

Christmas Newsletter – December 2023



Hello, I am Kearsy Cormier, the new director of DCAL. Welcome to our Christmas newsletter.

Firstly, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Mairéad MacSweeney for her remarkable six years of dedication as the director of DCAL, 2017-2022. Her tireless work and commitment have left an indelible mark on our centre, significantly contributing to our growth and success. Of course, Mairead continues to be a valuable part of the DCAL team.

2023 marks my first year as director. Having been a part of DCAL since its inception in 2006, I feel privileged to use my knowledge and experience to guide DCAL into the future. I am joined by Dr. Kate Rowley as the deputy director. Together, we are committed to leading the DCAL team and focusing on achieving the performance goals we have established over the past few years (see [DCAL website](#) for more).



The other big news from this year was that DCAL temporarily relocated to Gray's Inn Road during renovations of the Gordon Square building. We are delighted to announce our return to our original home at 49 Gordon Square, reinvigorated and ready for exciting ventures ahead.



Research Update

Language and Reading Development Projects



We currently have three exciting projects running at DCAL that investigate the relationship between language and literacy development.

Language Comprehension in Deaf Children

Dr Kate Rowley and Dr Patrick Rosenburg have been busy this year on the Language Comprehension in Deaf Children project in addition to standardising the BSL Sentence Repetition Test (BSL-SRT). While the aim of this project is to make the BSL-SRT and BSL Comprehension tests available for educational

and clinical purposes, they also want to better understand the relationships between language comprehension skills, such as vocabulary and sentence, towards comprehension in BSL, and the relationship between BSL Comprehension and reading comprehension in English. Thus far, they have been busy liaising with many schools, with more than 150 deaf children participating in this project. They are beyond grateful, and they look forward to sharing their findings when the project ends in the new year. If your school or child has not taken part and you are interested, do get in touch with them. Otherwise, stay tuned for updates and enjoy a wonderful winter holiday. Contact Patrick Rosenberg at p.rosenberg@ucl.ac.uk.

Visual Communication & Reading Development Project

In another study, we are investigating the relationship between visual communication and reading. This study is led by Prof. Mairéad MacSweeney, Dr Tyron Woolfe, Lizzie Taunton and Dr. Heather Payne. They are looking at the relationship between speechreading (lipreading) skills / BSL skills/ Fingerspelling skills and later reading development. They visit the children, at home or at school, 6 times over 3 years in order to follow their language and literacy progress. The team have already visited 67 4-year-olds and look forward to involve many more in the project. **Huge thanks to all those teachers, parents and children who have helped with the project so far! We are currently recruiting deaf children who will start in 2024.** If you are interested, you can find more information about this project [here](#) or you can email the research team at: visualcr@ucl.ac.uk.

Preschool Language and Literacy Study

The Preschool Language and Literacy study has had another very busy year. Dr Fiona Kyle and Dr Katie Mason started this longitudinal study back in 2019. Our study is investigating how preschool language skills are related to later reading development in deaf and hearing children. We are working with over 120 deaf children and 110 hearing children who have been involved in the study since they were in preschool (3 or 4 years old). We would like to thank all of the schools, teachers, families and children for their support. We have some very interesting findings from our data that we are looking forward to sharing with everyone early next year. Our preliminary results highlight that access to early language is critical for later reading in deaf children. You can find out more about the Preschool Language and Literacy study and our other recent publications at www.ladder-lab.com. Look out for more details about our findings coming soon!



Neuroscience research

Our [research](#) looked into how being deaf from an early age shapes the way brain's networks are organised. We found that deaf and hearing individuals had different connections between the auditory part of the brain and other major networks, like those related to movement and attention.

This not only helps us understand the brain of deaf individuals, but it also provides an invaluable understanding of brain function more generally, and of how the organisation of brain networks is influenced by the sensory experiences of each person.



Linguistics Research

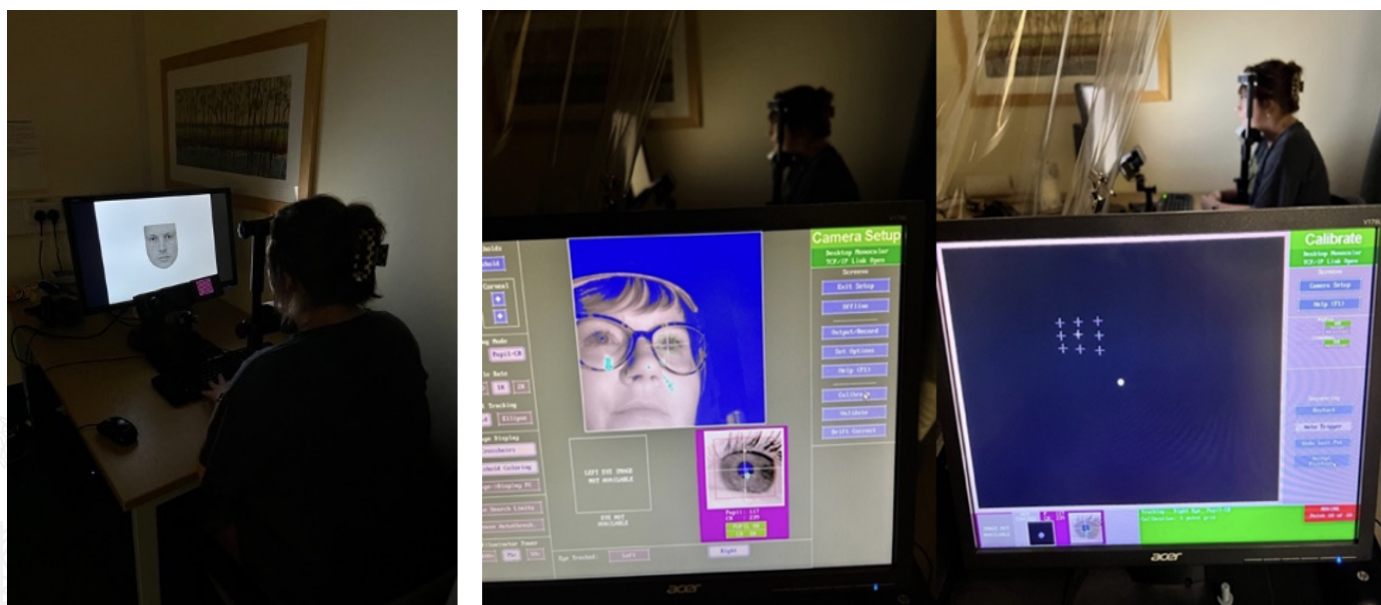
This year we published a [paper](#) on attitudes towards age variation and change in BSL. We have continued work on several sign linguistics projects including writing up papers on sign sentence types, questions, and negation in BSL, and we finished collecting data for a project on sign order in BSL and German Sign Language (DGS) for an ESRC funded project on language evolution. In sign language technology, we published a [paper](#) on best practices for sign language technology research which was very well received.

We also collected data evaluating machine translations between BSL and English using the BSL Corpus for [EASIER](#), a large EU project on automatic translation with European sign languages.

DCAL students

BSL and face processing research by Ryan McLean (MSc project)

Ryan McLean recently completed the MSc in Language Sciences with a specialisation in Sign Language and Deaf Studies at UCL. Ryan's MSc research project aimed to investigate if sign language experience impacts how we process faces and if it enables individuals to recognise faces more accurately. Ryan's research found that hearing signers performed better during face recognition tasks than hearing, bilingual, non-signers. This suggests a positive link between sign language experience and face recognition ability, that cannot be due to bilingualism. However, the age at which signers started to learn BSL, as well as the length of their experience with BSL, was not linked to their face recognition ability. There were also no differences between the signers and non-signers eye gaze patterns when they looked at faces. Both groups presented a preferential gaze to the eyes. This research has important implications for understanding how language experience can shape the way we interact with our social world.





Zahra Nawab's PhD research

Zahra Nawab, a deaf PhD student, started her PhD journey in DCAL in September. Zahra's research interests are deafness, mental health, and ethnicity. The PhD study will be exploring language deprivation in deaf adults and linking this to mental health. Her supervisors are Dr Velia Cardin and Dr Kate Rowley.

Alongside the PhD, Zahra is working as a Science Communications Officer for 4 hours a week at DCAL and is also working as an Assistant Psychologist in the NHS. Welcome to the DCAL team, Zahra!

DCAL Activities

Bencie Woll's MBE

In June we were absolutely thrilled to find out that Prof Bencie Woll had been awarded a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the first King's Birthday Honours list. This prestigious award was in recognition of her pioneering research in the field of BSL linguistics and campaigning over the last 40yrs for improved access for deaf people across the UK and across the world. Her work has also played a major role in increasing the public understanding and appreciation of British Sign Language and the Deaf community.

Bencie was the founder of DCAL. We are extremely proud of her achievements and grateful for her ongoing commitment to DCAL and to this essential field of research.



BSL GCSE

The DfE has been developing a BSL GCSE since 2019, but work was delayed a great deal because of COVID. Robert Adam and Bencie Woll were involved in work on this. The consultation on the draft documents was completed in June and consultation took place over the summer, with over 700 responses from deaf and hearing individuals and organisations. The revised draft has gone to the Government Minister for approval and the plan is to start the GCSE in September 2025. So, there will be a great deal to do to train deaf people as teachers of the BSL GCSE, and DCAL is now working on that.

New NDCS-funded project in collaboration with DEWA on Early years intervention and the experiences of ethnic minorities

NDCS has given a grant to DEWA to do some research with ethnic minority families who have deaf children on their experiences of early years intervention services (diagnosis, audiology, pre-school teachers, nurseries, etc.) Bencie is working with DEWA on the project. We will be interviewing ethnic minority families with young deaf children (including interpreting and translation for those who don't speak English), young deaf people (to ask about their memories of early years services), and the hearing brothers and sisters of young deaf people (to ask about their experiences as "language brokers" - assisting communication between their parents and professionals, and between their parents and their deaf brothers and sisters).



ERASMUS+ project on dementia and the deaf community



Erasmus+

Jo Atkinson and Bencie Woll are involved in a European project which is seeking to improve information and services linked to dementia for deaf people in several European countries (Austria, Germany, Italy and Greece). Our colleagues in those countries are adapting the BSL Cognitive Screen which we developed at DCAL into other sign languages to provide better diagnosis of dementia, and have designed and are delivering information about dementia to their deaf communities.

Memorial event for Frances Elton

In January this year we held a memorial event in honour of Frances Elton who passed away in late 2022. Frances worked at DCAL for many years. She had a long career in research and teaching and her work on BSL influenced many people. The event had various speakers and a panel discussion in tribute to Frances, her work, and her legacy. It also included a premier showing of 'Lightwave', a film developed by Rubbena Aurengzeb-Tariq and Prof. Bencie Woll, see: <https://www.rubbena.com/lightwave-trellis-2020>



Public and engagement events

Deaf Day

The Deaf Day is a one-day event organised by City Lit, aiming to celebrate Deaf culture through various workshops, taster sessions, and exhibitors. DCAL is proud to take part in this special day, sharing our research projects with the Deaf community and engaging with everyone during the event.

EDI Projects at DCAL

Deaf Migrants Project

Tyron Woolfe and Indie Beedie



The aim of this project was to explore the current experiences of Deaf Migrants living in London to inform proposals for future work. We worked with a Deaf Ukrainian refugee and a further 10 Deaf Migrants across London to explore their experiences, barriers, and wants/needs. We also worked with City Lit and DeafPlus, a charity in London.

Day 1 was focused on the Deaf Migrants' experiences, a safe space for them all with a Deaf Clinical Psychologist on hand for any who wished to have further support on the day. Day 2 included a presentation from a project in Finland with Deaf migrants. A presentation was given from the Mobile Deaf project, giving further insight.

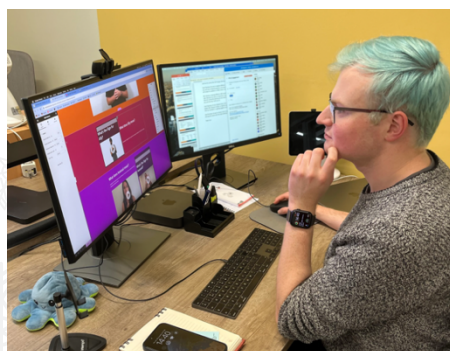
A few of the Deaf Migrants gave a summary of their experiences to the audience which included invited guests from across the academic and voluntary sectors. Representatives from the Greater London Assembly came and learned so much and has committed to the GLA to being involved in the development of needed support.

Since the event DeafPlus and the Greater London Authority have invited Deaf Migrants to be part of future planning of service development and to influence the support experienced by future Deaf Migrants. It is hoped that this collaboration will lead to tangible actions that will make a positive effect on the lives of Deaf Migrants in London.



Promoting and expanding the British Sign Language LGBTQ+ glossary

Tyron Woolfe, Kate Rowley, Patrick Rosenburg and Calum Medlock



4 of our staff received funding from the UCL LGBTQ+ Equality Implementation Grant (LEIG). The aim was to look at emerging LGBTQ+ glossary in BSL. A second aim of this project was to build a relationship between Deaf and Hearing UCL staff, both LGBTQ and allies.

We worked closely with the charity, Deaf Rainbow UK. We received over 80 suggestions for words needing BSL. We worked with 8 selected focus group members, all Deaf and LGBTQ+. We then shared 20 proposed signs with the wider community for feedback.

100 people came to an event, hosted by a Deaf Drag Queen with fun and games as well as a signed song. 20 developed BSL signs were then shared with the audience.

Whilst this project did not achieve all of the words suggested, we will continue with a passion to seek continued funding for development work here after gathering all evaluation data.

Most attendees said they really enjoyed the project. UCL hearing and deaf LGBTQ+ staff and their allies have had more opportunity to engage with each other. We will continue to try and build on this. Deaf Rainbow UK has really valued working with our staff.



Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing (HoH) Student Experiences at UCL

We have exciting news to share! We have been successful in obtaining a small research grant (£1000) to find out more about deaf/HoH undergraduate students' experiences at UCL.

We will be conducting a survey and running focus groups to identify the number of deaf/HoH students at UCL, to better understand the barriers deaf/HoH students may face and to develop strategies to improve deaf/HoH students' overall experience at UCL, and in higher education in general. Findings from this project will be written up as a report and shared widely at UCL.

We have recruited a deaf/HoH student researcher to carry out this work and aim to develop a deaf/HoH network at UCL. Watch this space for updates!

For more information, contact Dr Kate Rowley at kate.rowley@ucl.ac.uk.

Offensive signs project

Indie Beedie, Sannah Gulamani, and Kearsy Cormier

In late 2022, we were successful in achieving funding from the UCL Beacon Bursary for a project on offensive signs in BSL. Specifically, we focus on offensive signs that perpetuate racist, ableist and other oppressive ideologies in BSL such as the concept of what the 'rightful' signs should be in the name of 'tradition'. The aim is to bring to the forefront intersectional experiences and provide an opportunity for people to discuss their views and feeling on offensive signs, language preservation, variation and attitudes. This year we organised two Deaf-led workshops - one for Deaf Black, Asian and other minority ethnic BSL signers and the other was for Deaf signers who are not from visibly ethnic minorities. These were run in collaboration with DEWA (Deaf Ethnic Women's Association) and Black Deaf UK. We are working on summarising these workshops and plan to disseminate findings next year.



Resources for research and for the community

We have a range of resources from all of our research projects and findings:

- The [DCAL Research Data Archive](#) is a publicly available data archive of our studies of language, communication and cognition. Browse the data from our unique projects here and learn more about our findings!
- The [British Sign Language \(BSL\) Corpus](#) is a publicly accessible, on-line record of BSL used by Deaf people in the UK. It's a collection of video clips showing Deaf people using BSL.
- The [BSL SignBank](#), has approximately 2500 BSL signs developed from the BSL Corpus. In other words, BSL signs directly from the deaf community!
- The [DCAL Assessment Portal](#) hosts eight language and cognition assessments. These assessments can be used to assess language abilities and language development in deaf adults and children and assess deaf signers where there are concerns about language impairment, brain injury, brain disease, stroke or dementia. Get in touch for further information.
- The [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 accredited for CPD by professional bodies (e.g., the Royal College of Physicians and Royal College of Nursing).

Our Online Deaf Awareness Training for Teachers, covers topics such as the importance of deaf awareness in the classroom setting, different perspectives of deafness, strategies for communicating with deaf pupils, and how to create a deaf- supportive learning environment.

Studying at DCAL



If you are interested in further developing your knowledge of deafness, language and cognition, DCAL offers the [MSc in Language Sciences with specialisation in Sign Language and Deaf Studies](#). Deaf and disabled students (UK or international) can apply to the [Snowdon Masters Scholarships](#), which provide up to £30,000 to study on any UK Masters programme. The next round of applications for the [Snowdon Masters Scholarships](#) will open in January 2024.

We also offer the degree-level modules 'Deafness, Cognition and Language', 'Sign Language Linguistics', 'Deaf Culture' and modules on interpreting and on BSL.



Professional Services at DCAL

Our Professional Services (PS) team at DCAL merged with the HR team to form the HR & EDI Team, led by Ania Gasiorek, the HR & EDI Team Manager. This integration significantly bolstered our efforts to fulfil divisional EDI commitments and streamline collaboration between PALS HR, PALS IT, and PALS Finances.

This year, Indie Beedie took a new role as the Senior Student Success Officer at UCL Student and Registry Services. Congratulations, Indie! We wish you the best in your new role and extend our gratitude for your invaluable contributions at DCAL. Your expertise and knowledge will be missed. Also, congratulations to Sannah Gulamani on the birth of her second son. Welcome baby Elyas!

Welcome to the new members of the PS team: Dr. Laura Monroy, who has taken on the role of the new Executive Officer and also assumed the position of Safety Officer. Additionally, we've welcomed two new additions to the PS team: Afshan Jamil as our Centre Administrator and Calum Medlock, covering Sannah's maternity leave. Welcome to the PS team at DCAL! Lastly, a big congratulations to Dani Diaz for a successful transition from Technical Officer at DCAL to the PALS IT team, excelling as a Research Programmer. Well done, Dani!



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 2023.



Economic and Social Research Council



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