

I'm a hearing man living in the south-east of England and I'm currently learning BSL. For me, it's a labour of love, because I've reached 29 and never learnt another language before, so it's a challenge – one that I hope I'm rising to!



By Matthew Munson

Reader's Story



Where I live in east Kent, there's a sizeable Deaf community – and, to my shame, I never sought to communicate with anyone who happened to be Deaf, because I was terrified of not being understood ... or making an idiot of myself.

I'm glad I'm over that phase now!

I work with the general public every day, and Deaf people are being encouraged to make full use of our services; for me, I realised that I need to take a step and get over whatever worries I'd got about communicating effectively with the Deaf community. Since then, I've been on a Deaf awareness course and started learning BSL Level 1.

But what I've come to realise is that I can't just learn the language in isolation; I need to understand Deaf culture and history in order to place the language into context. So, I've started making Deaf friends, who are incredibly patient with me as I try and sign. One of my friends also suggested going to a local Deaf pub – and I'm glad I went!

I hadn't realised until then how common Deaf pub nights were throughout the country, and certainly in east Kent. Three Saturdays in every month have pub nights in different towns as well as Margate's night on a Wednesday in the local Weatherspoons. My friend (who I learn BSL with) and I decided to go along and see what it was all about.

I won't deny it; I was nervous. I remember once being with a group of Deaf people and they laughed at a joke I didn't understand – and I immediately felt self-conscious, as anyone would have felt in the same situation. Of course, back then I didn't sign – now, I've begun learning and,

going to the Deaf pub for the first time, I was well aware of my limitations in signing – but quickly found out how welcoming Deaf people can be.

To meet such a wide variety of people – who willingly travelled from around the south-east just to meet with friends for the evening – was awesome. I met a guy and his girlfriend who had travelled from London specifically to come to the Deaf pub, and another guy who I know from my BSL class had travelled over from Whitstable. Deaf pubs are big, popular occasions – and I was glad to be welcomed in like an old friend.

I was conscious of my limited BSL, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. Thankfully, all the Deaf people I spoke to didn't seem phased by my slow signing – or that I sign left-handed!

There's as much variety in the Deaf world as there is in the hearing world, of course, and individual Deaf people can be easier or harder to follow in the same way that, when I talk fast I must be difficult to follow. I felt sad that I couldn't understand everything that was being said, and I would have loved to have had more in depth conversations with people, but I know that will come – and I was never made to feel like I wasn't welcome back to improve my communication skills.

There were a couple of hearing people besides my friend and I; Sarah Martin, who

has been one of my inspirations, was there to introduce us, and Dee works with the Royal National Institute for the Deaf and is studying Level 2 at the moment. I tell you something, if I'm half as good as she is now when I do my Level 2 course, I will be a very happy man.

It made me far more appreciative of the world Deaf people live in. I was in a minority and had to work hard to make myself understood, as well as trying – and sometimes failing – to understand others. It made me appreciate what Deaf people have to face, and made me more determined to be as involved as I can with the language and the community in the future.

Who'd have thought all of that would have come out of a visit to the pub? If there's one way to learn a language, it's to immerse yourself in it and not be afraid to make mistakes (and occasionally make an idiot of yourself). That's a philosophy I'm sticking by, as I intend to make more visits to the local Deaf pubs – I feel as if my confidence has been boosted ten-fold by just one visit.

Thank you to everyone for making me so welcome, and I'm looking forward to next month!