

# We should all learn how to read the signs

Meryl Glaser

SOUTH African Sign Language (SASL) is a dynamic language, which is the natural language of the deaf community.

It is capable of performing all the functions of a language so users can chat, think, dream, pray, flirt and reflect in this language. It has its own language structure and is not linked to any spoken language.

Like all other languages, it is associated with a rich and vibrant culture – deaf culture.

Most (as many as 95 percent) deaf or hard-of-hearing (D/HH) children are born into hearing homes – this is also true for children who lose their hearing in early childhood through disease, accident and abuse.

This means that most D/HH children have no easy access to SASL, as their families do to sign. Importantly, they also have no easy access to the spoken language of their homes and communities, because of their hearing loss.

In order to acquire language naturally, children need to be exposed to language input from mature language users to have many opportunities to interact and communicate in the language and to have adequate sensory systems; ears or eyes with which to absorb this language stimulation and develop full language competence.

This is different from being taught a language. All hearing children acquire language naturally regardless of which language is spoken in their homes.

This is equally true for deaf children who are born into deaf homes where sign language is the home language.

The challenge for D/HH children to naturally access language – be it spoken or signed – means that many arrive at school with little or no language skills. It is generally the task of the foundation phase at schools to convert a learner's language into literacy skills and the academic achievement that depends on this literacy.

Although modern technologies such as hearing testing, digital hearing aids and cochlear implants offer remarkable opportunities, they are not a simple solution, especially in the South African context.

Amplification technology and 'rehabilitation' is out of reach for many. Sign language is a fully-fledged communication tool that needs more recognition

### SEE ME

Kirsty MacLons

You never saw me but I was here long before you

Wild stories of the hunt flew from my fingers as we gathered around the silent fire

See me I see you feeling sorry for me

Thinking me alone and isolated, I see it in your eyes

You see my deafness as something to be fixed

I see you limiting my future to hand-outs

I see my Deaf community I can communicate with my face-to-face family

From Cuba to Cambodia. See me

See I have ten toes and ten fingers, just like you

See I look just like you but I am not you I see you see me somehow lesser than you

Hearing impaired does not describe who I am

but something that I am not like non-white

See me I am Deaf

See me You never saw me but I saw your warped lies

bounce from the halls of Milan 1880, deciding my future, forbidding my language

And I saw you 130 years later mumble an apologetic excuse

I saw you argue and disagree over how to teach me.

And now I see me poorly taught, waiting for my disability grant

See me I see you clearly through my lowered eyes

But you never saw me I see a future where my teacher can sign to me a linguistic moving representation of a scientific process

I see questions and answers fly fleetingly backwards and forwards on fingertips

See me I see you misunderstand my language, seeing it as an inferior transliteration of your spoken languages

Strangely, I see you teach baby sign to your hearing babies yet deny me the right to learn my natural language

You don't see how I choreograph my language to

argue a political point through mobile eyebrows

charge a tree into a helicopter with a wrist flick

travel back in time, cyclic hands over shoulder

You don't see the freedom of my four dimensional language

You don't see how words become moving pictures in

this quiet, vibrant language of my soul.

See me

See me patiently waiting, seeking answers, working harder

See my dream, my potential, my brilliance.

See my freedom, my invention, my possibilities, my uniqueness

See my language, my culture, my identity.

I am a child of the eye not a child of the ear

I am another way to be human

I give you new understandings, new perceptions, new encounters

I am more adaptable, more that you can imagine

I am more See me boldly grab my rights

See what I will become

See your tomorrow world shaped by me?

See me striding out of the meadow fields, out of the classroom, out of the university

See me, my future and yours

See me, the dream realised

See me, the Deaf South African child

See me

MacLons has over 28 years of teaching and materials development for signed languages and Deaf education, from pre-school to university level, both locally and internationally.

She is currently the Education and SASL specialist at SLED (Sign Language Education and Development). [www.sled.org.za](http://www.sled.org.za)

around them, so they can easily access this language input and interaction with adult users of SASL results in quick, easy acquisition.

Signing children have age-appropriate language skills and enter school with the language skills necessary to embark on the literacy learning adventure of the early years at school, giving them the tools with which to satisfy their curiosity and thirst for world knowledge.

This is not a simple issue as we know that access to SASL is not available in hearing homes.

In addition, many teachers who are employed at schools for deaf children have limited sign language skills due to lack of training both pre-service and in service.

Programmes to teach families SASL are limited, especially in rural areas.

SASL is not yet recognised as an official language in South Africa, despite ongoing efforts to lobby for this status. The Constitution does however recognise SASL as a language development and the South African Schools Act (96) declares that SASL should be regarded as an official language for teaching in public schools.

The Department of Basic Education has developed a curriculum (Grades R to 12) for teaching SASL as a language and is engaged in a roll out process planned for January. This will give deaf children an opportunity to learn in their natural language.

Technology and SASL should not be seen as standing in opposition to one another. Each provides some level of solution but each comes with a set of limitations and challenges.

It is important to consider the individual child and the socio-economic context in which he or she lives.

What we want for all D/HH children is the opportunity to develop to their full potential, learn all they can and be happy, contributing members of society.

Glaser works with Deaf Community of Cape Town teaching literacy and computer skills. She trained as a speech therapist and audiologist. She serves on the ministerial committee for SASL curriculum development.



IN TOUCH: For over 14 years, SLED (Sign Language Education and Development) has been working towards outstanding education for deaf children through South African Sign Language (SASL) by providing training and materials for schools across Southern Africa. SLED is a unique, majority-deaf NPO whose vision is to see all of South Africa's deaf children achieving their full potential, as it facilitates deaf children's equal and democratic right to literacy and learning through the promotion of SASL. Picture: SLED

### How are they doing now?

Owen is switched on!

OWEN'S cochlear implant surgery on August 4 was successful. His parents, Tasmyrn and Brandon report that the first days post surgery was the most trying for their little fighter. He kept pulling at his bandages – they just seemed to be in his way.

Owen's switch-on took place on August 22. Initially he struggled with the sound and just wanted the "music" to stop. Each morning his parents persevered through the tears of his anxiety and discomfort of the initial 30 minutes when his processor was switched on. Within ten days the tears, anxiety and discomfort became less of a concern as he adapted to his new ability to process all the sounds he was hearing.

He has gone from wearing his cochlear for two hours to 12 hours a day. At school he is referred to as Mr Talkative who enjoys socialising with his peers.

"Owen makes it his mission to tell us about each and every new sound that is of interest to him, he will point at his ear and say 'I heard that' so we know the cochlear is without a doubt making a difference," says Tasmyrn.

Many blessings have come this family's way since the article in the Health Times' Silent Ability series, Part2, in July. Brandon recently started work at a new company allowing Tasmyrn to work half day, enabling her to spend more one-on-one time on rehabilitation work with Owen, and fun with her boys on the beach.

Fundraising for Owen's surgery to sound exceeded all expectations. Not only have funds covered his surgery, but also the costs of his new hearing aid. Paying it forward, the family returned his donated Widex Baby 440 hearing aids back to Widex with the hope that another child can now benefit from them.

This little guy has a bright future ahead of him and we look forward to following his #journey2sound. – Chevone Petersen



### One more week till Amyoli has sound

I REMEMBER SammyN messaging the weekend before Amyoli's surgery: "She's not feeling well, she has a fever. What do I do? Should I take her to hospital or what?"

I completely understand the panic as a parent knowing that your child needs to have surgery and the slightest hint of ill-health results in surgery being postponed.

Thankfully Amyoli (who featured in Part 3 of the Silent Ability series) felt much better the next day. Her surgery was a success and I was grateful knowing that SammyN had some amazing support – her friends and family waited with her outside the theatre room during the anxious moments of waiting to hear how the complex operation went.

SammyN reports that her daughter's recovery is going very well and her switch-on is scheduled for October 1.

This family has decided that they will only travel to Cape Town later in the year to investigate possible schooling options for Amyoli in the Western Cape. An exciting future awaits this little one.

Fundraising for Amyoli's journey to sound is on-going. SammyN still needs additional financial support to ensure ongoing costs of medical services relating to Amyoli's rehabilitation is covered.

For more information contact SammyN via her email, [Xymkelongewu@gmail.com](mailto:Xymkelongewu@gmail.com) – Chevone Petersen



www.ecabelsoftlove.com  
www.ecabelsoftlove.com

NEED HELP? Join Chevone and Kai's friendly and informative family support group.

Sign language is our way, and right, of expressing our thoughts, feelings and ideas in the world of sound



## I am very proud to be deaf and am helping SASL to be recognised as an official SA language

I WAS born on 15 June 1981, the only deaf child and the youngest of seven children. My parents enrolled me at Carel du Toit at the age of two and in 1988 I joined the Dominican School for the Deaf where we used Total Communication (a mixture of signs that are supported by a spoken language in an ad hoc way).

My mother died when I was eight and communication with family became a challenge. I found comfort and support at school. My social worker at school understood my emotional needs at home, while

society just assumed that I was a spoilt brat.

At the age of fifteen I became the first head boy and member of the Representative Council of Learners and the first member of the School Governing Body. I received deaf leadership training in Durban, by Dr Wilma Newhoudt and Bruno Druchen. This training was facilitated by DeafSA and it was here where I became aware of South African Sign Language (SASL), which soon became my first language. The knowledge shared

during this leadership training empowered me to lobby for deaf people and acceptance of SASL. At the time, deaf students weren't accepted to complete Grade 12. I lobbied for the rights of deaf students. We made history in 2000 when we were the first four deaf pupils to complete Grade 12 at the Dominican School for the Deaf.

Attending Cape College where I was the first deaf student with SASL as a first language to complete their N6 Financial Management Diploma was very

difficult since I had no Sign Language Interpreter, but I never gave up. I struggled to find employment after completing my diploma and worked as a life guard at the Bellville South swimming pool. I then received a job offer at FNB where I gained invaluable experience across various departments and interpreted for deaf clients.

My contract at FNB expired and I enrolled at the University of the Western Cape where I completed my BCom Public Management

Degree. Again, this was a challenge, even though I wear bilateral hearing aids, my first language is SASL and with no interpreter I had to depend on lip-reading, eye contact and lots of notes.

While at UWC in 2007, I was nominated by DeafSA to attend the World Federation of Deaf Youth Assembly and Conference in Madrid. Here that I realised how essential sign language is for deaf people – it is a beautiful language.

In 2008, after my graduation, I joined the National Literacy

Campaign called Kha Ri Gude (Let Us Learn) project hosted by National Department of Basic Education in Pretoria. I was part of a team who developed the SASL structure on how to teach deaf illiterate people how to read and write. I am still the national monitor for three provinces.

Thereafter I was subcontracted by an independent company to provide ABET and some SASL training at Pollsmoor prison. Later I successfully applied for the Provincial Director position at

DeafSA Western Cape. This has given me a platform to communicate in SASL with my clients, staff, Deaf Provincial Council members and National Executive Committee members. I am grateful that I also have a boss who is deaf and fluent in SASL. Together we strive to make SASL accessible to deaf people.

In South Africa we have more than 600 000 deaf people and some 1.4 million people with hearing loss. SASL is not a spoken language, but it is a natural dialect from the deaf

community and we are working very hard to have this integral SA language recognised as the official 12th language in the country.

It is important for people to understand that there is no English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, and so forth in SASL. It is a language, South African Sign Language, and it forms an integral part of deaf culture.

My dream is to one day obtain my honours in Political Studies or Labour Law and I would like to have access to university studies in my first language, SASL. Sign language

interpreters are expensive and I cannot afford this service right now.

My moto for Deaf Awareness month is that being deaf is not an obstacle. We must all work together and make it possible for our human rights in South Africa to be recognised.

I am very proud to be deaf. Mohamed is the Provincial Director for DeafSA Western Cape, he actively lobbies for the needs of deaf persons rights to access to communication via SASL. See [www.deafsa.co.za](http://www.deafsa.co.za)