

Singular and plural – literacy at Heathlands

Sara Head reflects on the importance of the concept of singular and plural

Every once in a while something you have been doing for years without thinking takes on a new significance. Last year while teaching literacy to lower KS2 I realised afresh how very important it is that pupils understand the concept of singular and plural. It may sound like stating the obvious, but I don't just mean knowing that if you add an 's' you can change a boy into lots of boys and a dog into lots of dogs – magic though that may be! It is important to give pupils the meta-language to discuss and identify singular and plural in sentences, confidence to discuss the concept, and the ability to identify and apply that knowledge to other 'patterns' and rules they come across in English.

This is important because the ability to talk about language in terms of singular and plural supports pupils when they come to address some of the more challenging aspects of English writing for deaf, sign language using pupils. Obviously using the correct plural for a noun is important but an understanding of singular and plural is an essential building block for so much more.

Pronouns:

- singular: I, he, she, it
- plural: they, we and you. 'You' can, of course, be singular or plural but when it comes to subject verb agreement it is treated as plural.

Determiners:

- particularly **articles a/an** are always singular
- **the** can be singular or plural but to be plural the noun needs to change
- other determiners also give information about quantity and nouns need to change accordingly – one boy, some cats, a few coins.

Above all, it is essential for that challenging area of **subject-verb agreement**, in fact without an understanding of singular and plural this crucial area is not going to make sense to pupils. The ability to understand and discuss how and why we use auxiliary verbs, particularly 'to be', rests on them securing the concepts both of tense and singular/plural.

Last year, working with a group of lower KS2 pupils, we saw them making rapid progress when it came to teaching subject-verb agreement. This was possible because of the prior, intensive focus on developing their understanding of singular and plural, which gave a strong foundation for building subsequent learning.

How do we develop this understanding?

Baseline

Work through a simple checklist to assess what the child knows – assume nothing!

- When looking at groups of objects can a child tell you which is one and which is more?
- Do they understand the mathematical concept of 'oneness' and can they recognise 'one' and 'more than one' without counting?
- Can they appropriately use the sign 'lots' and apply it in different situations?
- Is there any evidence in their spontaneous signing that they are indicating more than one? (for example, indicating two boys by signing boy twice or by using placement to indicate more than one)
- For older pupils are they using any evidence of plurals in their free writing (outside of formal exercises focusing on plurals)?
- Does the child understand the concept of a noun?
- Can they identify a noun or pronoun in a sentence?

The answers to these questions, and your observations and knowledge of the child, will allow you to tailor the teaching or intervention to the needs of the pupil.

Teaching the concept of singleness and pluralness:

Teaching the vocabulary 'single' and 'plural' can be done in very practical ways – we use soft toys, cars, Lego bricks – in fact anything that can be grouped and is going to motivate children.

Having established these concepts, and the child's ability to use the language, the next steps are to ensure the child can:

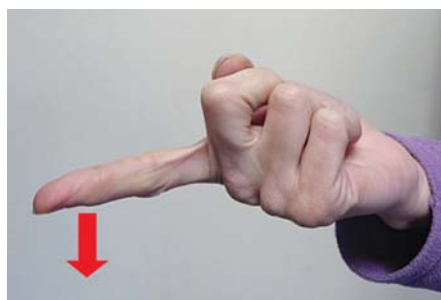
- read the words (in different contexts and in different fonts and colours)
- spell the words (writing)
- fingerspell the words
- sign the words.

Children then have to group a variety of different things (objects, people, photos etc) labelling them singular and plural. Keep reinforcing that concept through everything you do across the curriculum eg giving out the pencils: "You have one in your hand and there are lots in the pot, which is singular, which plural?"

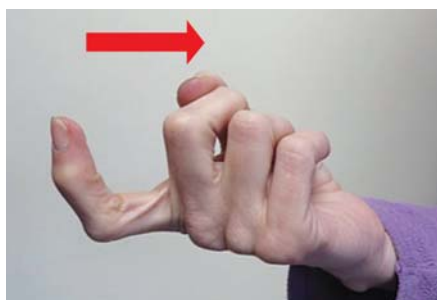
Learning the rules

Once the pupils have the concept, you are ready for the rules for creating a plural. Sometimes it is easy for pupils to get 'stuck' on the easy ones (add 's' means lots). The different rules need to be taught systematically and this may take time.

Pupils need to understand that it is the noun that changes and see examples in the texts they are reading. This needs to be directly taught. For example, given the sentences: "I saw a boy" and "I saw the boys."



Specifically they are the signs for **is** which shows singular present tense



and **was** singular past tense



by contrast **were** shows plural past tense

Can they identify which words have changed? Can they explain why?

The most important rules to learn regarding how the singular noun is modified are as follows:

- 1) To make regular nouns plural, add 's' to the end. *Example: girl – girls*
- 2) If the noun ends in 's,' 'ss', 'sh', 'ch', 'x' or 'z' add 'es' to the end to make it plural. *Example: fox – foxes*
- 3) If the noun ends with 'f' or 'fe' change the 'f' to 've' and add 's'. *Example: wolf – wolves*
- 4) If a noun ends in 'y' and the letter before the 'y' is a **consonant**, change the ending to 'ies'. *Example: puppy – puppies*
- 5) If the noun ends in 'y' and the letter before the 'y' is a **vowel**, simply add an 's' to make it plural. *Example: boy – boys*
- 6) Some nouns don't change at all when they're pluralised. *Example: sheep – sheep*
- 7) Irregular nouns follow no specific rules, so the only thing you can do is look them up and learn them!

When pupils are ready to learn rule 4 they need to understand and be able to use and identify the concepts **consonant** and **vowel**. Other useful vocabulary for them to learn is **regular** and **irregular**.

Explaining learning and teaching others

Having taught children these rules (using plenty of practical exercises as well as written work) use drama, poster making or filming to get the pupils to explain the rule to their peers and others. Having to explain what they have learnt not only reinforces their learning but gives them confidence and 'expert' status and any videos they have produced can act as revision material and be a useful resource for others.

Reinforcing language

Work linked to plurals needs to go on the classroom working wall and be left for pupils to refer to.

Using the language of singular and plural regularly and revisiting what has been taught is essential for children to become confident with the concept and be able to apply the rules.

Spotting singular and plural in reading

Being able to spot evidence of singular and plural in their own reading also helps. In the early 1980s the Signed English working party came up with some signs to support pupils when reading 'aloud' and signing those 'small' but important words that are linked to English grammar. We don't use their work these days, but a few of the signs they came up with can be really useful instead of fingerspelling, as it helps children to start to see the grammar of language, which helps when they come to write.

Using these signs when reading can help children to choose the appropriate form of the 'to be' verb in a sentence. When they have been using them in their own reading it is then a fairly simple step to teach them how the signs are linked to singular/plural and tense.

Application

Embedding understanding is always a challenge and can require persistence on the teacher's part. One of the main aims of literacy teaching is to get children thinking critically about language and their writing and giving them that meta-language to discuss English. Editing work is essential for all children and children need to edit to show singular and plural in their writing, not only through modifying the noun but through their choice of determiner and their use of verbs. As teachers we need to give children both the language and skills to identify mistakes, discuss what those mistakes are and identify how they can be corrected.

A strong knowledge of the rules of singular and plural forms a secure foundation for teaching many of the areas of writing deaf children find difficult and goes towards enabling those language conversations that turns children into reflective writers. ■



Sara Head is Assistant Head Teacher at Heathlands School in St Albans with leadership responsibility for the Lower School. Heathlands is graded as Outstanding by Ofsted and the excellent progress and teaching was highlighted. Sara has taught Primary age, profoundly deaf, sign language using children for 30 years with a particular interest and focus on developing pupils' literacy skills. Over this time she has taught the full range of ability, supporting a significant number of children to achieve age related expectations. She has also used her experience of teaching, learning and literacy to provide mentoring and advice to other Teachers of the Deaf. She strongly believes teachers never stop learning and that the best approach for success is a child-centred one.

BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the March 2019 issue.

© BATOD 2019



BATOD
British Association of
Teachers of the Deaf

MAGAZINE • March 2019 • ISSN 1336-0799 • www.batod.org.uk

Transitions

EAL resource
Roma deaf children
BATOD North Study Day

Join BATOD to get THE Magazine for professionals working with deaf children