

# Christmas Newsletter - December 2020

There is no doubt that 2020 has been a challenging year for everybody. At DCAL, we have had to adapt all our work, teaching and research to remote and new environments. This has been challenging, but has also helped us grow and develop in unexpected ways. In this newsletter, we would like to share with you not only our research and achievements during this difficult year, but also some of the challenges and tools that we developed to overcome them.



## Research

In spite of national lockdowns and the closure of UCL buildings for months, research at DCAL has continued remotely – have a look at some of our highlights below! You can also find information about our projects [here](#) and can also [sign up](#) if you want to be involved in future research.

### ***The deaf and signing brain.***

Studying the deaf brain not only contributes evidence to guide and improve health and education for deaf individuals, but it can also tell us a lot about how the brain works. Why is this? The brain is the organ that we use for making sense of all the information that we get through our senses. In hearing people, there are parts of the brain that are involved in making sense of sounds. These brain regions are used in deaf individuals for things such as vision, touch, language and keeping information in mind. In a [recent review](#), we discussed how these differences in function can arise, and what can they tell us about brain structure and function.

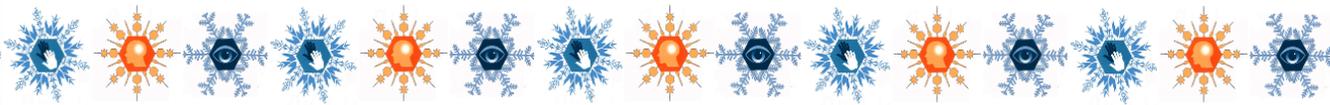


In another paper this year, our [research](#) has also shown that early and late learners of a sign language, both deaf and hearing, show different brain responses when looking at sign language. Both groups use 'visual' and 'language' areas of the brain to make sense of the language, but late signers relied more on visual areas, while early signers relied more on language areas of the brain. These data lend further support to the argument that robust early language experience is fundamental for 'native-like' responses to language in the adult brain, highlighting the vital importance of early access to language for deaf children.

### ***Sign Linguistics Research***

We have spent most of this year analysing data and writing up papers on BSL syntax, language attitudes, and how BSL signers quote and demonstrate actions of others when in conversation ('enactment'). Watch this space for upcoming publications! This includes a chapter on the future of sign language corpora which will be published in a volume about sign language corpora by Gallaudet University Press.

In the area of linguistics and technology, we co-organised [a workshop](#) about automatic sign language recognition and translation which highlighted recent developments - including a focus on technology that takes deaf people's actual needs into consideration (e.g. searchable sign language videos).



### **Language development in deaf children**

Early this year, the book 'Understanding Deafness, Language and Cognitive Development' was published to mark the career and contributions of Bencie Woll, founding director of DCAL and one of the greatest scholars in the field of deafness and sign language. The book focuses on language and cognitive development, and was edited by former DCAL co-director Gary Morgan. It has several contributions from past and present members of DCAL, and it's a great resource for language development researchers as well as teachers and clinical researchers. You can see the list of contents in this [link](#).

DCAL has pioneered language assessment tools for children acquiring BSL, but few such assessments exist for other sign languages. In collaboration with the Pedagogical University of Krakow and City University of London, we developed and have now published a Polish Sign Language (PJM) Receptive Skills Test, based on the BSL Receptive Skills Test used in the UK. Our preliminary [report](#) shows the potential of the PJM test to be used in educational, clinical and research environments, with good validity, reliability, and sensitivity to age. We will continue working on a standardised version that can be available for early intervention with deaf children who have delays or difficulties in developing Polish Sign Language.

### **Reading**

Our longitudinal Preschool Language and Literacy project investigates how early spoken and sign language skills relate to later reading. After having to suspend data collection at schools due to COVID-19, our team is back at work, planning the next phase of data collection in spring/summer 2021. We look forward to working again with all our participants and schools in the new year!

### **Age-related hearing loss**

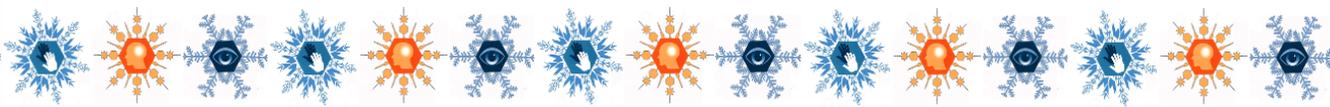
In a recent [pilot study](#), we explored the use of pharmacological interventions to improve speech perception in adults with age-related hearing loss. Our results show that a single dose of the drug dopamine can have a small but positive effect in hearing adults when they try to understand speech produced by a simulated cochlear implant. Further studies are needed to confirm this in larger groups and to evaluate the effect it can have in day-to-day communication, but it opens interesting avenues for interventions in hearing adults with age-related hearing loss.

## **Life in a COVID-19 world – contributions from DCAL**



The current pandemic has shaken our personal and professional lives, challenging the ways in which we communicate and work, in many cases with more profound effects for deaf and hard of hearing people. Members of DCAL developed a range of strategies and guidelines to adapt to these new challenges. Here we want to share some of these with you, as well as some other online resources that can be of use during this period of remote working.

**Remote working:** DCAL, like many organisations, has been getting to grips with online working and behaviour. We created remote working guidelines to ensure that deaf people could maximise their online participation in virtual meetings and events, and reduce visual demands and fatigue. Our guidelines have proved very useful to users across the globe, and Sannah Gulamani discussed them at the User Experience panel for the virtual [ASSETS 2020 Conference](#). You can download the guidelines here and find more



information in this [article and BSL video](#) for Limping Chicken - we would love to know if these are useful, so do get in touch via social media or [dcal@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:dcal@ucl.ac.uk).

**Face masks and communication:** Due to ongoing COVID-19 risks, face coverings have become required in many public spaces. Face coverings increase communication difficulty for everybody, especially deaf and hard of hearing children and adults. Deaf and hearing DCAL staff wrote a statement to highlight such issues, explain some possible adaptations, and highlight that the focus on face coverings should not take away from access for deaf BSL signers. Please help us disseminate [this statement](#) to your colleagues, friends and family!



**COVID-19 BSL e-books for children:** We teamed up with Frank Barnes School for Deaf Children to produce [4 BSL e-books](#) for deaf children about Covid-19. BSL was one of many sign languages included in this project by [RISE e-books team](#). These books are incredibly valuable for deaf children who use BSL, providing them with direct access to crucial information about coronavirus and its impact on everyday life. We hope you like them as much as we do!

**Online Language Assessment for deaf children and adults:** The [DCAL Assessment portal](#) hosts eight language and cognition assessments suitable for use with deaf individuals. These assessments have been based on 15 years of research at DCAL, and can be used to assess language abilities and language development in deaf adults and children. They can also be used to assess deaf signers where there are concerns about language impairment, brain injury, brain disease, stroke or dementia. Our tests are designed to be used by qualified professionals and researchers. If you wish to be tested, or to have your child assessed, please seek advice from a qualified professional who will be able to approach us to obtain permission and/or training to use the tests. [Get in touch](#) for further information.

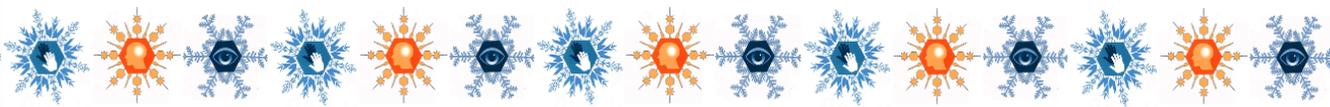
**Online Deaf awareness:** We continue offering a suite of [Deaf Awareness online courses](#) that aim to help health professionals better understand the communication needs of D/deaf and hard of hearing (HoH) people. These are fully accessible online, and accredited for CPD by professional bodies (e.g., the Royal College of Physicians and Royal College of Nursing). We are also thrilled to announce the upcoming release of a new online Deaf Awareness toolkit for teachers. This free short course will provide teachers (and other education professionals) with skills e.g. communication strategies to help them support deaf pupils. If you want to find out more about any of these courses please email us at [dcalcourses@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:dcalcourses@ucl.ac.uk).



## Studying at DCAL



This year has been unprecedented for university education. DCAL, like the rest of UCL, rose to the challenge -- we moved all our typical face-to-face teaching practices online, while ensuring a full and rich educational experience for our students. This has required a huge amount of work in a short space of time. It is working though! Students are enjoying our degree-level modules (e.g. 'Deafness, Cognition and Language', 'Sign Language Linguistics', 'Deaf Culture' and modules on interpreting). In addition, the BSL levels 1 and 2



modules have both been as popular as ever, this year online for the first time. For postgraduate students, we continue offering the [MSc in Language Sciences with specialisation in Sign Language and Deaf Studies](#), which attracts students from around the world. We also offer an [affiliate programme in Psychology and Language Sciences](#). This allows undergraduate students from overseas to study at UCL for one or two terms, with an option to specialise in Sign Language and Deaf Studies. Find out more about the courses we offer on our [website](#) and [get in touch](#) if you are interested in applying.

## Widening Participation, Engagement and Community Projects

We are delighted to be collaborating with **Deaf artist Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq and the east London deaf community** in '[The Light-Wave project](#)'. East London's deaf Community is a long-established part of East London life, but it has invariably been underrepresented in British deaf culture. The project aspires to facilitate a creative collaboration that recognises the east London Deaf community's history, culture and language.

In March, our lives changed, and many of our planned activities could not take place, but in August we successfully ran the [Discover UCL summer school for deaf and hard of hearing year 11 and 12 students](#) remotely. In 2021, Discover UCL will run for the 9th consecutive year, delivering a program that encourages and supports young deaf people's university applications. [Get in touch](#) if you want to find out more.



We've also been involved in many important conversations and groups to identify and discuss pressing issues. These include the **BSL roundtable at Parliament** to advocate for BSL access in parliamentary activities, with a recent advance being the interpretation into BSL of Prime Minister Questions every Wednesday at midday. We have been active supporters of the [Where Is the Interpreter Campaign](#), an extremely vital campaign asking the Prime Minister's Office to provide a BSL-English interpreter at live televised national addresses during the pandemic, ensuring equal access to information for deaf people.

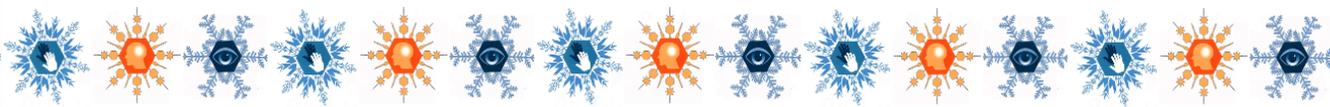
We have joined with many other organisations and the **United Kingdom Council on Deafness (UKCoD)** to form a collective online group providing updates on activities, identifying gaps in support or services, and discussing how we can support the deaf community and one another. You can find all these updates and information [here](#). We are also involved in a UKCoD Special Interest Group (SIG) working on a BSL Bill with the aim of achieving a BSL Act providing legal status for BSL.

Lastly, we have been involved in important discussions and collaboration with **Black Deaf UK** in how we can promote and advocate for positive change in academia and increased representation and support the Black Deaf community.

## Congratulations!

Several members of DCAL achieved great success this year. Having been a research assistant, PhD student and post-doctoral researcher at DCAL Kate Rowley was appointed to her first Lectureship position at the University of Wolverhampton which she will start in December 2020. Robert Adam was also research assistant, PhD student and then Teaching Fellow at DCAL and took up an Assistant Professor position at Heriot-Watt University in April 2020. We will and do miss





them both greatly, even though they will both continue to be strongly linked with DCAL. We wish them the very best in their new roles and thank them for all their hard work and many and varied contributions to DCAL.

At UCL, Manjula Patrick has taken on a new role as our Faculty's Lead on Disability Equity. This role is aimed at improving access and inclusion for deaf and disabled staff and students by developing disability equality initiatives and improving awareness.

In October, Kearsy Cormier was promoted to Professor of Sign Linguistics – a very well deserved recognition to her academic career which started at the University of Texas in Austin and continued for more than 18 years in the UK, first at University of Bristol and then at DCAL.

Finally, Mairéad MacSweeney was awarded a Senior Research Fellowship from [Wellcome](#). This 6 year research programme will start in June 2021. It will focus on reading development in deaf children – in particular the contribution of sign language, fingerspelling and speechreading skills.

Well deserved congratulations to all!



*Happy Christmas from all of us at DCAL*

We hope you enjoyed reading our highlights.  
If you want to know any more about any of these topics, please do [contact us](#).  
Thank you for all of your support and interest in our work over 2020.  
We look forward to working together in 2021!

