students are expected to know at least 750 signs from the established lexicon in order to understand, produce and interact in BSL at GCSE. Awarding organisations may use the vocabulary set out at Annex C as an advisory list in selecting vocabulary when writing GCSE specifications. The selected vocabulary will take into account sign frequency (provided in Annex C where available) and semantic relevance and should be specified according to topic and purpose of communication in a vocabulary list of signs from the established lexicon.
5. **Regional variants and base signs**⁹ (including modifiers and negations) of a specific sign count as one sign in the prescribed number of signs. In addition to these 750 signs, students are expected to know the 26 letters of the British two-handed manual alphabet and numerals, both cardinals and ordinals.

⁹ The term 'base sign' is used linguistically to describe the form of a sign from the established lexicon before it is modified using productive morphology to change or extend its meaning. For example "*run, running and runner*", these would not count as three different signs, this would count as one sign as they are identical signs.

6. **Visual motivation:** Students of the BSL GCSE will need to understand and apply the concept of visual motivation in the structure of signs. In many BSL signs there is a link between the form of the sign and its meaning. This is sometimes called “iconicity”, but the term “visual motivation” is preferred as the relationship is often not an image of the referent, but of something associated with the referent. Visual motivation also includes the grammatical use of space to reflect spatial relationships. Other signs are not visually motivated and have an arbitrary relationship with their referents.
7. **Fingerspelling** is based on the written form of English, with 26 hand arrangements corresponding to the letters of the English alphabet. Fingerspelling serves multiple functions within BSL, including their role in loan signs as well as for representation of English personal names and place names. In addition to the 750-sign vocabulary, students will be expected to understand and make appropriate use of fingerspelling, at a slower than normal speed.
8. **Pace:** For the purposes of the BSL GCSE, a moderate signing pace is defined as accurate articulation of signs at a slower than normal conversational pace.
9. **BSL signs, sentences and texts:** The following definitions of terms will be helpful in understanding the linguistic demand of the subject content. Within this context, the term **BSL signs** refers to individual lexical items. **A signed sentence** is defined as a sign, clause, or phrase, or a group of clauses or phrases forming a syntactic and semantic unit. **Signed text** means a sequence made up of sentences articulated accurately at a moderate pace.
10. **Conversation in BSL** is an exchange of information between two proficient signers or between the student and a conversational partner, using signed sentences.
11. **BSL Grammar** includes morphology (e.g. plurals, classifiers) and syntax (sign order and sentence structure, e.g. negation, topic-comment structures). In common with many other languages, BSL signed sentences may differ from English in structure and word/sign order.
12. **Standard BSL:** Students of BSL are expected to use the grammar of standard BSL and should have awareness of regional lexical variation. Although there is no formal standardised BSL, Standard BSL may be considered the variety of BSL used by BSL signers in public settings, for example, deaf presenters on BSL Zone and BBC See Hear programmes. Students may use regional lexical variation in productive and interactive tasks providing that task requirements are fully met.
13. **History of BSL:** The expectation for students to develop knowledge and understanding of the history of British Sign Language is a separate aspect of the content to that of study of the language. It should represent 15% of the total qualification content. Awarding organisations may select the detailed content that will be included in specifications to address the expectations of paragraph 9. It is not

expected that this would require a study of linguistics, as this is likely to be too demanding for this GCSE qualification. It is also not expected that specifications would require the use of BSL in teaching the history of BSL, to avoid limiting the extent to which new learners of the language could engage with the detailed content.

Annex B: Grammar requirements for British Sign Language at GCSE

GCSE students will be expected to develop and use their knowledge and understanding of BSL grammar progressively throughout their course.

Students will be required to apply their knowledge and understanding of grammar, appropriate to British Sign Language, as set out in Annex B.

The structure of the lexicon: visual motivation, the form of signs and fingerspelling

- Students will be expected to demonstrate accuracy of articulation of signs and fingerspelling in relation to features of location, handshape, movement and orientation, and understand how the forms of signs may be related to sign meaning.

Classifiers:

- The term **classifier** refers to a morphological system that can express events and states, using handshape classifiers to represent movement, location, and shape. In contrast to signs in the established lexicon, which may consist of a single morpheme, classifiers consist of many morphemes. Specifically, the handshape, location, and movement may all be meaningful on their own.
- In classifier constructions, the handshape serves as a classifier representing an entity or features associated with that entity. The signer can also represent features of an entity's movement in a visually motivated way. The handshape, movement and relative location are meaningful on their own.
- Classifiers may be seen in both nouns and verbs. Depicting and locatable/spatial nouns can be located in different areas in signing space, while plain nouns (signs from the established lexicon) always occur in the same location. Students will be expected to recognise and use nouns and verbs which demonstrate the following:
 - **Whole entity classifiers:** The handshape represents the overall shape of a referent (e.g. upright index finger to refer to a person).
 - **Handling/instrument classifiers:** The handshape represents the hands handling an entity or instrument. They resemble whole entity classifiers, but they semantically imply an agent handling the entity (e.g. thumb and index finger touching to refer to handling a small object).
 - **Limb classifiers (also referred to as body parts):** The handshape represents limbs such as legs, feet or paws.

- **Extension and surface classifiers (also referred to as size and shape):**
The handshape and movement represents the depth or width of an entity (e.g. THIN-PERSON, SPOTS).

Modification of nouns and verbs

In BSL, modification may be accomplished in several ways, which can also co-occur: the addition of lexical modifiers, change in the manual articulation of the sign, or non-manual modification of the sign.

Adjectivals (noun modification)

- **Comparative/superlative:** Students will be able to describe and compare noun concepts.
- **Size/shape:** Students will be able to modify signs in relation to size and shape of referents.
- **Simultaneous/sequential modification:** Students will be able to use signs to indicate modification using two hands: one to indicate the noun and the other hand for the modifier or by using a modifier preceding or following the noun.

Adverbials (lexical signs and verb modification)

As well as adverbial lexical signs, such as YESTERDAY and SLOWLY, adverbial information can be conveyed by modifications to the movement and size of a sign (speed of movement, use of space and spatial relations, and configurations of the face and mouth with specific meanings). These modifications provide information on time, aspect and manner in verbs. Time adverbials indicate calendrical time (e.g. IN-2-HOURS, TOMORROW, LAST-YEAR). Aspect is concerned with the way the grammar marks the duration or type of temporal activity (e.g. REPEATEDLY, FOR-A-LONG-TIME). Manner adverbials describe how and in what way an action is carried out (e.g. NERVOUSLY, CASUALLY).

- **Manner, aspect, intensity:** Students will be able to recognise and use lexical adverbial markers (for example, EVERY-DAY, CARELESSLY) and non-manual adverbial markers to describe how an action takes place.
- **Comparative/superlative:** Students will be able to use manual signs and non-manual features to describe, for example, an action as faster or slower than another action.

Verb

Verbs in BSL fall into a number of different classes, depending on their semantic and formational properties. Students will be expected to recognise which class a verb belongs to and use appropriate morphology.

- **Plain (non-inflecting):** Verbs that represent an agent's function, behaviour or experience, e.g. THINK, LOVE, CRY, RIDE A BIKE. They are often located on the body and do not undergo change in handshape or location.
- **Indicating/agreeing/transfer:** (*all three terms are used in the literature*): the locations at the beginning and end of the verb are associated with roles such as subject/agent or object/patient. Typical verbs in this group use the start point for the source and the end point for the goal, with something transferred (e.g. ASK, SEND, GIVE). Unlike spatial verbs, the handshape does not provide information on class of what is transferred, but the verb may be modified for plural number or aspect.
- **Depicting (spatial):** (*both terms are used in literature*): Spatial verbs that take the form of a handshape or handshapes representing referents as they move through space and can demonstrate spatial relationships with other referents. Spatial verbs also indicate the starting and finishing points of an action, together with the movement path. The handshapes in spatial verbs represent real object features or classes (how objects are handled, their size and shape, or their function): these are classifiers.
- **Existential:** Existential verbs indicate that a person, animal, object or vehicle exists in time and/or space. Negative existential verbs indicate that an entity does not exist.

Auxiliary/modal verbs

- Modal verbs express necessity, possibility and intention. They include such forms as MUST, CAN'T, WON'T, SHOULD and are listed in the vocabulary list in Annex C.

Number/quantity

- **Numerals:** Students will be expected to understand and correctly produce their regional variant form of BSL numerals.
- **Plurals:** Pluralisation can take a number of forms, including – in signs with appropriate phonology and semantics – repetition of a noun or a verb sign accompanied by change in where the sign is located. Students are expected to understand and use plural forms as appropriate.
- **Number in verbs:** Verbs can indicate the presence of more than one agent and also how many objects or 'undergoers' are part of a verb, for example, how many people perform an action, or are given an object.
- **Numeral incorporation:** Numerical incorporation is the process in which the handshape of signs referring to quantity (age/amount/time) can be modified to indicate the number of referents (e.g. THE THREE OF US, FOUR POUNDS, IN

TWO WEEKS TIME). Students are expected to understand and be able to represent up to 5 referents using noun and verb morphology as appropriate.

- **List buoys:** are used to enumerate entities. List buoys are numeral signs that are formed on one hand while the other hand keeps on signing, or refers to the digits of the list buoy. They help guide the discourse by serving as conceptual landmarks (as in, for example, “There are 4 people in my family: my father, my mother, my older sister, and me”, where the non-dominant hand maintains the handshape of the numeral 4, while the dominant hand is used to enumerate the family members).
- **Ordinals:** are numeral signs such as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, that show relative ordering (e.g. She was the first person in her family to go to university). A list of ordinals is provided in Annex C. Students will be able to demonstrate an ability to use list buoys to refer to two or more referents, and to use ordinals in BSL.

Referencing

- **Personal and possessive pronominals:** (comparable to such forms in English as ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’).
- **Reflexive:** A reflexive pronominal refers to a previously named noun or pronominal with the same sentence (comparable to English “ourselves”, “myself”, particularly where the subject and object are the same, and also for emphasis).
- **Enumerative/Pluralisation of singular pronominals:** In BSL, enumerative pronominals enable signers to distinguish between meanings such as “(each of) them” and “(all of) them”.

Negation

- **Negative suffixation (also called negative incorporation):** A negation particle (consisting of a movement feature) may be added at the end of a subset of plain verbs (primarily those involving sensory and cognitive experience, including modal verbs) to change the value of the sentence from positive to negative (comparable to structures in English such as “does/doesn’t”, “can/can’t”) as in the following sentence BOY CAKE LIKE-neg (“The boy doesn’t like cake”.)
- **Phrasal and Clausal negation:** Individual lexical items, phrases and clauses may be negated non-manually (using headshake and/or negative facial expression) or by means of non-manual negation accompanied by an appropriate lexical negator (e.g. NOT, NOTHING, NEVER).

Clause structures

- **Declaratives/statements:** A declarative sentence is a sentence that makes a statement, provides a fact, or offers an explanation. Students will be expected to recognise and produce declarative sentences.
- **Negation:** Negation can take different forms in BSL. Students will be expected to understand and use appropriate manual single negator signs, non-manual markers of negation, and negative declarative sentences.

- **Affirmation:** A declaration or confirmation of truth or validity. Students will be expected to use appropriate manual affirmative signs and non-manual markers.
- **Interrogatives:** An interrogative sentence asks a direct question. Students will understand content ('wh-') and polar ('yes/no') sentences, including both manual and non-manual markers as appropriate. Students will be able to ask questions using these types of interrogatives in BSL.
- **Sign order in simple clauses:** Students will be expected to understand and produce sentences with agent/subject as the initial element.
- **Sentences with different verb types:** Students will be expected to recognise and produce sentence structure using a variety of plain, depicting/agreeing, and spatial verbs.

Prepositions and Conjunctions

- While a list of the most common prepositions is presented in the established lexicon, classifier constructions may be used in preference to spatial prepositions (e.g. locating the classifier for long thin object above the classifier for flat object to mean "the pen is on the table"); non-manual features such as use of different areas in front of the body and head tilts may be used in preference to conjunctions (for example, the 'if' clause in an "if, then" sentence may be signed to the left of the signer's body, with the head tilted back, and the 'then' clause signed to the right of the signer's body, with the head tilted forward).

Complex clause structures

- **Verbless clauses and ellipsis:** A verbless clause (or "small clause") is a clause-like construction in which a verb element is implied but not present, for example GOOD MORNING, HAPPY BIRTHDAY, COFFEE FOR ME). Students will be expected to recognise and produce verbless clauses as appropriate.
- **Coordination & subordination:** Coordination links together two or more elements; nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., e.g. two nouns may be coordinated ("cats and women"). In relation to clause structures, coordination and subordination refer to the presence of two (or more) linked clauses. The presence of coordination in BSL is signalled in several different ways: by the use of a manual coordinator (comparable to English 'and', 'or') by non-manual marking involving facial expression and body position.

Subordination is the process of connecting two sentences or parts of a sentence together to show that one part is more important than the other. Subordination can represent different types of relationship: Concession (expressed in English by conjunctions such as 'although'), Reason ('because', 'so that') and Condition ('if', 'unless'). In BSL subordination of one clause to another can be signalled by the use of a manual coordinator (comparable to English 'because') and by non-manual marking involving facial expression and body position. Students will be expected to recognise and use manual and non-manual coordination and subordination.

Pragmatics

- **Constructed action:** Students will be able to use constructed action to describe what different participants in a narrative do, using classifier handshapes and space to describe physical actions, for example climbing up a rope or crawling on the ground, and to represent a referent's utterances, thoughts, feelings and/or attitudes, using face, head, body, hands and/or other non-manual cues. These functions are comparable to those found with framed quotations and demonstrations in spoken languages.
- **Role shift:** Role shift refers to a particular type of constructed action, where the signer takes on the role of one or more characters in a narrative (in addition to, or in place of, a narrator). Role shift involves using spatial marking and different orientations of the body and gaze to distinguish between characters and the referential space they occupy.

Focus and emphasis

- **Doubling:** In doubling, some element, referring to a single object or action, occurs twice (for example ANN WILL WIN WILL or WHO CAN'T READ WHO). The main function of doubling is foregrounding or emphasis of the doubled information, a function served in English, for example, by prosodic stress on the emphasised word. Students will be expected to recognise the presence of doubling in sign sentences.
- **Topic-Comment, Topicalisation, contrasting old/new information, Cleft sentence structure:** These all modify the order of signs in a sentence in order to change the prominence of different elements.
- **Topic-Comment:** The Topic is what the signer is talking about in relation to and the Comment makes observations on that topic.
- **Topicalisation:** In Topicalisation, as well as having the topic first in the sentence, facial expression and head position is used for emphasis of the topic. This construction may be considered comparable to the emphasis on the object in passive sentences in English.
- **Cleft sentences:** are complex sentences in which a single message is divided (cleft) into two clauses. This allows a focus on what is new information. (e.g. in English "It was my husband you spoke to on the phone". In BSL this is accomplished by various devices such as non-manual marking emphasising the focus and use of a wh-question sign (STEAL MONEY WHO/POINT is equivalent to "It's that person who stole the money").

Annex C: BSL Vocabulary

Annex C: BSL Vocabulary list can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-british-sign-language-bsl>.



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for Education

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