

# Visual Phonics by Hand – a reflection twenty years on

**Babs Day** gives an overview of the impact of Visual Phonics by Hand here in the UK and beyond

I can't believe I'm writing 'twenty years on' – shocking that so much time has passed and that 'Vis Phons', very like the young teenagers that I was living with at the time, has gone off and left the nest and is living well and happy and separately from me. It does have its own life and it never ceases to amaze me how far and wide it has spread around the country and the world. It is slightly different everywhere. Speech and Language therapists and QToDs have adapted it to suit ... made things up where they forget the original hand shape ... created their own resources as the digital magic grows. The need for a simple and easily accessible way of expressing the phonemes to deaf children learning the language has never been more important and now so many of them are in mainstream schools. Most of the copies sold nowadays are to mainstream schools supporting single or small groups of deaf children.

We started in 1999 by cutting and sticking a photograph of Tracy, my TA at the time, frozen in a handshape onto a phoneme – or trying to impossibly draw the hand and lip-shape connections. Being a retirement fail, I am still working as a Headteacher, although now in Elmfield school in Bristol – I don't even do the Vis Phons by Hand training there, they are better than I am at the Elmfield Vis Phons by Hand way. I have always taken the view that ... as long as it works...!

I was reflecting about the way that Vis Phons has developed over the time and with a laissez-faire approach

to marketing, it has simply caught on like a 'meme' because it works, I suppose. It has spread from school to school following certain QToDs or SLTs and moves as they move and now new teachers just assume it has always been there, like laminators and photocopiers. We elders know different times when sticky back plastic and Banda sheets ruled – and when phonics just wasn't done with deaf children because it obviously had to rely on hearing.

Both parts of my 'reinvention' came face to face recently. We run a glamping and elopement wedding business in Cornwall (bottle of champers for all BATOD members booking at 'Frieda and the Moon'!). As I delivered the welcome hamper – with homemade scones and jam (a new skill) – to our new guests, it transpired that the one who, it turned out was a SALT, said sheepishly, 'I wondered if it was you ... are you Babs Day of Visual Phonics?' It sort of brought my ridiculous life parts together as a shock to me – but she was so enthusiastic about it, 'Oh I love it, we use it all the time' and then we had to tear ourselves away from the inevitable 'work talk' that could have gone on for hours.

I got a phone call from a teacher working in Tanzania who wanted to use it with his language disordered pupils, so we discussed a few teaching issues and I sent him a copy and as far as I know he is still doing it.

My work in St John's School for the Deaf in The Gambia, involved the mental acrobatics of adapting it to one handed, originally Dutch based, fingerspelling and making

videos of each set of phonemes for the Jolly Phonics scheme they had all been made to do across Gambian schools. It worked though, although the video is not fit for consumption as my lipstick had smudged and I was perspiring in the tropical heat with the energy of remembering the one-handed signs.

Then there was the phone call from an Australian researcher who was doing a study into its use and when she asked, 'What do you think about it?' I said 'I'm a bit biased' (and added that I had devised it). I could hear her surprise at the end of the phone.





### Some wisdom from the staffroom this week...

*'It is a nice relaxed tool to use with very young children'*

*'It makes a beautiful clear link to the hidden sounds in words'*

*'It is flexible and evolves to meet different needs'*

*'A tool for inclusive practice with all abilities in the classroom'*

*'You can use for acoustic highlighting'*

*'My older children use it and help each other out by sounding out words and blending'*

*'It really supports learning and gives them access even if they can't hear it'*

*'speech can be assisted because they make the lip-patterns when they highlight the phoneme'*

*When I thought we had probably mined all its uses over the last 20 years ... a Beatbox performer came into school this week ... and there we all were using /b/ /t/ /k/ visphons to help the children to lay down their tracks ... cool or what!*

So, thousands of deaf children around the world have used it now, as a bridge ... and just for the time required learning to decode, sound out, make the right lip-shape – even if they can't hear any of it, spell or make a phonic attempt and the speech improvement effect is a really important fortunate unintended consequence. So, long may it live – my errant child spawned out of desperation when we had to account for doing phonics in the 1990s Literacy Strategy.



*Babs Day is Executive Headteacher at Elmfield School for Deaf Children*

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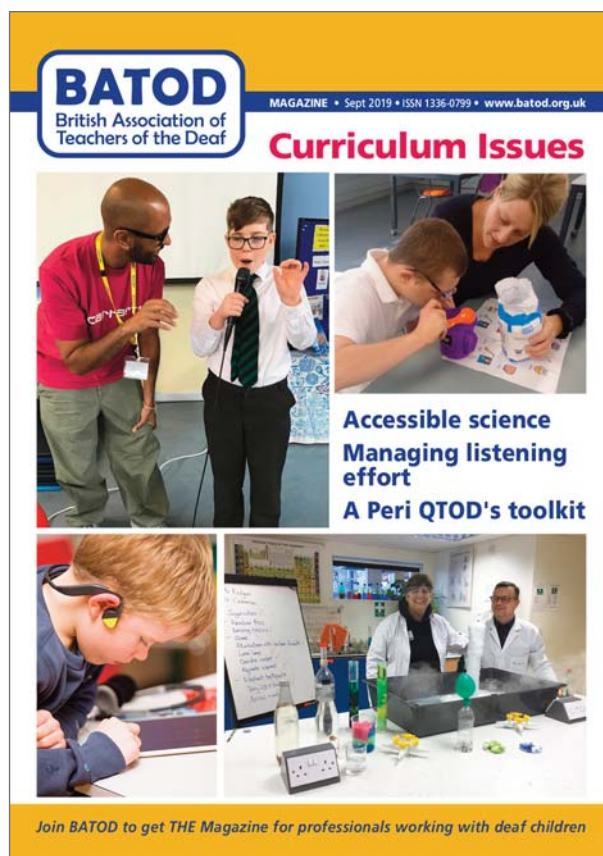
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