

THE **CATRIN & ABI** METHOD

BSL FOR EVERYONE

A BASIC INTRODUCTION

Teaching British Sign Language and Iaith Arwyddion Cymraeg in the classroom

www.catrinandabi.com

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BACKGROUND

Since 2004, BSL has been formally recognised as a language in Wales. We have also seen quick progression in Scotland and now England looks to do similar.

In 2018, COS was commissioned by the Welsh Government to report on how British Sign Language could be introduced into schools as part of the then new Curriculum for Wales as an International language.

The study included many aspects, but the following areas highlighted key findings that would significantly impact introducing an effective teaching method.

They were as follows:

How BSL is currently taught in the UK

Why is it not taught already

International efforts to do similar

The benefit to children



WHY IS IT NOT TAUGHT ALREADY?

Perhaps it is strange that in 2025, we are discussing a project to introduce sign language educational support and resources to schools, but we are. After all, sign languages are used by both children and adults who are Deaf, hard of hearing, have ALNs, have late or no vocal acquisition, or are family members and friends of people who are first-language sign users.

The latter of these highlights that sign languages are already socially and culturally present and relevant. We have a very multilingual overlap and have done for a long time.

When we consider that some people, both children and adults, culturally cross three 'official' languages in Wales where this method was developed. So it is strange that we do not culturally represent them in our classrooms more. We have a language that is socially and culturally present within our communities across the UK but not in our schools. So why not?



THE CLASSROOM CATCH-22

Children who predominantly use sign language are either not in mainstream education or use secondary language skills while in their mainstream classroom. So, mainstream education has never had an 'urgent' or perceived need for BSL learning or resources because they have no learners with a 'sign' need.

This is the classroom Catch-22. What has this meant?

Learners who predominantly use sign language as their primary communication have been effectively excluded from the mainstream classroom due to a lack of capacity to provide sign language instruction. They are also culturally and socially excluded from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. from siblings, neighbours, and friends they would otherwise be sat next to and play with during breaktime.

This has also meant that other children have not only not benefited from the opportunity to integrate better with their Deaf peers, but they have also not been able to develop their own language skills by using sign-aligned learning with their first or second languages. This particularly impacts learners who require extra support to develop their SLC skills.



HOW BSL IS TRADITIONALLY TAUGHT IN THE UK AND HOW WE DO IT DIFFERENTLY

Traditionally, BSL has only been featured in mainstream schools as a fringe language associated with Deafness and disability. More specifically, it aligned with diversity, inclusivity, and disability learning. Only two accreditors and curriculum designers were in the UK for many years. Today, there is only one. This teaching method did the following:

Allowed Deaf BSL users to gain recognised qualifications in BSL.

Instructed non-deaf learners working with or intending to work with and support Deaf people (Communication support workers, Interpreters, Translators).



A report to the Welsh Government in 2018 highlighted that this teaching approach was wholly unacceptable for teaching children BSL as an International Language as part of the Welsh Curriculum changes.

We developed a curriculum bespoke to the needs of learners that aligned with the school Curriculum that does the following:

Broadly, it teaches learners BSL aligned with the regional Curriculum

In Wales, it teaches learners BSL and IAC (Iaith Arwyddion Cymraeg) aligned with the Curriculum of Wales

This learning aligns with and alongside other core SLC subjects

Aids in the development of Learners' first and second languages

We have also developed resources that did not exist before we began, and a critical aim for us is to work with Adnodd to ensure these resources are available and work alongside Adnodd to develop new resources.

By running the self-funded **Abi Project** pilot, we have collaborated with class teachers, adapting our lesson plans and assessments to meet Learners' needs. We have also run teacher training sessions in person and online to support practitioners in developing their skills and confidence to teach BSL/IAC without us. This pilot has led us to create a sustainable model of teaching BSL/IAC as part of the Curriculum's throughout the UK called **The Catrin and Abi Method**.

We also ran sessions in non-classroom or school setting environments to identify potential other needs of children in their home and social lives, such as:



Integrate BSL/IAC school activities by supporting language leaders in running lunchtime language clubs and signing choirs.

Collaborate with outside partners to introduce practice sessions in school holiday clubs and with Guides and Scouting organisations to see how Learners can maintain and improve their BSL/IAC language skills outside the classroom.

From these collaborations, Learners experience the real-world benefit of learning English and Welsh with BSL/IAC in their other non-classroom environments. These experiences highlight and reinforce our expectation that learners, along with parents and guardians, can incorporate BSL/IAC alongside and in support of their broader SLC development.

Ultimately, the long-term aim is to support teachers across education environments to confidently deliver BSL/IAC sessions themselves and in understanding their value, not only as a means to learn a language and all the benefits that brings to a Learner but also as a tool to boost English (and Welsh in Wales) skills in reading, writing, and oracy.

We have seen this taking shape in what we have done as part of the pilot project. Along with over 300 primary and secondary schools benefitting from our free support in North Wales, we have recently started supporting primary school settings in South Wales with its BSL/IAC curriculum across Key Stage 2. This widening of scope aids us in identifying regional and cultural differences to better support Learners and teachers and better frame bespoke measures in pan-Wales and UK wide projects.



Our Method demonstrates that education practitioners across different settings understand the scope and benefits to Learners at multiple levels of development across all Key Stages and how practitioners themselves can see their development and progression as BSL/IAC educators.



WHO IS THIS METHOD FOR?

Simply put, the **Catrin & Abi Method** is for all children. It is the best way to foster inclusion by having all children irrespective of their abilities to begin the **Catrin & Abi Method** of learning BSL.

All children benefit from language learning for the following reasons:

Improved Memory and Focus:

Learning a new language strengthens memory and attention skills, as children must learn new vocabulary and grammar rules.

Enhanced Problem-Solving:

Language learning involves pattern recognition and critical thinking, boosting problem-solving abilities.

Better Academic Performance:

Bilingual and multilingual children often demonstrate higher academic achievement, including better reading and writing skills.

Stronger Foundation for Literacy:

Language skills are fundamental for developing literacy, including reading and writing comprehension.

While wider Social and Cultural Benefits include:

Increased Cultural Awareness:

Learning a language fosters an appreciation for different cultures and perspectives, promoting empathy and understanding.

Improved Communication Skills:

Language learning enhances communication abilities, allowing children to connect with people from diverse backgrounds.

Enhanced Social Skills:

Learning a new language can boost confidence and social skills, as children learn to navigate new situations and interact with others.

However, there are additional benefits with the following learners being able to develop their wider Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) alongside their signed learning. These children fall within **SEND** and **ALN** understanding:

Neurodevelopmental Condition (ADHD, ASD, DCD)

Deaf and hard of hearing

Late developing speech

Mutism, in particular Selective Mutism

Speech Impediment

Oral communication anxiety

Auditory Processing Disorder

Verbal Apraxia

Dyslexia

Dyscalculia (for children who struggle with numbers, the method provides visual, kinesthetic, and spatial learning approaches, allowing learners to visualise math concepts)

The method ensures Learners learn BSL while simultaneously being able to develop in other areas. This sign supported method also does not hinder the development of other learners with no additional development need as they simply benefit from learning a new language. They importantly all learn together.

It does this through an alignment with the learning environment and curriculum of the delivering authority, while also creating extra layers of imprinting and retention based on arbitrary and non arbitrary language mapping. These approaches are unlike other BSL teaching approaches.

The Catrin & Abi Method:

Works alongside and supports the development of the Learners' first and second languages by supporting, reinforcing, and maximising their progress in literacy, which includes oracy, within the recognised stages of the core curriculum which is completely absent in traditional BSL learning.

Is sensitive to the need for teachers and parents to learn in alignment to support learners in the classroom and at home. It encourages a complementary approach to aligned learning and support. For example, Learners and their parents will be able to use home resources, which will easily allow parents to develop their broader communication skills while they learn BSL together.

Encourages oracy as a tool to add an extra layer of imprinting in the Learner's experience while also aligning the learning of signs to words and images (oracy is removed from traditional BSL learning). This introduces iconicity language mapping into SLC learning which will help avoid issues arising in the future, as Learners will benefit from the natural and fluid aligning of arbitrary and non-arbitrary language mapping systems, which will maximise cognitive development and reasoning.

Encourages Learners to take ownership of the language and make it their own by aligning it with their first and second language development.

This method creates a holistic approach, which means that while learning BSL as an International language, Learners will maximise their core SLC learning with this aligned approach. Our method will also significantly impact supporting learners with their communication needs, particularly if the Learner has a communication need associated with neurodiversity disability, sensory loss, anxiety or one of the many causes that impact communication development.

The Resources

As we have highlighted, the lack of resources and quality resources have seriously impacted the teaching of BSL to children.

These resources have been made to make learning as easy as possible through the resource covering all points of accessibility to include the written word, audio and narration, and BSL.

The Benefits of these Resources

The benefits of using these resources are:

They use tried and tested methods of images and animation for education.

They have visual and written sources encouraging both sign and reading development.

Allows adults to learn alongside child learners.

They have further resources available to encourage and develop learning.

Dedicated Education Support Specialist are available to attend the school and give further lessons.

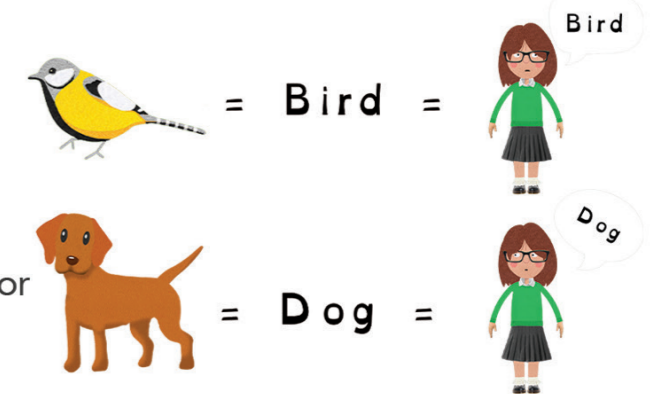


How does BSL help?

BSL can work alongside a learner's core language to help them develop their core language skills by offering an extra layer of imprinting and simplifying understanding. Sign languages are known as Non-arbitrary languages, unlike oral languages, which are arbitrary.

An arbitrary language has no inherent or natural connection between a word's form (sound or spelling) and its meaning, while a non-arbitrary language (or iconic language) has some form of resemblance or relationship between the form and meaning of a word.

For example, words like bird or dog have nothing in common with how the words bird and dog look or how the words for bird and dog sound. However, in BSL, the sign for a bird looks like a bird tweeting, and the sign for a dog looks like a dog walking.



Most languages have non-arbitrary elements. English examples are onomatopoeia words, such as meow, cuckoo, and buzz, which represent sounds. However, English, like most other languages, is arbitrary.



Words like bird and dog, although arbitrary, are relatively simple words that most people understand quickly and more accurately than more abstract words in English. This simplicity is known as the concreteness effect. BSL, however, introduces non-arbitrary signs for more complex or abstract words that evoke the meaning of the word as part of the sign, making imprinting and retention much easier for the learner.

This non-arbitrariness and the movement and gestures in BSL make sign languages more intuitive and easier to learn. However, putting them alongside English, for example, as a teaching method can make learning their core language easier, as it allows more chance of imprinting and understanding through non-arbitrary association and muscle memory. This not only helps a Learner learn words but concepts.



THE OUTCOME

The **Catrin and Abi Method** centres around the idea of sisters Catrin and Abi. Who they are and what they represent.

Catrin, who is hearing, and Abi, who is Deaf, and importantly, both able to learn BSL based on their cultural setting, language need, while both expressing interest through language discovery and learning about the wider world around them. It recognises children as the key Learners and puts their needs first.

Their needs are also better able to be developed alongside their peers who will have varying abilities just as Catrin and Abi do.

This focus on the Learner aligns with national school Curriculums progression development, which other BSL learning models do not. **The Catrin & Abi Method** fundamentally considers not only learning outcomes but the well-being of Learners and importantly Learners at risk of being left behind who can develop alongside their peers if given the opportunity. We now can approach SLC needs with an extra tool as well as provide an enriching learning experience through a native language.

Our research into the outcomes and feedback of our project from teachers has shown learners whose progression has stalled previously has improved while engaged in our course and Method. The creator of Catrin & Abi, John Evans has a PhD in Linguistics and has visited classes and spoken to teachers who have said their learners who did not speak now communicate with their peers, and children who struggled to spell now use fingerspelling to help and have now progressed alongside their peers.

All this is possible because of **Catrin & Abi**.

Abi is a Deaf child. She is creative, imaginative and spirited. Her big sister Catrin is just that, a big sister. Sometimes annoyed but always proud of her little sister and her shenanigans.

Catrin & Abi allows children, whatever their abilities, to become their own heroes and see the heroes in others. To learn like Catrin and Abi through sign, and better understand and enjoy the world around them.



THE FUTURE

Series Two mirrors Progression Step 2 and allows learners progression in their wider SLC needs.

There is also the development of bespoke learning courses for teachers. The aim of the course is to enable primary schools to deliver the statutory International Languages element of their Curriculum.

BSL is a new element, which many schools are struggling to provide. BSL for Teachers supports the cross-cutting priorities of Health and Well-Being, Cross-Curricular Skills, Diversity and Local, National and International Contexts. Our Method and support aligns with the International Languages study, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and meets the criteria of the Four Purposes, so our Teacher-Learners can develop them in their settings.

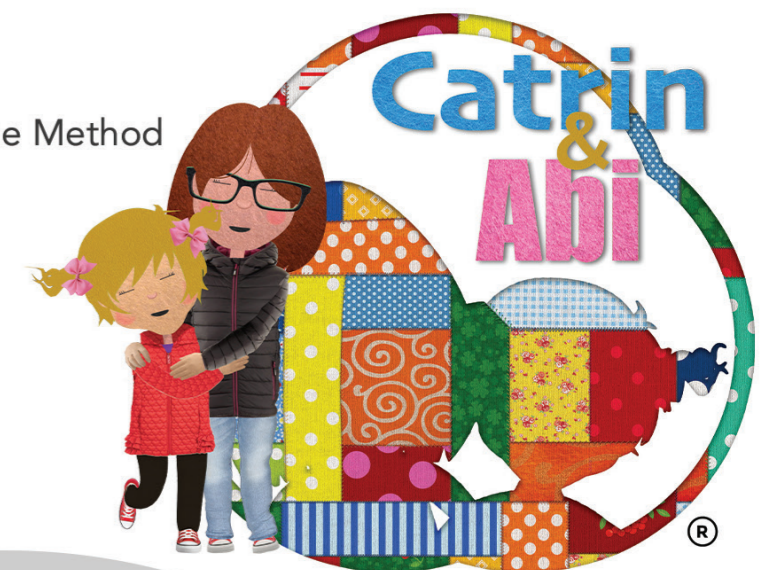
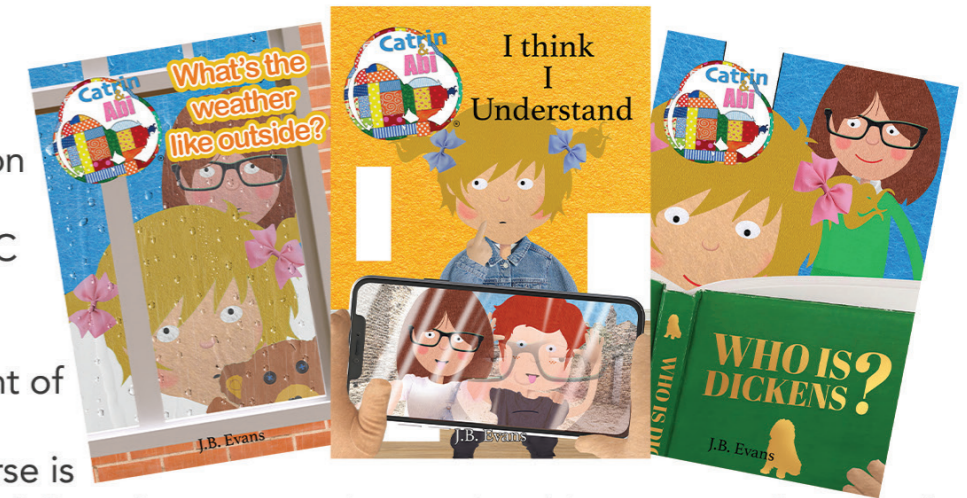
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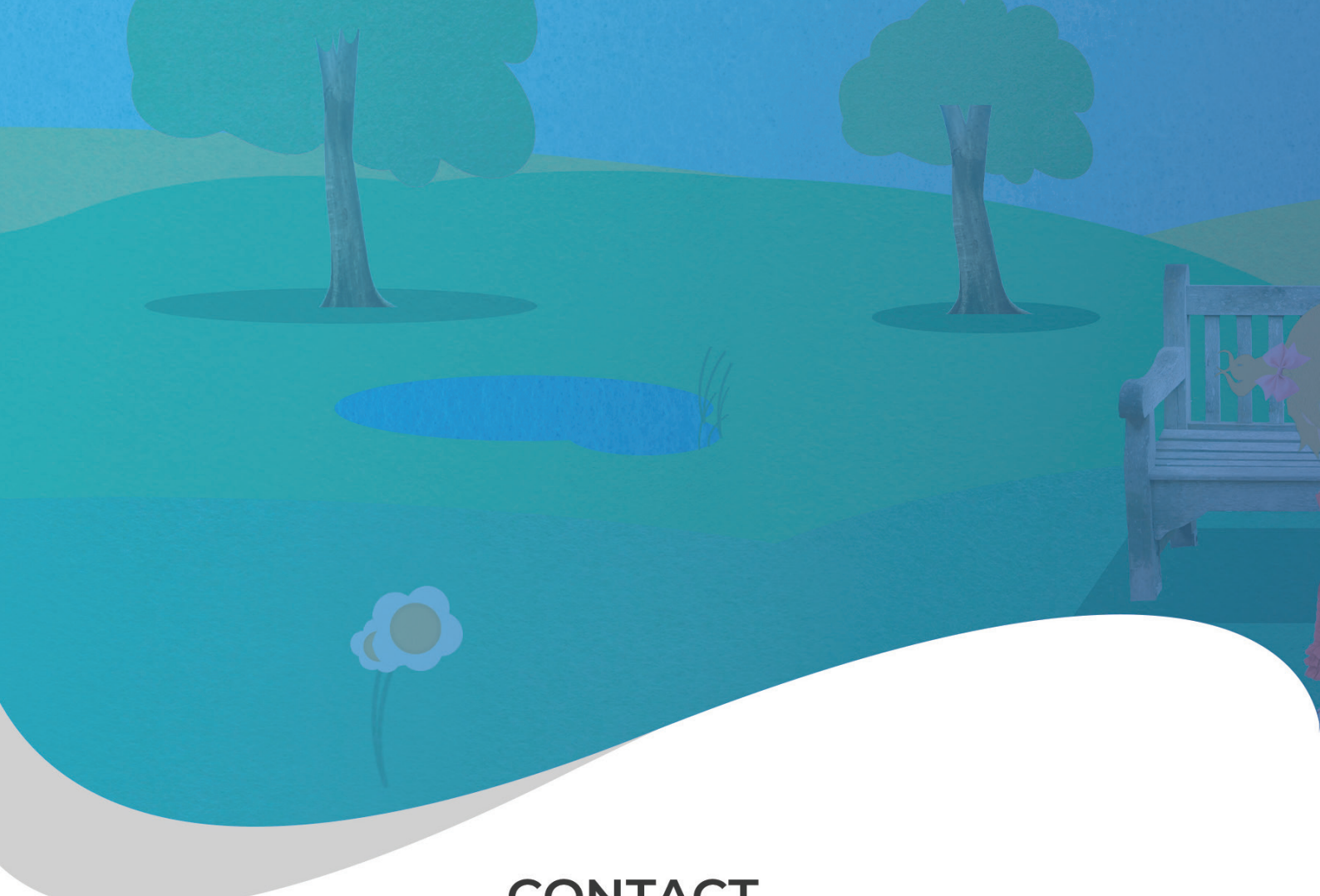
This course specialises in meeting the distinct needs of our Teacher-Learners, who have widely requested training to deliver a new aspect of the Curriculum to their pupils in schools. Our partners can deliver the qualification through the medium of English, Welsh and where requested, BSL.

Schemes of work and sessions plans will closely reflect the Progression Steps teachers are used to to enable Teacher-Learners to deliver and assess the BSL strand of the curriculum in their schools.

To find out more about Catrin & Abi or the Method please email:

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