

# British sign language essay sample



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This review will be discussing the topic of Makaton and the use of this technique within the educational environment. Makaton is a technique that was devised from British Sign Language (BSL), it is a much simpler form of communication and uses common vocabulary that is used everyday speech. It was devised as “ a way of increasing the ability to communicate in those who live with learning difficulties, such as those living with Autism and those with cognitive impairment”. (Rowlinson, 2010, n. p) It is also used with individuals that have speech problems. Makaton is a much simpler form than BSL as it also incorporates the use of picture cards and ties in facial expressions with the word to produce more contact in a shortest form.

Makaton fascinates me and has done since I was a young age. I was very lucky that my mother worked in a special needs school and was a Makaton Teacher. If we had days off school then we were able to attend work with her and she what life was like you had a disability. Due to the fact my mother spent all day signing, it become the norm that the odd sign would slip in when she was talking with us. Once I became a mother, I used a couple of basic everyday signs with my children when they were babies and found that this helped them a lot when they were trying to learn how to communicate with me.

This review will consider the Advantages and Disadvantages of this technique and examine the theories behind Makaton and how it is used today.

What is Makaton?

BSL was around to help children who were deaf or had hearing problems, but there was not anything to help children with learning difficulties to communicate. Makaton is a unique language programme offering a structured, multi-model approach for the teaching of communication, language and literacy skills. Makaton is widely used throughout the world. “ Today Makaton is used within Schools, hospitals, training environments such as colleges and social education centres and in homes of children and adults who have communication difficulties” (ELCE, 2010 n. p)

The signs are derived from BSL, which is the cultural language of the Deaf Community. This often allows a child or adult to understand much more of what is spoken and so reduces frustration. It has been shown to positively encourage the development of spoken language. Makaton “ is a visual system of communicating that uses signs and pictures. It is designed to support the spoken word, not to replace it.” (Beith, Tassoni, Bulman & Robinson, 2005, pg120) It allows the individual to communicate with the people they interact with everyday, such as teachers, parents, siblings and friends. It is made up from using two types of vocabularies. “ The Makaton Vocabulary relies heavily on natural gestures, body language and facial expressions to portray the messages.” (Foreman & Crews, 1998, pg 17) This in turn enables children and adults to master the signs quicker than if they were learning British sign language.

Makaton is split in to two areas:

**Core Vocabulary:** This aspect provides users with basic, everyday concepts that the individual is able to develop on as they progress through their

education. There are “ approximately 300 concepts .... that are taught in a specific order. There are 9 stages of frequently occurring and motivating concepts. Concepts are taught rather than individual words, for example; ‘ food and eat’ represent the same concept and therefore there is one sign to learn. (Reguson, ND, NP) Although the programme is organised in stages, it can be modified and tailored to the individual’s needs. (See Appendix 1)

Resource Vocabulary: This is a much larger, topic based resource. That includes broader life experiences and is able to be linked with Core Vocabulary. There are over 7000 concepts. Walker (1985) created the resource vocabulary to support the core vocabulary; this helps the individual to develop skills of communication that they might not have learnt. Makaton symbols have three essential criteria

1. The symbols need to be pictographic
2. The symbols need to be simple and easy to draw so that other individuals are able to draw them
3. The symbols need to relate to language themes so that they can encourage the development of language

“ Symbols could be presented with the pictures that the child already knows and, at a later stage, the pictures could be removed if appropriate”. (ACE, 2000, n. p) ACE also suggests that educational environments are able to purchase software so that symbols can be printed off and used. (Appendix 2)

What are the main theories behind this technique?

“ The Makaton Vocabulary was developed in the 1970’s and became, and has remained, one of most pervasive and influential pedagogical approaches for children with severe learning difficulties.” (Sheehy & Duffy, 2009, pg 91)

The term Makaton is a derivation from: Margaret Walker-Senior Speech Therapist at the Hospital; Kathy Johnston and Tony Cornforth, both Psychiatric Hospital Visitors from the Association for the Deaf and Dumb (Cornforth, Johnston & Walker, 1974, pg 23). The name Makaton is made up of syllables from the beginning of each of their names Ma-Ka-Ton.

Makaton was “ originally designed in the early 1970s for a group of deaf adults, with mental handicap, living in an Institution and for their carers, peers and instructors. Both groups were unable to communicate about their basic needs or shared daily living experiences”. (Walker, 1987, pg1) This then lead individuals to have communication skills that they may never have acquired before.

What are the advantages of using Makaton?

“ Unlike BSL, Makaton uses speech as well as actions and symbols. This encourages children to learn many different forms of communication have shown good results in academic and social achievement by those who use it.

Makaton has now been developed and extended to allow access to the Curriculum. “ Manual signs and graphic symbols are used together with speech to provide a visual representation of language.” (Bass, 2003, pg20)

The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (E. D. S, 2007) declares that each individual must achieve their potential, but there is not always enough time for a teacher to provide this. Therefore there is an argument that every class

teacher needs access to a classroom assistant to help each pupil to achieve their full potential.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (Legislation, 2001) provided an enhanced education that was right for pupils with SEN. It was aimed at pupils with SEN attending mainstream education and being treated as any other individual pupil. The main aspect of the Act is to make sure that education institutes do not discriminate against disabled pupils. The amended Education Act 1996 turned into a “ positive endorsement of inclusion” (DFE, 2001). With this Act parents could send their child to a mainstream school and would be given support, but if they wished their child to go to a special school then this could be arranged as well.

Teachers have the overall responsibility of providing for each individual child’s needs. The teacher is the one who liaises with the child’s parent/carer, to keep them informed about their child’s progress. Teachers need to be aware of any issues that are happening at home since this can affect the child in class. Unfortunately, this rarely occurs, parents do not speak to teachers as often as they should do. It has been noted that “ boys are two and a half times more likely to have additional needs than girls” (Frankel 2011).

Most classes are made up of pupils from a “ variety of backgrounds, not with homogeneous groups of children from the same ethnic origins. An increasing number of students are immigrants, children who live between two languages, two cultures and children with disabilities.” (Cappellini 2005, pg xv) These children need support and understanding, just because they

cannot speak or write in English, they still need to learn it. “ Schools must recognise individual difference and provide support for pupils” (Flynn, Stainthorp 2006, pg 73)

A teacher’s main priority is to provide each child with the best education which meets individuals needs. “ A child with a special educational need is one who has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for them.” (Hall, 2009 pg 4) It is necessary for the teacher to be aware of any indications that could lead to a specific need, such as children who may show signs of struggling with a particular class.

A teacher cannot suggest that a child has a specific learning difficulty without support from other adults, including parents and other specialists. “ Teachers are taking on responsibility” (Warnock, Norwich, Terzi, 2010, pg 18) to retrain in Makaton so that they have the knowledge and understanding to help the individual pupil. If the school has access to an additional needs department, the teacher should precede here first. The teacher will be involved and have a relationship with staff in this department already.

The head teacher needs to become aware of any pupils with SEN. “ Head teachers and staff in mainstream, special schools and units ...have the responsibility for meeting the educational, social and care needs of pupils with additional support needs in their schools.” (HMle, 2004) The school might decide that an educational psychologist or other relevant professionals need to be involved. An educational psychologist is someone who supports children within an educational setting. They aim to help the child in the best

way and suggest options to provide appropriate guidance and maximise the child's learning.

More and More it is noticeable that Makaton resources are being used everywhere within the educational environment. Makaton is used throughout the UK and “ has now been adapted and is used within 40 other countries.” (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005 pg. 65) This recourse helps the individual “ to encourage expressive speech where possible; to develop an understanding of language through the visual medium of the signs and the logical structure of the sign language.” (Kyle & Woll, 1998, pg33)

Makaton has developed over the years, “ there has been a recent surge of interest in using signing with all babies and young children, not just those with special needs”. (Ford, 2006, pg 1) This proves that this technique can be used with anyone to help support communication. Hooper and Walker (2007, pg38) State that Custer and Osguthorpe (1983) believe students with mild and moderate learning disabilities are able to tutor mainstream peers in the use of sign language. This had a great advantage that it helps the individuals to feel that they have a sense of worth because they are given some reasonability, which in turn helps them blossom in to adults who can communicate with the world.

Makaton is now a charity and helps out as many individuals as they can. The charity have links with Apple and “ have had days to show how people are using iPads with children and adults with communication needs”. (M. C, 2012, n. p) Another method that the charity has developed is working with BBC's children's channel CBeebies. They launched a programme called “



Something Special". (BBC, n. d, n. p) This program is a massive hit with the children but what it shows through fun and entertainment is that children with special needs are no different from everyone else. The 'Something Special' programme teaches Makaton skills and through their website parents are able to find out more information on Makaton and how to use it with their children through activities and everyday life.

### Disadvantages of Makaton

The main opposing view of this method of teaching children language skills is that it may reduce the individualised process of the development of communication. Byler (1985) suggests that pupils should also be introduced to other methods and not rely on Makaton.

Teachers and parents need to be trained properly and understand Makaton so that it can be used to its full potential, if not then errors can arise. “

Providing totally individualised vocabularies for students is possible when only a small number of people need augmentative input in any given environment, but if the use of these vocabularies is to occur in an interactive context then very large numbers of interactors will be involved and difficulties in remembering individualised differences are more likely to occur and lead to confusion”. (Walker, 1987, pg3)

Leverton (Cited in Wilce, 2001, n. p) suggests that a major problem is that people start off using Makaton and it works so they then stop using it to its full potential. “ We love to hear that people have moved on from using us. But at the same time, we know that the number of communication-impaired children is leaping up, and the need is enormous.” Just because something is

working, why change it, the people that are responsible for these individuals need to look at why it is working and develop this in to a more positive result.

## Conclusion

Through this review it becomes clear that Makaton is so vital. “ Helping your child to communicate will totally change their lives. It will mean that you can understand them – this will help boost their self-esteem” (Le Blanc, 2012, pg120). Through this system, children are able to interact with other individuals; it encourages them to interact with others outside of the educational environment. “ During 1982 a survey was carried out by Thomas Coram Research institute which indicated that 95% of schools for children with special needs were using Makaton”. (ELCE, 2010 n. p) This proves that this technique works and it used be used throughout the educational environment.

Makaton has a very extensive range of resources that if used correctly, can help anyone who is having difficulties with communication. However language is always changing and Makaton is able to be adjusted at any point. Taylor (cited in Hogg, 1996, pg 415) suggests that Makaton needs to be adapted for other languages that are used within the UK, also that it can be accessible for all individuals that need it. It needs to cover areas of life that might occur such as abuse. Training courses need to be more affordable so that parents, family members and anyone who wishes to learn it can.

Children who have communication skills have every entitlement to learn how to communicate, we take “ speech, language and communication and words

which most of us use, comfortably and often, taking them for granted that we understand their meaning.” (Kersner & Wright, 2002, pg1) As some individuals understand what we are saying they just cannot reply but through Makaton this resource helps them to communicate.

I have found that using Makaton works from my own experience with my children and watching how it is used at nursery. I have a close friend who has a little boy with speech difficulties and he has really come on since using a small amount of signs to communicate what he is after, he also has a symbol book which he carries around. This technique has benefited him so much that his behaviour has improved and through this method it is noticeable that his communication skills are improving every day too.

To conclude with it has been made aware that children need to receive help at an early stage; parents and teachers need to actively seek assistance and work as part of a team. I plan to develop my knowledge on Makaton and learn how to use it within the classroom, after researching this method I have found that I am even more fascinated with the subject.