

## BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AS AN INSIGHT INTO CHINESE SIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Ensino de Língua de Sinais Britânica como  
inspiração no ensino de Língua de Sinais Chinesa

Gang Chen<sup>21</sup>

Tradução: Cristiane Hsu<sup>22</sup>

### RESUMO

Linguists around the world have reached a consensus on the concept that the sign language is a type of natural language<sup>[1]</sup>. From twentieth century to twenty-first century, the idea of the sign language with its own language development trajectory has evolved from unacceptable into widely accepted. As a new niche in social linguistics and anthropological linguistics,

### ABSTRACT

Linguistas ao redor do mundo chegaram a um consenso de que as línguas de sinais são um tipo de linguagem natural<sup>23</sup>. Do século XX ao século XXI, a ideia da língua de sinais com sua própria trajetória de desenvolvimento evoluiu de inaceitável para amplamente aceita. Como um novo nicho na sociolinguística e linguística antropológica, a "febre" da língua de

<sup>21</sup> Gang Chen é um professor surdo da Jiangsu Normal University, na cidade de Xuzhou, China.

<sup>22</sup> O texto de Gang Chen foi escrito originalmente em Chinês e traduzido para o inglês por Cristiane Hsu, que possui Mestrado em Linguística e Ensino de Língua Inglesa pela Universidade de Leeds, Mestrado em Fonoaudiologia pela Universidade Nacional de Enfermagem e Saúde de Taipei e PhD em Fonética pela University College London. Atualmente é Pesquisadora Associada da University | College London.

<sup>23</sup> Liu, Junfei, and Sun, Zhaocui. Sign language as a natural language. Chinese Journal of Social Science, 2013, (3): B04 Edition

the sign language “fever” surges in different social classes in China. The author of the current article is a Chinese Sign Language instructor, and this article mainly focuses on the current challenges in Chinese Sign Language (CSL) teaching, by exploiting British Sign Language (BSL) teaching as a core model for improvements in class management, teaching methods, teaching materials, qualification of sign language instructors and acquisition of CSL by Chinese deaf children. The future perspectives of CSL in China include the professionalization of CSL instructors, the dissemination of a common CSL, and the integration of deaf people into a more disabled-friendly society.

sinais surge em diferentes classes sociais na China. O autor deste artigo é um instrutor chinês da língua de sinais, e este artigo focaliza principalmente nos desafios atuais no ensino de língua de sinais chinesa (CSL), explorando o ensino de língua de sinais britânica (BSL) como um modelo central para melhorias na gestão do ensino, métodos e metodologias de ensino, materiais de ensino, qualificação de instrutores de língua de sinais e aquisição de CSL por crianças surdas chinesas. As perspectivas futuras da CSL na China incluem a profissionalização dos instrutores da CSL, a disseminação de uma CSL comum e a integração das pessoas surdas em uma sociedade mais adaptada aos deficientes.

#### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Sign language class, teaching methods, language acquisition, deaf teachers.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Palavras-chave Ensino de língua de sinais, métodos de ensino, aquisição de linguagem, professores surdos

## **Introduction**

According to a census study in 2010 conducted by the China Disabled Persons’ Federation, i.e. the Chinese governmental organization for managing affairs concerning disabled people, the total number of disabled people in China exceeded 8.5 million, and those suffering from speech, language and hearing impairments were 2.184 million<sup>24</sup>. The population of hearing impaired people in China outnumbers the sum of this population in the USA and in any of the European Countries, and thus, making the CSL the most used sign language in the world<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Zhao, Yanchao. China Disabled Persons’ Federation China’s announced that the disabled population in China is over 85 million according to the new statistics. *China’s Disabled People*, 2012, (4): 20.

<sup>25</sup> Xu, Jianguan. A comparative study of sign language policy for the deaf in China, Sweden and the USA. *Chinese Special Education*, 2013 (8): 36-41.

Ever since the publication of William Stokoe's "Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf" in 1960<sup>26</sup>, developed countries, such as the USA, European Countries, Japan and South Korea, have increasingly concentrated research efforts in understanding language acquisition by deaf children, in designing feasible curricula for sign language courses, in providing adequate interpretation service for sign language, and in genuine application of psycholinguistic theories in sign language. These research findings served as incentives for further investigation in acquisition and mastering of sign language.

Sign language class is the best platform for learning sign language, during the learning process, sign language learners have to use their eyes to observe and hands to sign, as sign language exploits hand gestures, facial expressions and corporal movements to convey communication. In China, CSL courses have been flourishing in higher education. For instance, Fudan University, Beijing Normal University, Jiangsu Normal University, East China Normal University, Liaoning Normal University, Chongqing Normal University offer degrees in linguistic studies in sign language, while Zhengzhou Institute of Technology and Nanjing Normal University for Special Education established programmes for sign language interpretation. The teaching staffs of these courses usually are deaf people hired as external contractors to provide instructors to hearing students at undergraduate and graduate levels, in order to enable them to work with deaf people and CSL after graduation. Other CSL training programmes offered by communities, charities and civil organisations provide CSL teaching to those who are interested in CSL and willing to facilitate their communication with deaf people.

Due to cultural disparity, sign language teaching in the UK differs from China in teaching methods, course syllabus, instructors' qualification, learning outcomes and students' feedback. In order to better understand the BSL instruction in the UK, the author visited University College London, University of Central Lancashire and BSL WORKS, and kept a record based on observation of BSL instruction, interaction with BSL deaf instructors and close examination of BSL teaching materials. The main purpose of the visits is to provide insights for specialised teaching techniques, and tailored course syllabus and teaching materials, by comparing CSL teaching to BSL teaching.

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<sup>26</sup> Zheng, Xuan. Research on Chinese Sign Language teaching for the hearing people. *Modern Special Education*, 2012, (4): 15-18.

## 2 Differences in Teaching Between BSL and CSL

### 2.1 The Pedagogy in Sign Language Teaching

The education system in the UK have been developed throughout centuries, in the modern times it has evolved into a complex, complete, yet flexible machinery<sup>27</sup>. BSL teaching has been developed and improved over three decades, it has already established as an idyllic teaching scheme, in terms of its professionalism, regularization and management. The BSL classes can be categorised into three different levels: 1) introductory, for those who are experiencing their first contact with sign language, including young children who recently diagnosed as deaf, hearing parents of deaf children, and members of general population who are interested in learning sign language; 2) intermediate, for those who already learnt the basics of sign language, they may be sign language interpreters or social workers who regularly work with deaf people or in the deaf community; and 3) advanced, for those whose skills are beyond the intermediate level, they may be advanced sign language interpreters, TV hosts of programmes for deaf people, and scholars conduct research in sign language. A clear definition of BSL proficiency level aids in accommodating learners of the same level, facilitates allocation of appropriate teaching resources, avoids poorly planned teaching, which may result in learning delays and inefficiency. In BSL, deaf people are the preferred instructors, because they are capable to teach BSL without an “accent”, as they acquired BSL as mother tongue and fully mastered BSL’s structures and linguistics.

In contrast, the first school for deaf children in China was founded in Yantai only in 1887<sup>28</sup>. Ever since, the number of schools for deaf people in China has flourished, reaching the total sum of 2,053 educational institutions in 2015<sup>29</sup>. Most of deaf people had their first contact with CSL in courses provided by these schools, where the instructors are mainly hearing people who acquired CSL as a second language. With the modernisation of the Chi-

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<sup>27</sup> Xiao, Xiao. British educational system: Current situation, educational system, organisation, and peculiarities. *Inner Mongolia education*, 2012, (3): 38-40.

<sup>28</sup> Sun, Guihua, and Liu, Qiufang. The first school for the deaf in China: Yantai Kai Yin. Ji'nan: Shandong Electronic Audio Video Press, 2007: 1-5.

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Bulletin of national education development in 2015. Retrieved from: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A03/s180/moe\\_633/201607/t20160706\\_270976.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A03/s180/moe_633/201607/t20160706_270976.html), 2016-07-06/2016-07-12.

nese society, sign language is gradually gaining the public attention. For instance, Chinese Central Television have included sign language interpretation when broadcasting news, community-based CSL training courses have bloomed in number, and higher education have offered more professional CSL programmes. Yet, the number of professional CSL instructor could not accompany the ever increasing demand for qualified CSL instructor. Although higher education institutions are increasingly demanding for professional deaf CSL instructors, it is rather common to witness the embarrassing situation that many of CSL cannot recruit qualified CSL instructors to deliver quality teaching. And this is the main issue that affects the CSL teaching in its infancy.

## 2.2 Teaching Resources for Sign Language

In the BSL classes, the teaching materials and resources are abundant in diversity. The majority of these resources are provided by the National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People, the Association of Sign Language Interpreters and British Deaf Association, and the British Deaf Association. For instance, *British Sign Language for Dummies*<sup>30</sup> is written for beginners. It explained each sign with precise description of the gesture, position, movement and direction, and illustrated with humorous pictures and straightforward tips for fast learning, making the learning process fun, easy and relaxing.

Currently there are not many available teaching materials for CSL, most of CSL courses are designed based on Chinese Sign Language, written by the China Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, a subsidiary of the government-run China Disabled Persons Federation, and published by Huaxia Publishing House in 2003<sup>31</sup>. As the pioneering book in CLS teaching, it is the preferred choice as of the vast majority of CSL course in China. However, many CSL instructors have found it difficult to find inspiration in this book for improving teaching methods and syllabus design. The major problem of this book is with the description of hand shapes and gestures, which

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<sup>30</sup> Napier, Melinda, Fitzgerald, James, and Pacquette, Elise. *British Sign Language for Dummies*. Chichester, UK: John, Willey and Sons, Ltd, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> China Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. *Chinese Sign Language*. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2003.

impedes the conception of more concise lesson plans, making it the major obstacle for the CLS teaching.

### 2.3 Teaching Methods in Sign Language

In BSL class, teaching technique is essential, each instructor should be equipped with assorted teaching skills, yet every teaching method convert to a common denominator – the coordinated use of hand gestures, facial expressions and corporal movement to successfully convey message. The most exploited teaching method in these classes is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)<sup>32</sup>, conceptualised by the American sociolinguist Dell Hymes in his 1972 journal article “On Communicative Competence”<sup>33</sup>, as a response to the theoretical limitations found in Chomsky’s “Transformational-Generative Grammar”. CLT is a world-wide known in language pedagogy, with the core-concept set in student-centred interaction as means of language acquisition, instead of targeting language learning through explicit teaching of syntactic rules and uses<sup>34</sup>.

As a natural language, sign language should also be taught within the CLT framework. Following this perspective, in the sign language classes offered in the UK higher education institutions, instructors constantly encourage students to use sign language to greet and communicate with peers. Through CLT, sign language teaching is delivered in a more enjoyable way, where students have their learning anxiety reduced and learning interest increased. In summary, communicative competence is to know when to say, where to say, how to say, and whom to say to. In this way, the person masters the essential language skills which allow him/her to communicate effectively in different situations with different peoples<sup>35</sup>.

In BLS classes, CLT has been successful to break the ice in the introductory classes, where students with no prior experience in sign language have their first contact with BSL in a friendly atmosphere created by the BSL

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<sup>32</sup> BSL QED. Teaching Method. Retrieved from: [http://www.bslqed.com/Teaching\\_Method-i-444.html](http://www.bslqed.com/Teaching_Method-i-444.html), 2008-11-11/2016-07-11.

<sup>33</sup> Hymes, Dell H. On communicative competence. In Pride, J.B.; Holmes, J. *Sociolinguistics: Selected readings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1972: 269-293.

<sup>34</sup> Brumfit, C.J., and Johnson, K. *Communicative Language Teaching*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Wang, Ying. Evaluating students’ English writing skills based on progress. *The Examination Weekly*, 2010, (43): 108-109.

instructor who uses simple but intuitive signs to welcome the students. For example, the instructor may sign as following:

- Thumbs turned up, eyebrows raising, smiling face to express “how are you?”
- Fists held tight, eyebrows frowning, nervous face to express “are you nervous?”
- Hands open, corners of mouth up, clapping hands to express “are you happy?”
- Arms falling to the body sides, eyes slightly closed, exhausted face to express “are you tired?”

An experienced BSL instructor is able to observe students’ behaviours, understand their anxiety, and use exaggerated facial expression and body language to teach the first signs to the students in an enjoyable way. In turn, the instructor’s friendliness will further encourage students to mimic signs, and the purpose of using signs for communication is then achieved.

In the past, CSL teaching used to be conducted by hearing instructors, the main focus of lessons used to be based on Mandarin Chinese syntax, where each written word was represented by a specific sign, thus a spoken sentence was interpreted by many gestures and movements, even the punctuation was signed. Often in the same class, these CSL instructors had to ensure lip-reading skills were taught to students, leading them to teach with exaggerated articulation and wide-open mouth shape<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, in many of deaf schools in China, students were used to sign and speak at same time.

CSL teaching has been developing more positively in recent years. Although CSL instructors has become professionalised, CSL still lacks systematic teaching methods, and the instructor have to try their luck in finding suitable teaching materials for other sign languages. Taking the CSL course run by the department of special education in Zhengzhou Institute of Technology as an example, their CSL instructors are deaf people and hired as teaching staff. Although these instructors have not receive formal CSL teaching training, as native user of CSL they can demonstrate the signs face-to-face to students, accompanied by rich facial expressions and body language, arousing students’ interests and affection in learning CSL.

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<sup>36</sup> Li, Kai. Comparison of the Higher Education for the Deaf between China and the USA. *Education and Occupation*, 2011, (35): 159-160.

### 3. The Effectiveness of CLT in CSL Class

In China, CSL course is offered as an elective worthy for academic credits in many universities and colleges. In institutions such as Zhengzhou Institute of Technology, Nanjing Normal University for Special Education, Nanjing University, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing Normal University, China Pharmaceutical University, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, etc., CSL courses are taught by deaf instructors, and this is a great improvement in CSL history<sup>37</sup>.

As a person with congenital deafness, the author has been working as a senior instructor in China for many years, with expertise in pedagogy and teaching, he conducted an experimental teaching in CSL class using the BSL teaching framework. The students were informed about the syllabus before the course started. The course venue was at room 111 in the Department of Linguistic Science of Jiangsu Normal University. From 41 enrolled students, 35 were undergraduates, 6 graduates, and all of them were studying in linguistics-related programmes. A survey in student profile has been carried out, and the results showed that none of the students had prior contact with CSL, and the majority of them were motivated to learn CSL for academic research purposes or by personal interest in sign language.

In the beginning of each lesson, the author would project on the screen the PowerPoint slides containing pictures and images to be used as prompts during the class. As no words were written on the slides, students were encouraged to rely solely on vision to perceive and learn. For instance, the first slide contained two pictures – one showing a person smiling and the other showing a person welcoming with open arms, and applying the principles of CLT, the author led students to sign: first pointing to the smiling picture, using the index fingers to point to the centre of the lips, then moving the fingers towards to the corner of the mouth, as if writing the letter ‘u’, and smiling while making these movements; next pointing to the welcoming picture, moving the open palm several times in front of the chest, while keeping smiling. Soon students realised that these signs meant ‘welcome’ in CSL, and many were astonished at how intuitive the sign language could be.

In the second slide, there were 6 facial pictures, depicting emotions such as happiness, nervousness, fear, anger, embarrassment and daydreaming.

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<sup>37</sup> Wu, Anan, and Yang, Junhui. Introduction to Chinese Sign Language. Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou University Press, 2014.



Students observed thoroughly how the author signed each emotion. The author pointed to the picture for embarrassment, then bit the lower lip, lowered the head, used right hand to cover the face from right to left, and smiled uneasily. When students saw the author's performance, they eagerly tried to mimic every single body movement and facial expression. Sometimes hilarious situations may rise and make everyone in the class to burst out laughing, but these are essential for the students to perceive the CSL is an interesting and entertaining class.

In the course feedback survey, a student wrote: "CSL is an amazing language which surprisingly uses both facial expressions and gestures to convey meaning. I never had the same experience when learning a new language. Thank you, teacher, for the vibrant class!" This demonstrates that teaching CSL with concise pictures and simple signs is an excellent start for those who are enthusiastic about sign language learning.

Based on the experimental teaching sessions described above, CLT facilitates teaching and learning when used with adequate teaching resources. However, disregarding the teaching methods or frameworks, instructor's personality, attitude and flexibility are the key features for the successful teaching. In the CSL class, he instructor should be adept at using the eyes, facial expressions, hand gestures and body movements to provide a joyful dynamic learning environment, and to stimulate students' willingness in learning<sup>38</sup>.

Therefore, the essence of sign language teaching comprises in "teaching is the fundamentals of learning" for the instructors, and in "good teacher-student bond leads to trustful relationship" for students. In this sense, the sign language classroom can be best described with the proverb "speech is silver, silence is golden", where learning a new language does not require any vocalizations.

## 4 Suggestions for CSL Teaching

### 4.1 Enhance Professional Training for CSL Instructors and Promote Teaching of the Generic CSL

China as a vast country has several ethnicities, cultures and languages. This principle also applies to sign language, as CSL can be categorised into

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<sup>38</sup> Lu, Wei. Research and suggestions for the sign language teaching in Chinese universities. *Journal of Changchun University*, 2014, (5): 689-700.

southern, northern and western. In China, sign language is more frequently used in the South (centred in Shanghai) and the North (centred in Beijing) of the country. These two areas differ largely in hand shape, location, movement and direction when signing the same concept. For example, “many years” is signed with clapping hands in the South, but in the North it is signed as holding the fist with the other hand; “ten” is sign in the South with index fingers making “x”, but in North it should be “+”; “yellow” is signed in South as writing “H” on the face, but in North it is signed with thumb and index finger gesturing “L”, and setting the thumb on the face while moving the index up and down twice. The differences in signing are similar from those found in Chinese Mandarin and other Chinese Languages.

Interestingly, Chinese deaf people from different geographic areas are not affected by these signing differences, as they are able to communicate with each other, yet the hearing learners of CSL are not equipped with this ability. Based on the author’s observations, there two main reasons for this disparity – first, deaf people are native user of sign language, and are capable of using facial expressions and body language as additional cues for understand the meaning of the signs; second, hearing students have limited contact with sign language outside of classroom, they learn from few instructors, thus they do not have enough exposure to sign language to become a fully proficient user. Ultimately, these issues could be solved if instructors are qualified and more prepared to deal with regional languages in CSL, and if there is a generic version of CSL that facilitates teaching, learning and communication.

#### **4.2 Proposing New Standardised CSL Teaching Materials to Improve CSL Teaching Quality**

Nowadays, there are teaching manuals and textbooks for CSL are available for purchase, such as *Daily Conversation in Chinese Sign Language*<sup>39</sup>, *Training Materials for Chinese Sign Language (Trial)*<sup>40</sup>, *Practical Sing Language for Love Deaf*<sup>41</sup>, *Introduction to Chinese Sign Language*<sup>42</sup>, *Basic*

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<sup>39</sup> China Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. *Daily Conversation in Chinese Sign Language*. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> China Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. *Training Materials for Chinese Sign Language (Trial)*. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Shandong Love Deaf Sign Language Research Center. *Practical Sing Language for Love Deaf*. Tianjin: Tianjin Education Press, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Zheng, Xuan. *Basic Course for Sign Language*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2015.

Course for Sign Language<sup>43</sup> and Chinese Sign Language<sup>44</sup>, just to name a few. However, none of these materials are standardised or written following a specific pedagogy, therefore, in practice, CSL instructors often prefer to rely on his/her own teaching style.

Currently, Chinese Sign Language edited by China Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has been widely used in as the course book. Many CSL instructors intuitively consider this book as standard CSL teaching material, yet little they know that in the book many signs for words and phrases are not those ones used by the deaf in the everyday life, as well as the gestures and movements are much more complex and inconsistent than those used in practice. Deliberately or unconsciously, instructors overemphasise Mandarin Chinese syntax in CLS teaching, and students end up learning sign language that cannot be used to communicate outside the classroom.

Therefore, more research in CSL should be encouraged, particularly those related to CSL teaching. The project of a new CSL book should be interdisciplinary, involving governmental departments, deaf associations, publishers, CSL communities and CSL teaching institutions. The content of this book should be close related to the real CSL used by the Chinese deaf people, based on language teaching pedagogy, and aiming teachers' and students' needs.

### 4.3 Reforming CSL Teaching Methods to Improve Teaching Quality

With the ever-accelerating updating of technology and information, CSL should keep pace, or it might be soon left behind. Professional CSL instructors should invest their effort in making CSL lessons more effective and efficient. Based on the author's observations in sign language teaching of many universities, colleges and institutions, the use of multimedia in the classroom is prudent and essential [22]. Especially due to the nature of sign language, CSL needs more visual and tactile stimuli to aid teaching process than any spoken language. Picture card containing signs, films, animations, music, mimes, printed words, objects, games, etc., alongside computers, projectors,

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<sup>43</sup> Lu, Wei. The application of multimedia technology in the college sign language teaching. *Journal of Changchun University*, 2015, (11): 137-140.

<sup>44</sup> Wu, Ting, Pan, Ya, and Zhang, Ruirui. A new perspective of education for all people: An interview with the director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). *World Education Information*, 2016, (7): 3-7.

video recording devices, mirrors, all help with the learning in the classroom environment, making learning process more pleasant, students more motivated, and class better-quality.

The deaf people are native users of sign languages. They are naturally proficient in sign language's syntactic rules and morphology, thus they best suit sign language teaching positions. Through contact with deaf instructors in the classroom, students can better understand the deaf culture, and master the use of sign language in various social situations.

#### **4.4 Increasing the Number of Deaf Child-Oriented CSL Class, Promoting Their Communication with Parents**

During language development, except those born to deaf parents, deaf children have to face the challenging in trying to learn spoken language with their limited residual hearing. Most of hearing parents believe, once their deaf children are fitted with hearing aids, they will be hearing and then being able to speak. Yet, these hearing devices are of very little help (if not of none help at all) for deaf children. Due to the communication barriers between hearing parents and deaf children, these children may live in isolation, not knowing or even fearing of the world beyond their family houses and schools, even leading them to develop sign of depression. Writing is not a realistic solution for these communication barriers, as deaf children are usually not proficient in expressing themselves with writing. Therefore, a feasible solution is to have both children and parent to learn sign language.

Based on evidence from research and recommendations from experts, hearing parents of deaf children in the UK and North European Countries are encouraged to learn sign language to communicate with their deaf children. While their children learn sign language in kindergartens and schools, these parents are being trained in specialised organisations. The parents also receive concrete support from the government and society, besides of free sign language lessons, they are also eligible for paid leaves and home sign language tutoring service.

According to Global Education Monitoring Report by UNESCO, children should be educated with language they can appreciate, and they should receive at least six years of formal education in their native language. Under this statement, hearing parents have to responsibility to support their deaf children in acquiring sign language as their mother tongue. The acquisition of

sign language by children should start as early as possible. In this sense, there should be more kindergarten for deaf children in China.

## 5. Conclusion

BSL has a comprehensive scheme in pedagogy, teaching methods, teaching materials, and lesson planning, which promote the interaction between instructors and students, and guarantee the quality of teaching and its outputs. In this ambit, CSL should be largely improved, and the most urgent issue is that there is no generic sign language in China, which leads to inadequate teaching materials.

CLT is a very important strength in BSL. Every instructor should be capable of teaching sign language with hand gestures, facial expressions, and body language, and encourage students to do the same in order to maximise the output of learning outside of classroom. Yet, CLT is not without its limitations. For instance, practice activities such as “telling” a story from the pictures are not adequate using this framework, because for accomplish the task, the students must already master the basic skills in sign language. Therefore, CLT is not the only solution for CSL teaching, and CSL instructors should explore other teaching methods that fit to their students’ level.

As suggestion for the future research and studies in CSL teaching and learning, the author would suggest to understand the questions under the sociolinguistic and language competence perspective. There are still many challenges to be overcome and many ambitions to be achieved in CSL.

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