



Deaf Interpreter Policy and Guidelines

ASLIA recognises that interpreting for Deaf clients requires a range of skills, given the diversity of client language and social backgrounds. In cases where the 'standard' Australian Sign Language Auslan<>English interpreter skill-set is insufficient for the demands or for cultural safety reasons, more specialised assistance is required to bridge the communication gap. ASLIA asserts that the work of Deaf Interpreters (DI), when appropriately applied¹, results in a highly effective strategy for providing quality communication access to diverse Deaf persons. Interpreters who are Deaf, first language (L1) Auslan users, enhance the work of Auslan<>English interpreters.

This document sets out ASLIA's policy regarding Deaf Interpreters and guidelines for engaging a Deaf Interpreters, the skills they can bring to enhance the Auslan<>English interpretation process in specific situations, and current options for recognising those skills.

Deaf people are trained to work as sign language interpreters/translators and are professionally qualified in the United States of America. They practice regularly in the United Kingdom and in recent years are increasingly relied upon in Australia. Although Deaf people have been working as DIs for years in Australia, there have been recent advances toward the professional accreditation of DIs in Australia. The specialised work of DIs is endorsed by the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD).

Definition of a Deaf Interpreter

¹ The decision to bring in the specialised skills of a DI should be made by interpreters and other service professionals, as well as by the Deaf consumer. As with Auslan<>English interpreting service provision, an optimal match for meeting a client's communication rests in collaboration between the consumers and professionals in the setting.

A Deaf Interpreter, previously known as a Deaf Relay Interpreter, is an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing, and formally credited as being fluent in Auslan, English and as having additional visual/gestural communication competency. They may also be familiar with a foreign signed language/s or contact variety. A DI is native, or native-like, user of Auslan who understands the complex cultural and linguistic experience of growing up deaf in a hearing mainstream community, and relying on visual cues for most communication. A DI will be able to discern unfamiliar or idiosyncratic gestures and signs, and understand the meaning of regular signs out of context from someone presenting dysfluent Auslan.

Role of a Deaf Interpreter

DIs have been accredited as being able adapt their own sign language production to accommodate the communication needs of a broad range of Auslan and signed language users who present with non-conventional gestural systems, other signed languages, and sign dysfluency impacted by educational disadvantage, and intellectual or psychiatric disabilities. DIs who have familiarity with one or more foreign signed languages should be engaged for migrants who use a foreign sign language unknown nor accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). An interpreting team that includes both DIs and Auslan<>English interpreters is often more effective than an Auslan<>English Interpreter alone. When there are two Auslan<>English Interpreters, two DIs are required.

For sight translations, working from English into Auslan or a more visual-gestural signing style, a DI must have fluent Auslan skills and fluent English literacy.

In Australia, DIs usually work in tandem with Auslan<>English interpreters and provide a unique language or communication bridge for particular Deaf individuals. They also provide translation from English scripts or documents into Auslan for websites or other media resources. Deaf Interpreters are bound by the ASLIA Code of Ethics thus ensuring maintenance of high standards of professional conduct in their identity and capacity as an interpreter and member of ASLIA.

The Need for Deaf Interpreters

Due to social and linguistic circumstances², some Deaf users of visual-gestural communication and signed languages gain a greater understanding of the information if it is communicated via a Deaf interpreter, as opposed to a hearing interpreter. These users include Australian-born members of the Deaf community who have acquired Auslan atypically and migrants who use community signed languages from countries where signed languages are underdeveloped. As a significant percentage of deaf people acquire Auslan later in life, there are limited numbers of native Auslan users, and many are therefore idiosyncratic in their language use. These variations in language fluency and usage can pose a barrier to Auslan<>English interpreters who do not have extra specialist skills.

Policy

Accreditation of Deaf Interpreters

In cooperation with the ASLIA DI sub-committee, NAATI initiated a DI 'Recognition' status in October of 2013. Candidates are granted recognition as DIs, by showing evidence of proficiency in Auslan (and English), completion of interpreter training, and evidence of work experience.

The following five competency areas are identified in relation to DI practice. Candidates must demonstrate at least one area for recognition:

1. Auslan/Non-Conventional Sign Language (NCSL) - Interpreting between Auslan and a sign language that is idiosyncratic or non-conventional.
2. Written English/Non-Conventional Sign Language (NCSL) - sight translation from written English forms or documents into sign language that is idiosyncratic or non-conventional.
3. Auslan/Adapted Sign Language - Interpreting between Auslan and a visually adapted or tactile form of sign language used by DeafBlind or Deaf persons with low-vision.
4. English/Auslan - Sight translation from written English forms or documents into Auslan.

² For linguistic description of Australian Sign Language, see Johnston & Schembri, 2007.

5. Auslan/Conventional Sign Language - Interpreting between Auslan and a foreign sign language (i.e. British Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, American Sign Language, etc.)

In 2016, through the NAATI approved course system, TAFE South Australia applied and gained approval for the delivery of the Diploma of Interpreting to Deaf Interpreters. As part of this approval, individuals who graduated with the Diploma and passed an assessment of their interpreting skills were recommended to NAATI for provisional certification as a Deaf Interpreter.

There is currently no accreditation testing of DI's by NAATI outside of the approved course pathway. However, NAATI has added Deaf Interpreter to its Expression of Interest (EOI) process for scheduled testing (see <https://www.naati.com.au/> and Submit an EOI form online). NAATI will consider offering direct testing based on a consideration of the EOIs received.

It is ASLIA policy that a DI should be engaged in any of the following situations:

- the attending Auslan<>English interpreter recommends a DI
- any person in the communication exchange requests a DI
- if the client is a Deaf child; the younger they are, the more likely they would benefit from a DI
- the Deaf person is charged with a criminal offence
- the Deaf person who has a cognitive disability or multiple disabilities that compromise communication and result in signing dysfluency
- the Deaf person is experiencing a mental health problem that creates temporary or ongoing signing dysfluency
- the Deaf person uses idiosyncratic non-standard signs, gestures, or 'home signs', which are unique to a family or original village community
- the Deaf person is (or has been) linguistically and/or socially isolated with limited conventional language proficiency, e.g. Frozen language
- the client is a DeafBlind person or deaf person with low vision, using tactile or visually modified sign language

- the client is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and uses a unique variety of Auslan or a community-based sign system that is inaccessible by other NAATI accredited Auslan<>English interpreters
- the Deaf person is experiencing complex trust issues where cultural sensitivity/comfort factor is paramount (e.g. trauma counselling)
- the Deaf person uses a foreign sign language and there are no accredited or qualified sign language interpreters available for that specific signed language
- the Deaf person uses a variety of sign languages or a common international lingua franca known as 'International Sign' (IS)

It is also ASLIA policy that DI should be booked for any information sessions or workshops organised by the service providers as a means of ensuring Deaf people have access to information in their first language.

Guidelines

When working in one of the situations listed above, both the interpreters work as a team between the English-speaking client (e.g. a service provider) and a Deaf client with non-conventional signing. Commonly the sequence is as follows: when the English speaker speaks, the Auslan<>English interpreter converts the message into Auslan for the DI, who then adapts it into the visual-gestural form appropriate for the Deaf client. When the Deaf client responds, the relay chain is reversed. Both interpreters need to incorporate linguistic and cultural contextual knowledge into this transfer process.

When a DI is requested or the need for a DI is recognised, the appointment should be stopped or delayed until a DI can be organised. Additionally, the need for a DI should be reported to the Interpreter Booking agency for future, to ensure a DI is organised for all future appointments. The Deaf client may need to be informed about the Dis and their role.

Legal context

In the legal context the DI and Auslan<>English interpreter are required to work together to understand a complex response from a Deaf individual. Where appropriate they should confer with each other and the Deaf client to arrive at an

agreed understanding, before the Auslan<>English interpreter conveys the message to the English speaking participant(s). Where appropriate, this negotiation should occur in the reverse direction, for complex English questions or concepts that do not readily unpack into a visual form. The DI and Auslan<>English interpreter should use their combined expertise and experience to determine when this conferral process is required. If this process needs to occur, the Auslan<>English interpreter needs to explain this process to non-signing legal professionals. A number of Deaf people appearing before courts have limited Auslan and English competency, thus a communication bridge is required to uphold legal rights and access to justice (See ASLIA's 'Legal Interpreting Policy').

Conference context

DIs and Auslan<>English interpreters should work in tandem at conference style events. Specifically, where international Deaf members of the audience require clear visual signed interpretations of spoken English presentations into an International Sign type of contact system. In this situation, a DI would stand on stage and the Auslan<>English interpreter would sit opposite them in the audience and provide an English into Auslan interpretation, with the DI then adapting the signing further into International Sign.

Version History

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