



DEAF INTERPRETER (DI) POLICY AND GUIDELINES

Preamble

ASLIA recognises that interpreting for Deaf clients requires a range of skills, given the diversity of client language and social backgrounds. Sometimes the 'standard' Australian Sign Language (Auslan)/English interpreter skill-set is insufficient for the demands, and more specialised assistance is required to bridge the communication gap. This document sets out the concept and role of a Deaf Interpreter (DI), 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. Deaf people have been working as DIs for years in Australia although recent advances toward the professional accreditation of DIs have been made. Their specialised work is endorsed by the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD).

Definition of a Deaf Interpreter¹

A Deaf Interpreter is an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing, fluent in Auslan, English and has additional visual/gestural communication competency. They may also be familiar with a foreign signed language/s or contact variety. In Australia, DIs usually work in tandem with Auslan/English interpreters and provide a unique language or communication bridge for particular Deaf individuals. They may 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.

Unique aspects of interpreting with signed language users in Australia

There is no universal sign language and Auslan is distinct to the Australian Deaf Community.² Although different community signed languages are distinct from one

¹ The term DI may also be known as a Deaf Relay Interpreter (DRI). Either refers to a Deaf person who has been trained to work as a specialised interpreter.

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

another in many ways, they do share some linguistic features given their common visual-gestural modality. This may be why some Deaf users of vastly different signed languages have an easier time understanding one another, compared with speakers of unrelated spoken languages.

Research on signed languages indicates that they are relatively young and are still changing and developing.³ Many of the world's community signed languages do not have formal recognition, and are not yet linguistically described, let alone taught in training programs for interpreters. Migrants to Australia include Deaf people who use a community signed language which has not yet been researched or recognised.

Even for Australian-born members of the Deaf community, their local signed language, Auslan, is usually acquired atypically. Only 5-10 % of Deaf children are born to signing Deaf parents, and so have exposure to sign language from birth, as do hearing children with their first spoken language. Consequently 90-95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents who do not know Auslan or use it fluently in the home. 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.

Specialised skills of a Deaf Interpreter

A DI is native, or native-like, user of Auslan who understands the complex cultural experience of growing up deaf in a hearing mainstream community, and relying on visual cues for most communication. She/he will be able to discern unfamiliar or idiosyncratic gestures and signs, and better understands the meaning of regular signs out of context from a dysfluent Auslan user.

This innate skill allows a DI to adapt her/his 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. Migrants who use a foreign sign language unknown nor accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) can also benefit from a skilled DI who has familiarity with one or more foreign signed languages.

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

Typical situations which require a Deaf Interpreter

³ *Sign languages share properties with young creole languages (Fischer, 1978, Meier, 1984), but have complex morphology (Aronoff et al, 2005). Woll reports that there are no known sign languages that are older than 300 years. (Woll et al, 2001).*

Whenever any of the following situations occur, a DI should be considered. The attending Auslan/English interpreter may be the only person able to make this recommendation.

- Deaf child - the younger they are, the more likely they would benefit from a DI.
- Deaf person charged with a criminal offence – this population is often less likely to have fluent Auslan.
- Deaf person who has a cognitive disability or multiple disabilities that compromise communication and result in signing dysfluency.
- Deaf person with a mental health disability that creates temporary or ongoing signing dysfluency.
- Use idiosyncratic non-standard signs, gestures, or ‘home signs’, which are unique to a family or original village community.
- Are linguistically and/or socially isolated with limited conventional language proficiency.
- DeafBlind person or deaf person with low vision, using tactile or visually modified sign language.
- Are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and use a unique variety of Auslan or a community-based sign system that is inaccessible by other NAATI accredited Auslan/English interpreters.
- Are experiencing complex trust issues where cultural sensitivity/comfort factor is paramount, for example, trauma counseling.
- Use a foreign sign language and there are no accredited or qualified sign language interpreters available for that specific signed language.
- Are users of a contact variety of sign languages or a common international lingua franca known as ‘International Sign’ (IS).

Deaf Interpreters working in tandem with Auslan/English interpreters

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.

In particularly challenging situations, such as court environments, the DI and Auslan/English interpreter may work together to understand a complex response from a Deaf individual. They may need to 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). This negotiation may also be required in the reverse direction, for complex English questions or concepts that do not readily unpack into a visual form. 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’).

Another context where DIs and Auslan/English interpreters work in tandem, is at conference style events, for example, where international Deaf members of the audience require clear visual signed interpretations of spoken English presentations into an IS 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 IS.

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.
- 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 Paraprofessional Deaf Interpreter accreditation. As of 22 November 2016, three accreditations have been awarded.

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.

Recommendations

ASLIA asserts that the work of Deaf Interpreters, when appropriately applied⁴, 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.

There is an ongoing need for the training and accreditation of Deaf Interpreters to enhance accuracy of communication for Deaf people with unique language or cultural differences, particularly in high-stakes settings.

More information about working with interpreters in general is available from ASLIA.
<http://www.aslia.com.au/>

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RID Standard Practice Paper, “Use of A Certified Deaf Interpreter”, Silver Spring, MD: US Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, RID. url:
<http://www.rid.org/interpreting/Standard Practice Papers/index.cfm>.

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⁴ *The decision to bring in the specialised skills of a DI may 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.*

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World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) url: www.wasli.org.

The US Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), url: www.rid.org