

The Pre-Entry and Entry-level courses are designed with people in mind who have learning disabilities and learning difficulties. It is therefore essential that Tutors planning to teach these give careful consideration to the way in which they deliver the training. The overall intention of these certificates is to recognise, develop and celebrate the signing skills that so many individuals who have learning difficulties and learning disabilities already possess.

Certificates at these levels may be gained during every day activity, as well as during pre-arranged, more formal courses.

For example, a Tutor who works in a day centre may wish to recognise the signs some individuals already use to encourage them to do so more often or increase their sign vocabulary. The Tutor could arrange for an explanatory briefing for the individuals, their carers, families and centre staff to explain the opportunity, and then register the course with Signalong.

Once the handbooks have been received, staff, carers, family and friends can all be involved with recording the signs the individual uses and recognises, and introducing and practising new signs in day-to-day activities both at the day centre, and in all areas of their lives.

In this way, teaching and learning is certain to be about real experiences in real situations, and relevant to the individuals' needs and choices.

The Elementary and Beginners awards can also be delivered in more a traditional course-style. It is suggested that each session lasts a maximum of one hour, and includes a break for refreshment and personal comfort.

The need for signing to be relevant to individuals' needs, and about real experiences in real situations remains paramount, as does the consideration that must be given to the extent to which the individual is able to generalise concepts, and how far developed is their understanding of symbolic representations. (Do they only recognise a real cat, or do they recognise a toy cat? Do they know that a picture of a shoe means "shoe" or do they only understand the concept when they're holding a real shoe?)

Depending on your experience of working with people who have learning disabilities, you will probably be able to assess your learners' levels of development during the first session.

Even in a formal environment, such as a classroom in a further education college, it's possible to focus each lesson on relevant, real experiences. For example, a college may be delivering animal care courses and is likely to welcome a visit from your learners who can then learn the signs for some of the animals, and some other useful signs such as soft, like, cuddle and danger.

In other settings the learners could, for example, spend one lesson visiting the canteen, learning and practising the signs for food, cutlery and crockery. Even looking out of the window, or a walk around the grounds of the local village hall or the residential care home or school, will give opportunities to sign and talk about people, cars, clothes and the weather, to name but a few.

Group activities can also offer opportunities for needs-led, real experiences in real situations. Use the refreshment break to practise signing, have an indoor picnic to extend "table" and "shopping" vocabulary. Play "Kim's Game" and "Mother Went To Market" drawing real objects out of a large shopping bag (or shopping basket if your learners' level of development suggests they need to see and select an object rather than draw at random). Play "Lotto" using pictures for the learners who can take meaning from them, and real objects for those whose development is at an object level. However you do it, have fun.