



# Supporting deaf children in Nicaragua

Kathy Owston continues her travels seeking out the best way to help deaf children in Nicaragua including helping them have their own sign language dictionary

Many thanks to all of you who responded to the article I wrote about my work with deaf people in Nicaragua, which was published in the November Magazine. It was good to receive your encouraging messages, and they have helped me to identify my role here working with deaf children in Nicaragua. Following on from that article, I submitted a proposal to BATOD's Mary Grace Wilkins Scholarship fund, which was accepted. So, I am now delighted to have received £1000 of funding for work with the deaf community in the north of Nicaragua.

When I last wrote, we had been living in hot and steamy Leon, by the Pacific coast. I had been trying to find a school for the deaf there, which I had heard about but could not track down. This illustrates one of the problems of working in countries like Nicaragua compared to the UK – the very poor shared information about services. Two weeks before we were due to leave Leon, I met a young American woman staying in our hostel, a Fulbright Student from the USA. What was she doing?

She was a Teacher of the Deaf, and she was running sign language classes in the Leon school for the Deaf! What a coincidence! Even armed with the address I could not easily find it. Not even the next-door-neighbours knew there was a school behind the front door of the normal residential house I found! So, although I only had two weeks left in that city, I enjoyed visiting the school and joined in a signing class with parents. Using some excellent resources in Spanish from Deaf Child Worldwide (the international branch of the NDCS), I was able to help advise re planning their sign language classes this term.

[http://www.deafchildworldwide.info/publications\\_and\\_resources/index.html](http://www.deafchildworldwide.info/publications_and_resources/index.html)

That was the impetus I needed to get me going to start to learn NSL – Nicaraguan Sign Language. I had been resisting previously, but now I am really enjoying learning new signs and getting to grips with the intricacies of the youngest recognised language in the world!

Following the 1979 Sandinista revolution, the new Nicaraguan Government initiated the country's first large-scale effort to educate deaf children. Hundreds of students were enrolled in two Managua schools. Having had no previous experience of the existing sign languages used by deaf people around the world, Managua's deaf children started from zero. They used gestural signs developed within their own families – what we call home signs. Once the students were placed together, they began to build on one another's signs. The children's inexperienced teachers – who were having little success communicating with their profoundly deaf students – watched in awe as the kids began signing among themselves. A new language had begun to bloom.





*We have now been able to provide each deaf student their own copy of the Sign-language dictionary*

This language has been studied by international linguists, and has been seen to have its own grammatical rules. The “Diccionario del Idioma de Señas” (Dictionary of signs) was published in 1997 and updated NSL Handbooks came out in 2009 and 2013. The money I have been given from the Mary Grace Wilkins fund is already proving to be a big help, as I have been able to provide copies of the NSL Nicaraguan Sign Language Dictionary to all of the students in the unit for the deaf in Estelí, the town where I am now living. Schools have now broken up for the end of year break, so the students were delighted to have their own copy of the dictionary to take home with them for the two-month holiday. Now they could study, they told me, and also would be able to show the signs to their families, to help them to communicate during this period. So many deaf children (in the UK and worldwide) hate school holidays, when they no longer have their deaf peers to communicate with. Being the only deaf person at home or in their community, is very isolating.

I have been attending sign language classes in Estelí run by Farnuel, whom I wrote about in my first article. Quite a commitment, as they run from 8am, for three hours on a Sunday morning! There are 14 primary school teachers and a few parents attending these classes. I met the father of a young deaf child here.

I hoped I might be able to help the family, but in conversation I found out that his son is actually living with his mother, in neighbouring Costa Rica... and he can only communicate with him via Skype once a week! Lives are very complicated here, where there is a lot of migration to other countries due to the lack of work opportunities in Nicaragua. Despite dad’s best efforts to learn signing, the signs his son uses in Costa Rica are very different.

However, I have been pleased to be using my skills as a peripatetic teacher, having started a schedule of home visits to a three-year-old. Shoskey has just received his first hearing aids, which he has had for just two months. Hearing aids here are rare, since they are expensive and the state health system cannot afford to provide any. Shoskey’s family lives in a poor suburb but managed to raise \$100 themselves to pay for the hearing aids. The remainder (\$750) was raised by a donor in the USA. I have been visiting him and his extended family on a weekly basis. At first, they were all optimistic, and he was wearing the aids all day, every day. Now, they are feeling less animated and are asking me why he isn’t talking yet, and why he doesn’t understand. It is such an important job that we ToDs do! Unfortunately, fitting amplification (or even doing cochlear implant surgery) and then walking away,

leaving the family and child with no support, is very normal in developing countries. I am sure that if I was not involved, those aids would have been given up on by now.

I have been able to show the family how much more Shoskey vocalises when wearing his aids, how he dances to music, that he can hear some environmental sounds, and that yes, he is learning language. But it all takes time! He loves to wear his aids, so that is the best sign! His mother asked the neighbours to turn down their salsa music on my last visit, so my messages about background noise and the importance of good spoken language with him are getting through. I am very aware however, that my input is limited by my non-fluent command of Spanish ..... I feel so limited, not being able to use my usual tricks, modelling natural language, singing nursery rhymes and action songs, and I am stumbling over the language of advice I want to give to his mother.

It is an eye opener to me as to why we must advise

parents to use their own natural language as the child's first oral language. In the UK, we all work with so many families whose first language is not English. Parents need natural communication with their deaf child, using a complete and rich language, that they know. Learning a second language will be much easier, once their first language is established. I can see why it is so important to use the language that is known.

<http://www.fountainmagazine.com/Issue/detail/Mother-Tongue-The-Language-of-Heart-and-Mind>

Shoskey and his mother have been learning some Nicaraguan signs at a group for children with disabilities they attend. I was puzzled, however, by their sign for "elephant". In the NSL dictionary it is almost the only sign that resembles the BSL sign. However, Shoskey consistently signed holding up four fingers (the sign for "B"), touched his nose with his thumb and dipped his hand down to describe an elephant's trunk. I have now found out that this is actually the specific sign for Babar! Many of the name signs in NSL are perceptive. The one for Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua's

Sandinista President, for example, is one hand tapping the opposing wrist to signify Ortega's flashy Rolex watch, a loud symbol for a poor deaf child. Fidel Castro is a wagging finger combined with a V-sign near the mouth, as if smoking a cigar!

So, since I wrote my first article last November, things have moved on a lot. I feel that I have found a niche where I can use my skills as a Teacher of the Deaf. However, I have a lot to do. I am trying to find out more about the existing provision in this area, and I am hoping to help to bring different providers together, so that people work more cohesively. My vision is to bring communication to deaf children living in the rural areas, by identifying them and then providing a mechanism for local professionals to work with their families. More about that next time!

Please contact me if you have comments or ideas you'd like to share on [owstonlewis@hotmail.com](mailto:owstonlewis@hotmail.com)

*Kathy Owston is a Teacher of the Deaf at St Thomas' Hospital on a three year career break in Nicaragua. Kathy is a recent recipient of a grant following the change in the status of the Mary Grace Wilkins Travelling Scholarship and this article is part of her reporting back to BATOD.*



Shoskey with his mother, Nadir

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