Marking time in British Sign Language

During this section I shall discuss how BSL incorporates tense. In English the marking of these can be indicated by the addition of ‘ed’, by internally making a vowel change within the verb form such as ‘ring/rang’, by changing at the end of the verb such as ‘bring/brought’, or by substitution such as ‘go/went’

Through recent research it has been suggested that there are at least two ways of indicating tense or time relationships in BSL sentences.

BSL makes use of adverbial markers (ie adding information to the verb) within space that can be used to represent time. These can be interpreted as ‘time lines’.

There are 4 time lines- A, B, C and D.

Underneath you will see a picture to show these time lines along with a brief description.
**Time line A**

Space along the signers shoulder can be used to represent time. For example ‘the past’ (before, long time ago) is located over the right shoulder. The ‘present’ at the cheek and the future in front of the right shoulder. The cheek is the tab for future marker such as ‘will’ which involves a forward twisting action. Also a manual sign can be modified by a non manual adverbial. Thus manual ‘a long time ago’ can be accompanied by a non manual intensifier with cheeks puffed out emphasising the length of time.

The notion of past time as behind (ie shown spatially) and future time in front can also be seen in most European spoken languages for example “In the time ahead of us” or “I’m past that”

**Time line B**

The signs are located in front of the body to represent succession (before/after) and to indicate duration (a long time). The palm is often used as a tab for forms such as ‘hour’, ‘late’ and these can also be modulated to ‘hour after hour’.

**Time line C**

The signs are in front of the signer’s body and the time line is used to indicate continuousness and/or duration. The movements involve a left to right action and can be used to explain that an event has persisted over a long period and that it also continues to persist (such as the sign ‘continue’)

**Time line D**

Time line D is often used to express the meaning of an event happening gradually over time. So in a sentence of “As he grew older he gradually acquired sign language”. The three main signs are used ‘grow older/acquire/sign language’. The movement is slow and deliberate which expresses the meaning of gradually.

Marking in time also uses number incorporation such as 3 years ago, 2 years time.

Another method that signers have been seen to use when incorporating time reference is to localise it in space. The signer points to a particular position in space and sets this up as a time point, allowing the signer the opportunity of referring back to that position again and again throughout the text. This method can be used independently of time lines.

BSL also uses ‘completion markers’ to mark past tense. There are at least 6 completion markers with 5 of them being glossed as ‘finish’ and the 6th one being glossed as ‘been’.

For example to make past tense of ‘see’ the signer would use the citation form of the verb then inflect it by adding the completion sign ‘finish’

From this and from the discussions earlier when marking time in BSL the signer has available to them a number of options which can be used frequently depending on the users own preference.

Obviously, though, there is still research being undertaken on this matter which could outline definite rules according to the contexts it is being used in.