

7 Myths and misconceptions about sign language

7.1 Popular misconceptions

Despite the systematic linguistic research on sign language since the late 1970s, many myths and misconceptions exist. Some of these are characterized in the following reviews of the BSL interpretation of the Queen's speech at Christmas in 1988. (We had hoped to include an excerpt of this on the video for the course but were unable to obtain permission.)



*(The Daily Telegraph, 27 December 1988)*⁷

⁷Since this appeared, *The Daily Telegraph* has published an apology for its 'breach of taste'.

(*The Guardian*, 2 January 1989)

These convey a view that sign language consists of wild gesticulation, eyes rolling, mouth in strange shapes, shoulders shrugged and, furthermore, that sign language is a sort of mime. From your own observations and understanding it will be clear to you that such statements are a misrepresentation of sign language.



◀ Activity 2

In response to the two articles quoted above, write to *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Guardian*. ◀

◀ Comment

As well as distinguishing sign language from gesture and mime, you may have felt the need to comment on the attitudes to deafness and the Deaf community implied within these reviews ◀

7.2 All sign languages are the same?

It is often assumed that there is only one sign language and that this is universal or international. Basically this is untrue. In Figure 3.5 you have already been introduced to the sign for MAN and WOMAN in a number of different languages, and it has been pointed out that ASL (American Sign Language) is not the same as BSL (British Sign Language). Interestingly, ASL shares more features with French Sign Language than with BSL, even though the USA and the UK share a common spoken language. This may be because the French sign language was introduced in the USA by the Frenchman Laurent Clerc who taught French Sign Language to Gallaudet and other pioneer teachers, and this had a major impact on American Sign Language. In Ireland too, there is a common spoken language but two sign languages. Irish Sign Language is used in the Republic of Ireland and by Catholic Deaf people in Northern Ireland, while British Sign Language is used by Protestant Deaf people in Northern Ireland. This distinction survives in Northern Ireland because Catholic and Protestant children are usually educated separately (Woll, 1988).

The reverse can also occur, in that two spoken language communities can share a sign language. In Belgium there is one sign language, although there are two spoken language communities, the French speaking and the Flemish speaking (Woll, 1988).

The idea that sign languages are universal may have arisen from the fact that Deaf people from different countries have a much greater facility to communicate with each other than do hearing people. This may be because Deaf people have a different approach to communicating, or have greater flexibility in their own language use. It may be that similarities in the structure of sign languages may facilitate communication across languages. Sachs (1989) suggests that while there is not a universal sign language, there may be universals *in* sign language:

The hundreds of sign languages that have arisen spontaneously all over the world are as distinct and strongly differentiated as the world's range of spoken languages. There is no one universal sign language.

And yet there may be universals *in* signed languages, which help to make it possible for the users to understand one another far more quickly than users of unrelated spoken languages could understand each other. Thus a monolingual Japanese would be lost in Arkansas, as a monolingual American would be lost in rural Japan. But a deaf American can make contact relatively swiftly with his signing brothers in Japan, Russia, or Peru—he would hardly be lost at all. Signers (especially native signers) are adept at picking up, or at least understanding, other signed languages, in a way which one would never find among speakers (except, perhaps, in the most gifted). Some understanding will usually be established within minutes, accomplished mostly by gesture and mime (in which signers are extraordinarily proficient). By the end of a day, a grammarless pidgin will be established. And within three weeks, perhaps, the signer will possess a very reasonable knowledge of the other sign language, enough to allow detailed discussion on quite complex issues. There was an impressive example of this in August 1988, when the National Theatre of the Deaf visited Tokyo, and joined the Japan Theatre of the Deaf in a joint production. ‘The deaf actors in the American and Japanese acting companies were soon chatting’, reported David E. Sanger in the *New York Times* (August 19, 1988), ‘and by late afternoon during one recent rehearsal it became clear they were already on each other’s wavelengths’.

(Sachs, 1989)

However, we should not be deceived into thinking that sign languages are all the same—the need for many different sign language interpreters at international conferences for Deaf people is a sufficient indication of their diversity.



Figure 3 7 Interpretation at the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf, Manchester, 1985. Professor Harlan Lane speaking with American Sign Language, Swedish Sign Language and British Sign Language interpreters (Source: courtesy of The British Deaf Association)

7.3 The iconic nature of sign language

In Section 2, one of the features of language described was the arbitrary nature of the linguistic element—that there was no direct relationship between the sign and word and that which they signified. One of the arguments that has been advanced against sign languages is that the signs are not truly arbitrary, but that there is a relationship between the sign and its meaning—that signs are iconic.

You will have realized from your own knowledge of BSL, or from trying to guess the meaning of signs for yourself, that a general relationship between the sign and its meaning is usually not immediately obvious, that signs are not transparent, although there are some that are. You will probably be able to guess the meaning of the signs in Figure 3.8:⁸

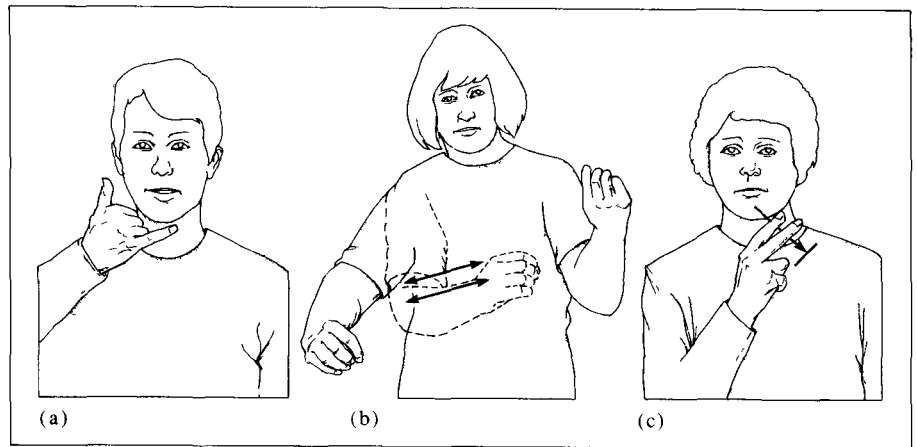


Figure 3.8

The next few in Figure 3.9 you probably cannot guess precisely, but once you know what they are you can make a connection between the sign and its meaning.

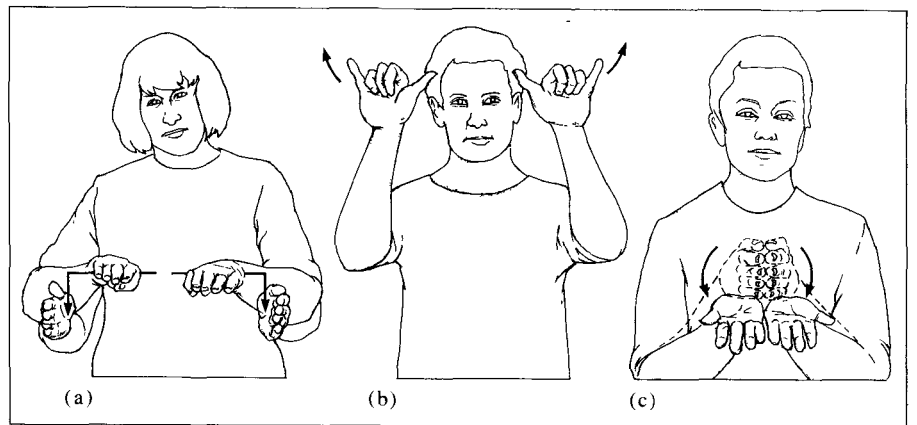


Figure 3.9

⁸The answers are given on page 53 at the end of this unit.

Klima and Bellugi (1979) have termed such signs translucent, where a relationship, while not transparent, can be derived between the sign and its meaning. That for a significant number of signs a relationship between the sign and its meaning can be described raises questions about the arbitrary nature of the linguistic elements of sign language.



◀ Reading

At this point you should read or re-read the following articles from Reader Two—they all discuss the iconicity of sign language. As you read them you should make notes on the following questions

(a) Why should sign language be more iconic than spoken language?

(b) How does this reflect the status of sign language as a language?

Article 6.1, 'British Sign Language, the language of the Deaf Community' by Mary Brennan,

Article 6.3, 'Sign Languages of Deaf People and Psycholinguistics' by A. Van Uden,

Article 6.4, 'Tell Me Where is Grammar Bred? "Critical Evaluation" or Another Chorus of "Come Back to Milano"?' by William Stokoe ◀

It is probably the case that a greater proportion of the linguistic elements of sign language than of spoken language can be described iconically, though the figures given in the paper by Van Uden are probably overestimates—the generally quoted figures for iconic signs are between one-third and one-half (Bellugi and Klima, 1976: ASL; Deuchar, 1984: BSL; Boyes-Braem, 1986: general). For signs that are transparent, it is less than 10 per cent (Bellugi and Klima, 1976).

A number of points can be made:

- △ Because sign language is a visual-gestural language, it lends itself more easily to iconicity. However, signs can only be iconic if they lend themselves to visual representation.
- △ Some signs are iconic because of the conventional associations of meaning, thus, in BSL a sign involving the extended thumb usually has an element of 'good' in its meaning.
- △ The iconicity is more pertinent to non-signers, particularly those learning to sign, than to native signers for whom the connections are irrelevant.
- △ The iconicity of signs is often judged on isolated signs, which are modified in use.
- △ Evidence from ASL shows that signs become less iconic over time.
- △ While signs are iconic, they are iconic in different ways in different languages. BSL, Danish Sign Language and Chinese Sign Language all have an iconic sign for 'tree' but it is different in every case (Deuchar, 1984).

In focusing too closely on the iconicity of signs one can lose sight of the fact that it is the relationship of the signs to each other, and the structure of the language, which is also important, and which is discussed in the next section.

7.4 Sign language is not grammatical?

Much of the earlier work on BSL was to demonstrate that it showed the properties of a language, as, before the late 1970s and the beginning of systematic research on BSL, many asserted that it did not. Significant among these were eminent educationalists who were resisting the use of signing in schools.

The signs in general do not follow a system of rules and therefore cannot be regarded as a language.

(Watson, Reader in Audiology and Education of the Deaf, 1967)

The argument against the traditional sign language, that it is non-grammatical and impedes the development of correct language forms, is valid.

(Reeves, Headmaster, school for the deaf, 1976)

These, however, were written before the explosion of work on sign language which has increasingly demonstrated their syntax. However, there are still critics, of whom Van Uden is one of the main ones.



◀ Reading

You should now look *again* at the following two articles in Reader Two

Article 6 3, 'Sign Languages of Deaf People and Psycholinguistics' by A. Van Uden,

Article 6 4, 'Tell Me Where is Grammar Bred? "Critical Evaluation" or Another Chorus of "Come Back to Milano"?' by William Stokoe ◀

◀ Comment

Using the Stokoe article, and other material from this unit and Reader Two (particularly Article 6 1 by Brennan which you have already read), you should be able to develop your own arguments to support the view that sign language does have its own grammar ◀

7.5 Sign language is a concrete language and cannot express complex ideas?

. I know this point of view is unpopular with many people—Sign Language is not 'up to it'. Signing can cope with everyday chat, but when it's necessary to get down to accurate reporting of specific terminology, signing breaks down. It hasn't the grammar and it hasn't the vocabulary.

(Firth, 1987)

Pictorial thinking permits the deaf person to persist too long in a concrete sensual conception of happiness, and in doing so strengthens egocentricity. A pictorial way of thinking thus impedes an ascent to selfless love and authentic Christianity . Now I am of the opinion that this pictorial thinking is especially heightened and established through sign language .

(Van Uden, 1975)



◀ Activity 3

Prepare a response to the assertion that sign language can only express concrete ideas

Sources

1 Video One

Consider the ideas discussed in various conversations

2 Video Two, Sequence 4

This shows the 1989 LASER Conference (The Language of Sign as an Educational Resource) Some of the speakers are lecturing in BSL, others are lecturing in spoken English and are being interpreted into BSL (on the right of the screen—disregard the left which is Sign Supported English interpreting, to be discussed later)

3 Reader Two, Article 1 2, 'Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language' by Nora Groce

In your reading of this article, note the number of different situations in which sign language was used. In particular, you may wish to comment that people would switch from spoken to sign language, and often the punch line of a joke was in sign language. Even if no Deaf people were present, hearing people might continue to use sign language if it was functional, for example, across great distances or noisy settings. For some situations—for example, preaching—sign language could sometimes seem more suitable.

4 Video Two, Sequence 6

Dorothy Miles' poem in British Sign Language. The English version is reprinted in Section 5 of this unit. There are many other sources. Several of the articles in Reader One have been translated from BSL, and later videos contain discussions, sketches etc. You will notice that the dominant language of all of the videos is BSL. ◀

7.6 Sign languages are inferior to spoken languages?

One of the main ways in which sign language has been seen as deficient is through comparison with spoken language. It has been argued that BSL does not have the wide-ranging vocabulary of spoken English, nor the number of grammatical forms. It may be that sign language does not have the range of linguistic elements in some areas—in technology, for example, because this is an area to which Deaf people have not had access—but what is important is that, as with other living languages, BSL has the potential to develop vocabulary in an infinite number of ways. Among recent new signs are those for MINICOM (a visual telephone system), COMPUTER, CALCULATOR, TV PRESENTER, EDIT, RESEARCH.

The argument about limitations of the grammar is more complex and we would suggest that it arises in part from a particular research methodology. Some research on BSL has taken English as the standard and has then asked, 'How does BSL express that?'. Inevitably, this makes the comparison language seem inferior because there is no scope to demonstrate the strength of the language.

One area in which some linguists have pointed to sign language as being impoverished is in the expression of time relationships. In Activity 1(c) you were asked to work out ways of referring to the past and future using gesture. Some of you will have probably evolved a time line and then indicated the occurrence of events by indicating particular points on that

line. This is a common way of talking about time in BSL. However, this creates difficulties in embedded sentences such as: 'Before he went shopping, John had a meeting with Mary, to finalize the arrangements for the following day'. It is important to realize that it is not that BSL cannot convey that information, but it would not use that type of sentence construction, which is English. An experimental set up which asked a BSL user to put across this message could make BSL seem very long-winded. Problems such as this arise when one language is taken as the base language, and much research into sign language is like this.

An example of an exception to this can be seen in the work of Miranda Pickersgill who examined in detail the way in which the sign usually glossed as 'FINISH' is used. The basic sign FINISH is illustrated in Figure 3.10.

Pickersgill's findings are based on observations of a man, deaf from birth and a fluent user of BSL, relying on observation on video recordings. Six main uses of the sign FINISH were identified, although most contained further possible subdivisions and could be utilized with differing emphases. They indicate that a British Sign Language user in signing FINISH has to show whether the completion is total or partial; whether there is personal involvement or it is the act itself which is significant; whether it is an individual act which is completed, or a sequence of acts; and whether the sign FINISH is used to imply that another related act will follow. The sign also has a use as an emphasis which may be stylistic and used more by some speakers than others. This is not to say that other languages cannot make such distinctions, but for many languages it is not required. Thus, a non-spoken language-centred approach can reveal a great deal about a language that is not immediately apparent from those approaches that take spoken language as their base line (Gregory and Pickersgill, 1988).

Harlan Lane (1985) has elaborated on the strengths of sign language by indicating the ease with which it expresses spatial concepts. He cites an experiment of his own based on ASL, in which pairs of students had to work with a dolls house. One had a photograph and had to instruct the other how to place seven pieces of furniture within the house. While speakers had to give elaborate explanations and had difficulty, ASL users could be much more economical in their descriptions and completed the task with comparative ease.

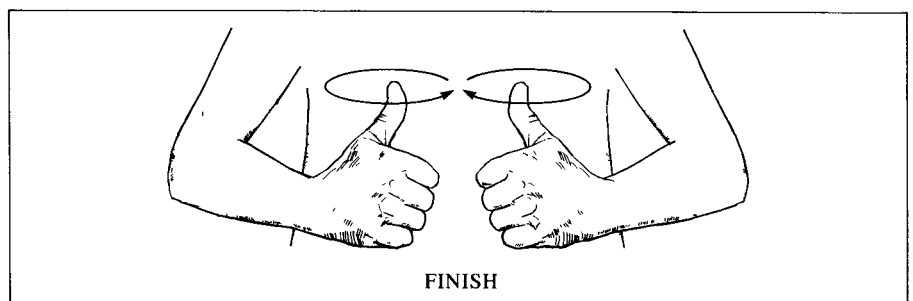


Figure 3.10

7.7 Finger spelling and sign language

A further misconception, though of a different order, is that sign language is finger spelling—that is, spelling out the words by using a different hand shape for each letter—and many people have this idea.

While in Britain we use a two-handed finger-spelling system, in the USA and most other countries it is one-handed. Figure 3.11 illustrates the two-handed BSL alphabet and the one-handed ASL alphabet.

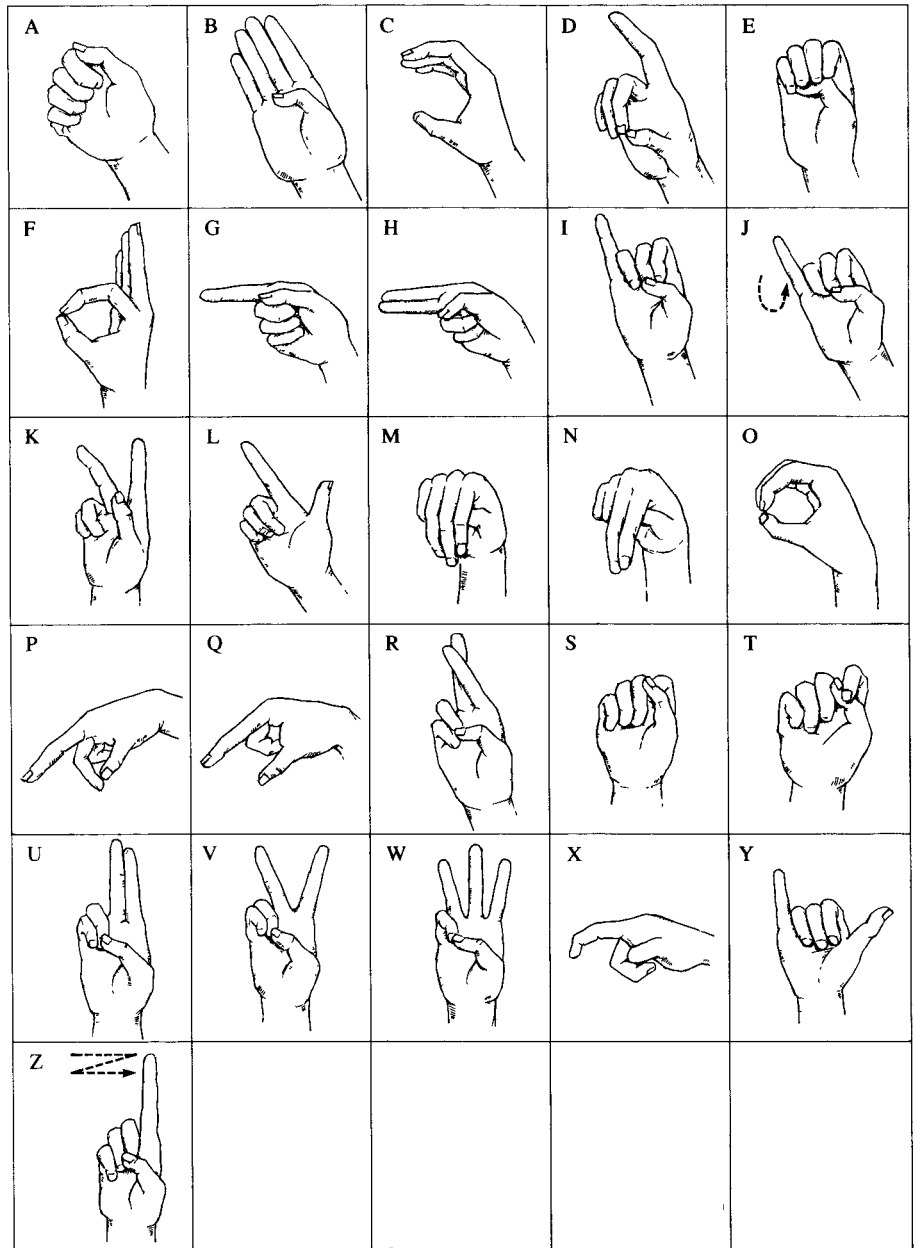
The Urdu alphabet and the Cyrillic alphabet of the USSR also have their own finger spelling as Figure 3.12 illustrates.

While finger spelling has a part to play in BSL, it is relatively small. Finger spelling is used for names and specialist words for which there is no sign available. Some signs, however, are based on letters of the alphabet. The sign for MOTHER is a double 'M', and for FATHER a double 'F'. Other signs in BSL incorporating letters are 'COLOUR', 'FAMILY', 'GOLD'. Letters may also be *combined* into signs. In BSL this occurs by a sequence of finger-spelt letters becoming the sign; for example, the BSL sign for Glasgow is G-W, and for Birmingham B-H-M. ASL can combine finger-spelt letters simultaneously. A classic example of this is the American sign 'I LOVE YOU' which Jimmy Carter made famous in his 1976 presidential campaign. This takes the ASL one-handed alphabet signs for I, L, Y and combines them into the sign 'I LOVE YOU', as Figures 3.13 and 3.14 show.



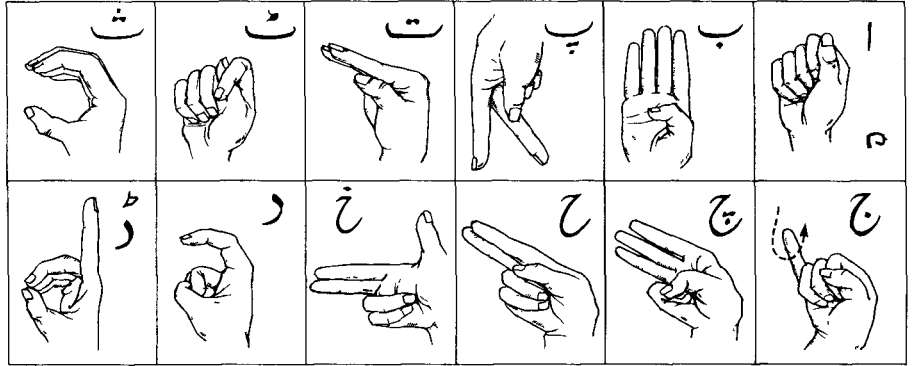
(a)

Figure 3.11 (a) BSL alphabet



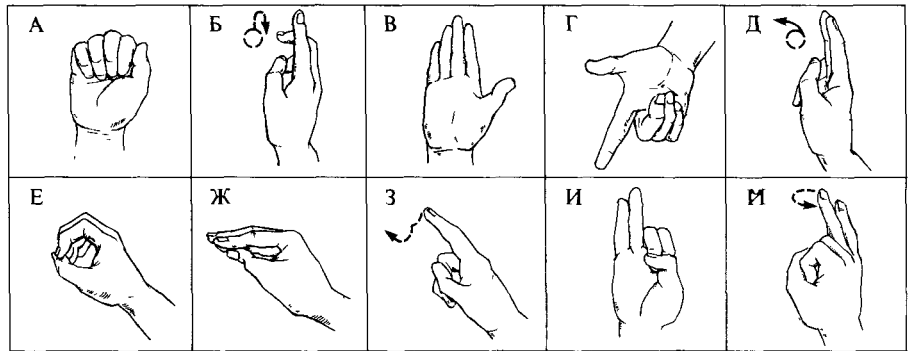
(b)

Figure 3.11 (b) ASL alphabet



(a)

Figure 3.12 (a) Examples of Urdu finger spelling



(b)

Figure 3.12 (b) Examples of Cyrillic finger spelling

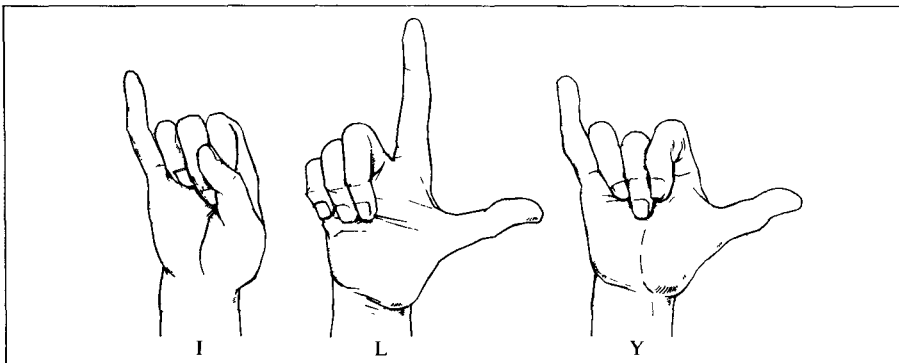


Figure 3.13

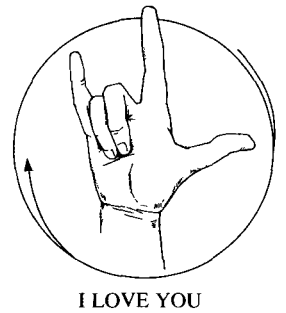


Figure 3.14

Activities

◀ Activity 4

Learn the two-handed finger spelling system, or if you know the two-handed learn the one-handed

For the two-handed start by learning A E I O U as illustrated in Figure 3.15

Then gradually fill in the letters between

You should achieve some competence in less than 30 minutes

Use the following words for practice

pig	jam	buzz
fun	hole	vest
dew	X-ray	quick

Ideally, you should persuade a friend to learn as well, while learning to finger spell letters is achieved relatively easily (although few non-native users achieve fluency), the reception or reading of finger spelling is much more difficult. Ask a friend to finger spell short words and try and read them. Identify particular points of ease and difficulty, and reflect upon any strategies that you develop ◀

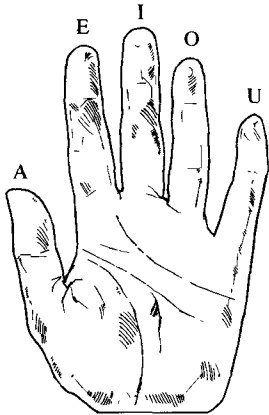


Figure 3.15

U Finger spelling is rarely used as a total means of communication—clearly it would be very slow. If names are finger-spelt, when they are repeated this is generally reduced to the first letter of the name.

Some languages do include more finger-spelt words than others; traditionally, BSL in Scotland has incorporated more finger spelling, and occasional examples of total use of finger spelling have also emerged. Harold Hofsteter was born deaf to hearing parents who communicated with him totally using the one-handed alphabet. It is claimed he could read by the age of 4 years.

Communication with deaf-blind people is often totally finger spelt. In this country it is based on the two-handed alphabet, spelt on the person's hand (see Figure 3.16).

Activities

◀ Activity 5

Ask someone to learn a few letters from the deaf-blind alphabet, and to form words and spell them onto your hands

- (a) Can you read them?
- (b) What are the difficulties? ◀

◀ Comment

(a) You will have found it much more difficult to read back finger-spelling than to do it

(b) You will have tried to recognize individual letters—but this is too slow a process. Competency comes from recognizing groups of letters ◀



Figure 3.16 Deaf-blind manual alphabet