TEACHING AND LEARNING AUSLAN VIA IMMERSION METHODS:
REPORT FOR THE QUEENSLAND DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION,
TRAINING AND THE ARTS

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Teaching and Learning Auslan via Immersion Methods:

A Report for the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts

Summary

The following issues are canvassed in the Report:

- What is bilingualism and how are immersion approaches to learning a second language embedded within such a context?
- Features of effective immersion programs within the context of DETA requirements
- The nature of sign languages (especially Auslan) and their role in the Deaf community
- Types and uses of signed communication in education
- Some assumptions about the context of DETA participants: including limited transfers from other language learning experiences, use of immersion opportunities, curriculum and pedagogical adaptations
- Assessment of Auslan proficiency
- Programs offered by Griffith University and their methods of delivery
- Recommended content of DETA program/s
- Sources of information used, references and resources identified

Conduct of the Research

A number of approaches to the gathering of data for this report was undertaken.

The WorldWideWeb was extensively utilised to search sites and obtain information. Using appropriate terms search engines such as Google Scholar and Ingenta provided access to professional and research journals and other sites on this topic. Terms used included “immersion teaching of language”, “immersion language learning”, “sign language”, “sign language teaching”, “immersion teaching of sign language”, “immersion learning of sign language” and the like.

Griffith University library print holdings were also searched for monographs and journals relevant to the topic.

Australian and international colleagues in expert in the areas of immersion and Deaf Studies and sign language and sign language learning and teaching were consulted both for their own knowledge and for their recommendations of print and online sources of relevant information.
Finally, the extensive expertise of the writers in Deaf Studies, language learning and deaf education was utilised in its compilation of the Report.

**Principles and Methods of Teaching and Learning a Second Language via Immersion**

It has been a common experience of many people who have learned a second language in school via traditional methods (the “Grammar-Translation” or the “Audiolingual Method”, for example) that when visiting the country of the language they have “learned” they are unable to effectively communicate with native speakers. Even with the “Communicative Methods” of the last several decades there are problems because although such methods enable learners to communicate more fluently they often make many mistakes in grammar and pronunciation which have been “fossilized” because there is often a lack of error correction in these approaches.

Many of these difficulties can be overcome by the use of “Immersion Methods” where the learner is placed in a situation where all or a significant proportion of the communication is in the target language to be learned. The essence of immersion learning/teaching of languages is “the teaching of language, content, and culture in combination without the use of the students’ first language” ([http://www.webcitation.org/5OPGazfJv](http://www.webcitation.org/5OPGazfJv)).

First it should be established that immersion approaches to learning a target language are a component of a bilingual approach. “Successive bilingualism” occurs when learners who have acquired at least a first language are engaged in the learning of a second language. “Simultaneous bilingualism” is the learning of two languages at the same time. This distinction can be considered in relation to sign language learning by teachers and by deaf students. Most deaf students come from hearing families and will not know Auslan without sufficient meaningful and proficient exposure to it from fluent users (for example, from Deaf children from signing Deaf families) or from Deaf adult models of Auslan.

For teachers, learning Auslan is clearly a case of successive bilingualism as it is for most deaf children who grow up with hearing families and with the use of speech and spoken language. Thus the use of immersion approaches is a way of maximising exposure to a target language, usually after a first language has been acquired, to some extent in the case of deaf children. Immersion may take place in a school where several courses are taught in a second language, while other courses are taken in the community first language. The balance between the two may vary, and full immersion occurs when all of the curriculum is presented in the second language. The outcome of partial immersion is more controverted but most linguists believe that for successful learning at least 50% of the program must be in an immersion format (Berthold, 1995; de Courcy, personal communication).

Another feature of immersion programs relates to the time that they are commenced and the terms “early”, “middle” and “late” are used to describe the ages at which students engage in the language learning. While early is best, there are still strong gains to be made in late engagement in language immersion opportunities. The situation of teachers and teacher aides from the Department of Education, Training and the Arts learning Auslan falls into the “late immersion” category.

As noted above, in schools an immersion approach in schools has meant the teaching of all or most of the curriculum in the target language. In adult programs it has often
meant the learner living in a native-speaking community for periods as extensive as can be arranged and as much exposure to the language as possible in meaningful communication in class sessions.

Most commentators recommend the teaching of some of the grammar of the target language as well as immersion in communicative settings—especially for adults. “For older students, effective foreign language instruction includes direct teaching, systematic practice involving rules and grammar, and plenty of opportunities for conversation …. A balanced instructional approach is vital” (American Education Research Association, 2006). A fuller overview of the principles of second language acquisition can be found at: [http://www.nwrel.org/request/2003may/overview.html](http://www.nwrel.org/request/2003may/overview.html)

This report is an examination of the implications for the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) of such a “balanced” approach, both in general and particularly as applied to the Griffith University programs in Auslan Studies presently being developed. As much exposure to native speakers of Auslan will be provided as possible under the circumstances in which DETA personnel will be in the program, while class time will also be devoted to the teaching of aspects of Auslan grammar and vocabulary and supervised practice in Auslan use and correction of student reception and production errors as well as general background content on the notion of Deaf Community and Culture, both overseas and in Australia. There will also be consideration of the pedagogical role of Auslan, especially in the context of the delivery of services to deaf students in Queensland, whether by direct instruction or interpreting. Extensive print and audiovisual resources are available to support these teaching/learning situations.

**Teaching and Learning a Sign Language via Immersion**

In principle, learning a sign language via the kinds of immersion and classwork practices outlined above and detailed below should not be greatly different from learning a spoken language under similar conditions. It is, however, different from the learning of a spoken language in some ways and there are differences in the ways in which immersion techniques may be applied. These differences are further considered below.

Learning one spoken language after the learning of another spoken language, probably the person’s first language, brings with it several assumptions, described within the well accepted “linguistic interdependence model” (Cummins, 1981). These include the potential transfers that occur from knowledge of the use of an existing language to the new language.

First, there is normally a common mode (auditory-oral in most cases) and the components of transfer involve the experience of a new phonology that will to some extent map on to the individual’s existing phonological repertoire. There may also be grammatical structures that transfer and in most spoken languages there will be a

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1 It should be noted that the Griffith university certificate programs are not designed to train interpreters. Further learning would be required for graduates of the certificates to prepare for the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) examination at Paraprofessional level or higher.
written code that may be used in the learning of the new language (Cummins 1981; Mayer & Wells, 1996; Mayer & Akumatsu, 2003).

Second, there are assumptions about the cognitive bases of the languages in use, particularly how they may be structured and applied to realise a range of communicative and cognitive functions. Learners who have learned to use languages in a predominantly auditory-oral mode develop related cognitive structures and strategies of memory, organization and association. These can be quite different from the cognitive strategies required to learn and use a visual-gestural sign language. (Marschark, 2007).

Third, for spoken language users there can often be an assumption that they may have had some, even if limited experience with other majority spoken languages such as English users’ experience with or exposure to French or Spanish and the frequent lexical borrowing or exchange between these languages and English. Most English users, however, will have had no contact with Auslan. Teachers of deaf children may have had some experience with signed English or some form of ‘contact signing’ employing features of the two languages.

In this context some mention needs to be made regarding the issue of language ‘mixing’ in cases where a second language is learned after a first language has been acquired. A natural tendency for many adults in learning a second language is to acquire vocabulary from the second language and attempt to use it with some mixing of the grammar of the first language and the second language. It is not possible to absolutely keep languages apart, either in a social sense, or when second language learning is attempted. This is one of the reasons why immersion approaches have such reported value in that they place the learner in a context of sustained and meaningful use of the target language. This is not to suggest that language mixing is a ‘bad’ thing, as most recent research in bilingual acquisition suggests that examples of language mixing are evidence that learning is taking place and that useful transfers between the languages are taking place (Vonen, 2005). The case of Simultaneous Communication (SimCom, the use of signs from a sign language usually presented in the word order and morphological structure of English and accompanied by speech), is interesting and the continued use of such approaches show that SimCom has value in the education of deaf students (Power, Hyde & Leigh, in press).

For all these reasons most writers in second language learning theory and practice therefore recommend some degree of use of the learner’s native language in the second language learning context, particularly to facilitate the comprehensibility of tasks and situations encountered in the second language (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

Other features of second language learning that are germane to this report are;

1.0 The use of native language speaker support. This would mean using Deaf native users of Auslan in ways that model and support the learning of the learners (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

2.0 Academic language scaffolding. This involves the teacher responsible for the program progressively building learners’ ability to complete tasks within their cognitive and experiential circumstances (Thomas & Collier, 2002).
3.0 Co-operative learning. This involves students in small group learning experiences where they are given frequent opportunities to use the target language in a spirit of friendliness, support and mutual respect. It is usually used in a context of well-structured and familiar tasks (Calderon, 2001).

4.0 Culture studies. These should be included to broaden and apply the focus of the program and typically include story telling activities, use of humour, traditions, and the development of cross-cultural awareness.

Cummins (1981) and other researchers and practitioners describe two different types of communication used in second language teaching and learning:

- Context-embedded communication that provides the learner with a range of communicative supports such as familiar objects, gestures and everyday examples.
- Context-reduced communication that provides fewer communicative clues to support understanding. For example a note or an email with no visual or other contextual cues.

Cummins also distinguishes between:

- Cognitively demanding communication that requires a learner to analyse and synthesise information quickly and contains abstract or specialised concepts, such as in a mathematics lesson.
- Cognitively undemanding communication that requires minimal abstract and critical thinking, such as in an everyday social communication or simple ‘yes’/’no’ classroom questions.

Understanding these features and principles of second language learning and their applications to immersion approaches and specifically to Auslan will need to be conveyed in any program for teachers or paraprofessionals. They are fundamental to the development of instructional strategies, curriculum materials, and language development activities.

Of central importance is the well-documented research and practical experience that demonstrates that there is a direct relationship between length of meaningful exposure to communication in the target language and level of receptive and expressive skill development. It would be ideal if learners could be immersed for extended periods in a signing Deaf community but this is rarely possible². The conditions under which DETA personnel will be able to enter an Auslan learning program would make such an approach using extended periods of contact very difficult, if not impossible.

² Of interest here is that Norway and Sweden have Deaf Centres as part of their services in their Departments of Education and the Arts. The Deaf Centre at Al in southern Norway, while also a Deaf cultural and language institute, provides live-in, structured immersion programs for people who wish to learn Norwegian Sign Language. Such Centres are supported by government funding as recognition of the status of the national sign language and of the value that the Centre offers learners of the sign language.
For these reasons ways must be found to provide as extensive as possible access to a signing environment for learners. Thus the importance of obtaining extended periods via workplace, evening, weekend and “holiday” sessions, as well as in-class exposure. These periods need to be interspaced with experiences that teach about the linguistic features of Auslan and structured in-class sessions.

In Sweden and Norway, both countries with long traditions of preparing teachers and interpreters to work in schools and other settings (notably neither country supports the placement of interpreters with deaf children in regular primary/elementary schools), programs in NSL and SSL are usually of three years duration. They also include studies of ethics, situational contexts and specialised studies in the theory and practice of communication and learning. In any year of these programs, extended periods of practice are involved (up to three months at a time) in learning the language/s and similar periods of professional practice in the use of the language/s in education contexts. These countries also provide short courses (three months each) for parents of deaf children and other community members. Many of these courses are on a live-in basis.

Possible Delivery Scenarios and Issues for Immersion Teaching of Auslan by DETA

Concurrently with the preparation of this Report Griffith University Faculty of Education is preparing two certificate courses in “Auslan Studies” which embody the principles and approaches described in this Report. One course will focus on the needs of teachers of deaf students and the other on those of teacher aides.

Hence these suggestions should be considered in the light of the discussion above and the context of members of programs either being enrolled for credit in one of the Auslan Studies certificates to be mounted by Griffith University or for other teachers, aides, parents or others who wish to obtain familiarity with Auslan and its use without obtaining a formal qualification. Appropriate arrangements for payment would need to be made by participants not members of the Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) in Queensland.

As explained above, the essence of immersion learning of a language is exposure to meaningful interaction with that language’s native speakers3 for lengthy periods. A number of factors therefore impinge upon DETA in its offering the teaching of Auslan to its staff via immersion methods.

1. Fulltime release to give full immersion in the signing Deaf community would be the ideal, but is impractical under the demands for ordinary delivery of service to deaf students by DETA staff and the availability of sufficient numbers of signing deaf people for such extended periods.

2. Part-time activities would therefore seem to be the only viable option and there are a number of possibilities in this regard:

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3 Despite the visual/manual mode of sign languages, “speaker” is still the conventional term for users.
2.1. Release of staff undertaking the Auslan studies programs for a period (e.g., one day per week) for intensive immersion in an Auslan-only environment. It would be beneficial to group some of these days in periods of three or more at a time.

2.2. Organisation of weekend and/or vacation “schools” where an immersion experience with native signers could be maintained. A decision would need to be made as to whether these occasions would be mandatory or optional for enrolled students.

2.3. Organisation of “after school” afternoon and/or evening programs could also be an option. Again mandatoriness would need to be considered for enrolled students.

2.4. Some combination of these arrangements, supplemented by online and interactive DVD practice in Auslan, and to establish regional “communities of practice” in Auslan.

3. Given that lengthy exposure of learners to native speakers of Auslan would be most effective in developing skills, the possible placement of native signers in the schools where learners are present and can interact with these speakers could also be an option.

4. Opportunities for regular “home study” could also be provided via take-home and/or internet–based resources (e.g., vodcasting and video streaming). Research indicates a minimum of 30 minutes per day can enhance learning.

It is not sufficient to merely engage in unstructured “chat” during these opportunities for mixing with native speakers. In any of options 2–3 it would be necessary to plan and structure meaningful activities that give opportunities for interaction in Auslan that replicate authentic communication uses of the language and may provide a foundation for its use in educational contexts. As described above, these could include learning about the Deaf community and its history, culture and activities, the grammar of Auslan, and where appropriate be also course content from the Griffith University certificates in Auslan where members are enrolled in one of those programs.

Management of the Program

Management of the program would depend on what arrangements DETA would wish to put in place for those entering the program. If the program is only for students enrolled in Griffith University programs, then the Griffith procedures for management through its Centre for Applied Studies in Deafness could be used. If non-enrolled students enter the program the Department could either contract the Centre to manage those students as well or nominate one of its own members to manage and support their activities. It is anticipated by Griffith that the equivalent of one day per week across at least three semesters, followed a structured professional practice program over a fourth semester would be necessary to manage all aspects of the program.

Qualifications, Skills and Experience of Delivery Staff
Several kinds of knowledge and skills will be required among the staff who would deliver an Auslan learning immersion program. Among these would be:

1. Scholars familiar with Deafness, the Australian Deaf Community and Culture and their implications for educating deaf students, especially as regards practical implementation in regular classrooms and special education units.
2. A scholar, or scholars familiar with the linguistics of Auslan.
3. A group of native speakers of Auslan, preferably Deaf people who are familiar with teaching Auslan.
4. Interpreters may be required in the early stages for delivery of some aspects of the program by Deaf people.
5. A Course Manager familiar with Griffith University procedures and online, teleconference and other techniques of delivery that will be used in the courses.

**Methods of Delivery of the Program**

In response to the model provided by Cummins (1981), some of the features of immersion approaches to second language learning are (de Courcy, personal communication, May, 2007):

1. Exclusive use of the target language in scheduled periods
2. Comprehensible input and output
3. Modelling and demonstration
4. Use of concrete or familiar materials and situations to support language learning
5. Effective use of questioning
6. Peer teaching and exposure to other communities using the language
7. Use of body language and gesture
8. Use of games and activities
9. Consideration of the genres of the language use
10. A supportive, risk-taking environment

The teaching of Auslan would be carried out by the immersion and in-class methods discussed above. Skill development will be by meaningful interaction with skilled Deaf or hearing Auslan teachers and tutors. Topics to be used might include the Deaf teachers’ experiences and life views, Deaf stories, news of current interest, experiences and interests and activities of class members, discussions of set reading and audiovisual materials, etc.

If not being taken for credit but only for development of Auslan skills the Program would include more emphasis and time devoted to actual Auslan skills but for teachers and aides would also need to include some attention to and understanding of the content listed above. This approach to learning Auslan has an educational context and is not designed for broad social purposes.
Assessment of Outcomes of Program – Auslan Skills and Content Knowledge and Application

Auslan Skills

Several methods are available for assessment of Auslan skills development. Which of these methods would be used will depend upon the desired outcomes of the Program.

Sign Language Proficiency Rating

The most extensive of the sign language skill assessment methods available is the “Sign Language Proficiency Rating” (SLPR) developed by Breda Carty and Des Power of Griffith University. The SLPR uses an interview technique to assess the level of skills of Auslan learners in both receptive and expressive modes. Levels range from

Zero Proficiency: Cannot communicate in sign language.

Limited Proficiency: Limited signing ability only within the most immediate, predictable areas they have been taught in beginning classes.

Basic Transactional Proficiency: Able to satisfy immediate, predictable needs using mostly learned language.

Transactional Proficiency: Able to satisfy everyday transactional needs and limited social needs.

Minimum Social Proficiency: Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements.

Intermediate Social Proficiency: Able to sign with sufficient sentence accuracy and vocabulary to participate in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social and work topics.

Advanced Social Proficiency: Able to use the language fluently and accurately in almost all social, community, recreational and work situations.

Native-Like Proficiency: Signing proficiency equivalent to that of a native signer of the same sociocultural variety.

The SLPR takes about one hour to administer.

Desired Outcome Level

The desired level of proficiency would need to be considered within the context of the desired Departmental outcomes. It could be considered that for competent use of Auslan for educational purposes at least Intermediate Social Proficiency would be necessary and Advanced Social Proficiency desirable.

Describing Signing
Another less formal method of assessment is also available: the “Describing Signing (Auslan Version)” developed by Des Power at Griffith University. This approach uses formal and informal observation of testees in class and in immersion sessions and develops a “Profile” of skills useful for both determining level of skill and where further development of skills is needed.

Content Knowledge

As described elsewhere, in addition to learning Auslan, students should be exposed to content knowledge which will include the nature of sign languages and their roles in Deaf communities (with an emphasis on the Australian context), the nature of Deaf communities, and the use of sign language in education for communication and learning (with special emphasis on the Queensland context).

These elements would be assessed via practical and theoretical assignments related to the content covered in lectures and online.

Skills and Knowledge Application

Of particular importance is the application of the skills and knowledge developed to real worklife situations in regular and special settings. In the Griffith University courses there is an entire semester devoted to an applied project for teaching and/or learning using the skills and knowledge developed in earlier subjects. It is anticipated that the outcomes of such projects will be archived on a database for the use of future students and other teachers and aides in their regular educational activities.

Print, Audiovisual and Online Resources

Griffith University has available some of Australia’s most extensive resources of print and audiovisual materials which could be used in the Program and is developing further materials to meet the needs of its certificate programs in Auslan.

Students enrolled in the proposed Griffith certificate programs would have access to the full print and audiovisual resources of the university without further charge, both by going to the library and ordering loans online or by telephone. Audiovisual materials can be delivered online or by provision of material on CDROM and DVD.

Selected Resources Available From Griffith University and Online

Audiovisual Materials


Branson, J., et al. (1995). Introduction to Auslan: Level 2 [Videorecording] NID, La Trobe University Language Centre, MtGravatt


**Online Auslan and Other Deaf Related Sites**

http://www.auslan101.com
http://www.auslan.org
http://www.auslan.org.au/ (Signbank)
http://auslantuition.csse.uwa.edu.au (University of Western Australia; does not run on Macs :-( unfortunately the site has been out of development for some time; worth looking at for the approach)
http://www.wfdeaf.org/ (World Federation of the Deaf)
http://www.deaflympics.com/ (the Deaflympics; run by the Comité Internationale des Sports des Sourds)
http://www.answers.com/topic/auslan (The Answers entry)
http://www.ozdeaftheatre.com/ (The Australian Theatre of the Deaf)
http://www.deaflibrary.org/ (A wide variety of internet resources)

Print Materials


*American Annals of the Deaf* (Available online and in print through Griffith Library)


*Deafness & Education International* (Available online and in print through Griffith Library)


*Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* (Available online and in print through Griffith Library)

The Recommended Content of an Auslan Immersion Program for the DETA

In order to determine the content of the program it would need to be determined if the DETA immersion programs in Auslan are for the development of competence only and/or whether they are seen as contributing to the Griffith University certificate programs.

In the Program if taken for academic credit for the Griffith University certificates academic objectives, related content and assessments could include:

- Auslan Receptive and Expressive Skills Development
- The World and Australian Deaf Community and Culture
- The Nature of Sign Languages
- Auslan and its use in the Australian Deaf Community
- The Grammar of Auslan: Lexicon, Syntax and Semantics
- The use of Auslan in teaching and communicating with deaf students in school settings—including direct teaching and interpreting
- The use of Auslan and related accommodations of the curriculum
- Auslan and the development of listening, speaking and literacy in English for deaf students

The World and Australian Deaf Communities and Culture

Throughout history Deaf people themselves have always found personal and social ease in community in their coming together because of their “differentness” from people who hear and speak. This began to be more formalised in the eighteenth century after schools were founded and their graduates came together and eventually formed “deaf clubs” which provided a social milieu where they could undertake many activities together that made their lives more pleasant and communication easier.
Most of the activities were the same as those enjoyed by the hearing-speaking community: sport, recreational activities such as cards, bowls, subtitled movies, theatre and the like. Many clubs had a religious affiliation with one or another of the major religions. They provided a basis for deaf people to meet and friendships begun in the school years frequently blossomed into romance and marriage. Often the clubs provided services to the Deaf community such as interpreting for personal needs, taxation management, and the like.

In Australia such clubs were usually called “Deaf Societies” and were state-based with headquarters in the state capital. They were largely administered by hearing people until the late twentieth century despite several attempts by deaf people to “manage their own affairs”. Breda Carty has provided a history of these times and activities (Carty, 2004).

Carty examines a number of associations formed by Deaf people over the years, most of which collapsed for various reasons. In 1986 a group of Deaf people founded the Australian Association of the Deaf which continues to be the peak body representing the interests and views of Deaf people in such areas as provision of captioned television, interpreting services, the use of Auslan (especially in education), portrayal of Deaf people in the media, cochlear implants, etc. Other Australian organizations include Deaf Sports Australia (http://www.deafsports.org.au/aboutus/links.php) that organises regular national sports meetings.

For many years Deaf people were cut off from the major means of non-face-to-face communication—the Telephone. With the advent of the TTY and Relay Services and more recently Short Message Service on mobile phones, this situation has been considerably improved. Research as been conducted into the communication methods of Deaf people around the world and in Australia (Power & Power, 2004; Power, Power & Horstmannhoff, 2007). Soon videophones will enable signed communication and relay interpreting at a distance. Power (2006a, b; 2005) has examined the press representation of Deaf people and deafness matters in the world and Australian press. The “Deaf Australia Online” Project (http://www.deafaustralia.org.au/online/index.htm) has also examined the use of online communication methods by deaf people.

There are numerous national and international groups for Deaf people in which Australian Deaf people have been very active. Chief among these is the World Federation of the Deaf which has over 130 member countries and which holds regular conferences on matters of interest to the world Deaf community (http://www.wfdeaf.org/). The World Conference of the WFD was held in Brisbane in 1998. Deaf people have always been very heavily involved in sports and the Deaflympics (http://www.deafsports.org.au/aboutus/links.php) began in 1924. The Summer Deaflympics was held in Melbourne in 2005.

The demography of the Australian Deaf Community is a contentious issue, with Johnston (2004) and Hyde and Power (1992) concluding that between 6000 and 15,000 deaf Australians have an everyday use of Auslan. Thus Deaf communities across Australia will not be large and will be demographically and geographically diverse.
The Nature of Signed Languages

Sign languages of the Deaf world (there are 121 listed in the *Ethnologue* (http://www.ethnologue.com/show_family.asp?subid=90008), but many more have not yet been listed) have been shown to have the same phonemic (this term is used despite the visual nature of signs), semantic, syntactic, and lexical characteristics as spoken languages and to be capable of expressing the same range of functions as do spoken languages for all purposes of life (see also Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sign_language). It’s a common misconception that all sign languages are the same, but in fact, except for historical associations like that between British and Australian sign languages) they are as different and as mutually unintelligible as different spoken languages.

Visual/Gestural Mode

Sign languages are different, however, in that they use a visual/manual mode of reception and expression rather than the auditory/vocal mode of spoken languages. In this regard they accommodate to and have design features that are responsive to human visual information processing and cognition. They are not just manual representations of a local spoken language in any of their semantic or syntactic characteristics, though their lexicons will inevitably influenced by features of the surrounding community, culture and physical situation of the people and land.

Grammar and Vocabulary

A feature of sign languages is that they do not replicate the grammatical characteristics of the local spoken language. In Auslan, for example, the usual word order in sentences is not that of English. Auslan (and most sign languages) use a “Topic-Comment” structure within sentences that (among other techniques) foregrounds the feature of attention in the sentence: e.g., “Cat garden in”, “Fish flathead tasty”.

In most cases sign languages use a noun-adjective order rather than adjective-noun: e.g., “boy happy”.

There are no real equivalents in most sign languages to the “be” forms of English and determiners are often omitted: “Boy happy” is quite as grammatical in Auslan as “The boy is happy” in English.

Except for occasional reasons of emphasis sentences in most sign languages (including Auslan) are “verb final”: “Boy ball chase” would be the usual word order.

Sign languages also make very extensive use of “classifiers” of various kinds. Classifiers stand for categories of objects and the same sign will frequently be used to express actions or events involving the object. The same “car” classifier, for example, could be used with other signs to express a car parking, crashing, speeding, etc. Other classifiers have complex syntactic uses for denoting time, place and other functions.

Spoken languages use facial expression and body movement to express emotion and other characteristics of communicative acts. Sign languages also use these phenomena
but they have actual rule-governed grammatical functions. For example, facial expressions and shoulder placement for questions that require YES/NO answers are different from facial expressions and shoulder placement for WH-questions, e.g., WHO, WHY, WHEN, WHERE, etc.

Fingerspelling (two-handed in the Australian case) is an essential component of sign language. It is used for words that have no sign equivalents (e.g., proper names), for emphasis and for clarification of meanings.

It is often said that sign languages have no written forms but in fact several systems are available, the best known of which is “Sutton Sign writing” (http://www.signwriting.org/). These systems are complicated to learn and are not commonly in everyday use or in education. Some are used for descriptive and archival purposes in sign language research.

Given the unfamiliar visual/manual nature of sign languages and their syntactic, lexical and semantic differences from spoken languages non-users have a difficult task in learning one (say Auslan) from scratch. Jacobs (1996; cited in Napier, Leigh & Nann, in press) was of the view that sign languages (ASL in his case) would be as difficult to learn for an English speaker as Chinese or Japanese, putting it at the upper end of difficulty and the time needed to learn to reasonable fluency. The American National Association of the Deaf nominates “one or two years … To pick up enough signs for basic communication and to sign them comfortably, without excessive stiffness” and the National Virtual Translation Centre estimates 1100 “class hours … [for “General Proficiency” in] languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English”, of which Auslan would be one such.

What methods are most suitable? It needs to be recognized that an “immersion” approach within the parameters that constrain DETA cannot be “pure”. Due to the adult status of the students, the time available, student motivation and skill and other variables, a desirable program will require a mixture of approaches: conscious learning and practice of vocabulary and syntax as well as meaningful interactive communication with native speakers.

Adults … need a judicious mixture of practice and communication. Deliberate direct instruction (e.g., studying grammatical structures, memorizing lists of vocabulary words) is vital, along with ample classroom and study time. As such students progress, their instruction should become increasingly communicative and should include an extended stay abroad [interaction with native Auslan speakers] for greatest effect.

Be realistic with students … about how much foreign language skill a few hours a week of instruction can generate …. Such limited instruction will not lead to mastery…. Recognize that for almost everyone, high proficiency in a foreign language will develop outside the classroom, through conversations with native speakers made possible by skills acquired in the classroom (American Education Research Association, 2006).

Learning Auslan will not be quick or easy.
Communicative competence in Auslan will require much meaningful interaction with native speakers inside and outside the classroom over a sustained period of time.

Varieties of Signed Communication

National sign languages like Auslan (a descendent of British Sign Language brought here by Deaf immigrants in the 1860s, and influenced also by Irish Sign Language) are frequently called “natural sign languages”. Native sign languages need to be distinguished from various methods of representing the local language on the hands. Many such exist. In Australia the system is called “Australasian Signed English”; ASE and was developed largely for school use in the 1970s (MacDougall, 19). ASE uses a mixture of Auslan and invented signs (including many for grammatical morphemes) to reproduce on the hands what is simultaneously being spoken. Used in this way it is often characterised as “Simultaneous Communication” or SimCom.

In Australia SimCom is little used outside educational settings and rarely as a means of communication among Deaf people. Indeed many Deaf people object to its use as a means of communication or even in education, preferring “bilingual/bicultural” approaches using natural sign language (see below). In reality, sign languages are always influenced by the majority spoken languages used in their surrounding communities and forms of SimCom have always evolved and found regular use wherever Deaf and hearing communities mix. This situation is unlikely to change.

There are also a number of other signing methods in use. “Gestuno” is an invented system (derived largely from British and American sign lexicons) which is used almost entirely in international meetings of deaf people. “Pidgin Sign English (PSE)” (also called “Contact Signing”) uses Auslan (in our case) in English word order and is often used in communication between hearing and Deaf signers.

The Use of Signed Communication in Education

In most educational settings for deaf students in Australia where signing is used the method of signing is Australasian Signed English in simultaneous communication with speech.

Increasingly Auslan is used in what are termed “Bilingual-Bicultural (BiBi)” settings. In these contexts English is taught mostly through reading and writing, although the use of speech and listening/lipreading sometimes plays a part. In many cases it appears that no voice is used for much of the time in BiBi classrooms.

In some other settings it seems that voice is used and as the word order and other characteristics of “pure Auslan” described above make it impossible to speak English and sign Auslan at the same time what appears to be used is a variety of PSE in which Auslan signs are used in English word order—what Trevor Johnston, the noted Australian sign linguist, has called “signing in English”.

In these cases it may be that adoption of the “voice-on/PSE” approach may be in response to the concerns of hearing parents’ concerns that their children would not develop oral skills in an Auslan-only signing environment.
There is as yet no reliable evidence concerning the prevalence of speech, listening and lipreading or PSE in Australian bilingual-bicultural programs

The form of signed and spoken communication to be used is a major issue with which the DETA approach to the teaching/learning of Auslan and its use for educational purposes will need to contend and a policy clearly enunciated. The decision will influence practice in schools and the approaches to Auslan to be adopted in any teaching of Auslan to DETA personnel.

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**References**


*What’s immersion education?* Downloaded from [http://www.webcitation.org/5OPGazfJv](http://www.webcitation.org/5OPGazfJv)