

SIGNS OF LEARNING:

Developing a national curriculum for first and second language learners of Auslan in Australian schools

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Abstract: Australia's education system has historically been premised on state and territory-based curricula, until the development of a national curriculum in each learning area, released in stages from 2014. This paper will discuss the curriculum development process for the Auslan curriculum in the Languages learning area, which delivered an endorsed blueprint for the formal teaching and learning of Auslan in Australian schools from 2017. Unique features of the curriculum will be outlined, such as the dual-pathways for first and second language learners of Auslan, and the different sequence entry points, specifically designed to meet the needs of deaf children in both the early primary school years, as well as those who are late learners of a first language, entering secondary school with limited spoken and/or signed language later in childhood. The paper will provide an overview of the structure and content of the curriculum and the nature of the learners, and conclude with some of the opportunities and challenges arising from this initiative, such as the ongoing lack of quality resources that exist for its day-to-day implementation in schools nation-wide.

Keywords: Auslan. Curriculum. Signed language pedagogy.

SINAIS DE APRENDIZAGEM:

Desenvolvendo um currículo nacional para alunos da Auslan como primeira e segunda língua nas escolas australianas

Resumo: Historicamente, o sistema educacional da Austrália foi baseado em currículos estaduais e territoriais, até o desenvolvimento de um currículo nacional em cada área de aprendizagem, lançado em etapas a partir de 2014. Este artigo discutirá o processo de desenvolvimento curricular para o currículo da Auslan na área de aprendizagem de Línguas, que forneceu um plano endossado para o ensino e aprendizagem formal da Auslan nas escolas australianas a partir de 2017. Características únicas do currículo serão descritas, como os caminhos duplos para alunos de primeira e segunda língua da Auslan e os diferentes pontos de entrada de sequência, projetado especificamente para atender às necessidades de crianças surdas nos primeiros anos do ensino fundamental, e os diferentes pontos de entrada de sequência, especificamente projetados para atender às necessidades de crianças surdas nos primeiros anos do ensino fundamental, bem como aquelas que são aprendizes tardios de uma primeira língua, ingressando no ensino médio com língua falada e/ou de sinais limitada mais tarde na infância. O artigo

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fornece uma visão geral da estrutura e conteúdo do currículo e da natureza dos alunos, e concluirá com algumas das oportunidades e desafios decorrentes desta iniciativa, como a contínua falta de recursos de qualidade que existem para a sua implementação no dia-a-dia nas escolas de todo o país.

Palavras-chave: Auslan. Currículo. Pedagogia da Língua de Sinais.

SEÑAS DE APRENDIZAJE:

Desarrollo de un currículo nacional para los estudiantes de Auslan como primer y segundo idioma en las escuelas australianas

Resumen: Históricamente, el sistema educativo de Australia se ha basado en currículos estatales y territoriales, hasta el desarrollo de un currículo nacional en cada área de aprendizaje, publicado en etapas a partir de 2014. Este artículo discutirá el proceso de desarrollo del currículo para el currículo de Auslan en el área de aprendizaje de idiomas, que ha proporcionado un modelo respaldado para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje formal de Auslan en las escuelas australianas a partir de 2017. Se describirán las características únicas del currículo, como los caminos duales para estudiantes de primer y segundo idioma de Auslan, y los diferentes puntos de entrada de secuencia, diseñados específicamente para satisfacer las necesidades de los niños sordos en los primeros años de la escuela primaria, así como aquellos que son aprendices tardíos de un primer idioma, ingresando a la escuela secundaria con lengua hablada y/o de señas limitada más adelante en la infancia. El artículo brindará una visión general de la estructura y contenido del currículo y la naturaleza de los estudiantes, y concluirá con algunas de las oportunidades y desafíos que se derivan de esta iniciativa, como la continua falta de recursos de calidad que existen para su día a día implementación actual en las escuelas de todo el país.

Palabras clave: Auslán. Currículo. Pedagogía de la Lengua de Señas.

Introduction

The development of a curriculum provides important educational infrastructure for teachers, presents rigorous standards, offers coherence and clarity for effective teaching and learning, and gives validation and ratification to a learning area for delivery in the classroom (DISBRAY, 2019). In 2017, the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* (ACARA) published the first national curriculum for Auslan (Australian Sign Language) for use in primary and secondary schools in Australia. Recognition of the learning area in the formal compulsory education context on a national level was a watershed moment, in light of the long history of politically and ideologically divisive actions and beliefs surrounding the use of signed languages (SL) in schools. An overview of this contentious history is beyond the scope of this paper, and is not limited to deaf people in Australia, however there is no doubt that the suppression, marginalisation and denigration of Auslan has had far-reaching consequences. Indeed, feedback sought from key members of the Deaf community and other stakeholders at the

time of publication of the national curriculum for Auslan, led to this powerful recollection being published in the introduction to the national curriculum document:

When I was a school student, we were punished for using our sign language. I remember writing 100 times: 'I must not sign'. It makes me so happy to see that young people today are encouraged to learn Auslan, and to be proud of it.
- Nola Colefax, OAM, Deaf elder. (ACARA, 2017).

Language is capital, and a national curriculum for Auslan in schools provides impetus for societal change, affecting each individual's agency and knowledge, as well as offering systemic acknowledgment of rights, access, and increased awareness. Not only does an Auslan curriculum enable learners to study a language with a rising public presence and visibility in Australia, it offers learners an appreciation of the varied ways languages operate as systems for making and sharing meaning. Like all SLs, Auslan uses a visual-gestural modality, and this challenges learners to become more flexible communicators, with enhanced cross-cultural capabilities. The potential for further impact of a quality Auslan course on the wider school community, school staff, and the families of Auslan learners in schools - deaf and hearing - is immeasurable.

For deaf children, a national curriculum for Auslan encourages formal study of the SL of their own country and acknowledges its place in Australia's linguistic heritage. It provides opportunities for them to reflect on Deaf culture and identity development. In schools where their hearing peers are also learning Auslan, deaf students will be able to share more effective communicative relationships with them. Further, greater awareness of the structure of Auslan can assist deaf students to better understand the structure of English and other languages. These benefits will apply to a wide range of deaf students, from those with signing families to those with limited prior experience with Auslan. Studying Auslan is often a social justice issue for deaf students who have experienced language deprivation or delays, and the formal recognition and inclusion of Auslan in the school curriculum across both the primary and secondary sector positively redresses, to some extent, the historic devaluing of SLs.

Hearing students learning Auslan as a second language (L2) are given opportunities to study a language which is indigenous to Australia. If they have deaf peers, their language learning is likely to include meaningful real-world communication opportunities, and allow them to

acquire an authentic appreciation of diversity and inclusion. Potential career pathways arising from studying Auslan include interpreting, teaching and social services. More importantly, it provides L2 learners with significant language and cultural competencies and understandings that are transferable for use in life in general, as well as in a wide range of occupations and community settings that may require any kind of communication and interaction, ranging from retail and hospitality, to healthcare and other professional and social contexts.

Whilst the benefits of a national curriculum in Auslan are many, and the inclusion of Auslan in a formalised national agenda on this scale in the education sector is very powerful on multiple levels, the implementation of the curriculum has resulted in some challenges, as well as opportunities. In particular, the groundbreaking curriculum has significant implications for resourcing on several levels, many of which are yet to be resolved in the implementation process at state and territory level.

The curriculum development process

In 2009, ACARA became operational after an Act of Federal Parliament in December 2008 legislated to bring Australian state-based education curricula together in a more unified fashion, creating clearer expectations for what *all* Australian children should be taught, regardless of their background, or where they reside in the country. The rationale for introducing an Australian Curriculum in all learning areas was to ensure greater quality, equity and transparency in the education system around the nation, despite education still remaining primarily a state and territory-based responsibility in Australia.

By 2014, the national curriculum for a number of key learning areas was released, for adoption by the states and territories of Australia. Languages as a learning area were targeted for incorporation in the national curriculum roll out, with a Shape Paper developed by ACARA in 2012 to set the direction for consistency in curriculum development. The intercultural language teaching and learning approach, with a focus on meaningful and purposeful classroom interactions and tasks, was the key influence behind curriculum design in the broad Languages learning area (SCARINO, LIDDICOAT, 2009; LIDDICOAT, SCARINO, 2013). In 2014, Chinese, Indonesian, Italian and French were the first languages included in the Australian Curriculum. By the time ACARA assembled the team to write the Auslan curriculum, they had already

completed and published 14 language curricula for spoken languages, and two curriculum frameworks – one for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and one for Classical Languages (specifically, Latin and Greek). Several of these language curricula had been written with two or more pathways in learning for different groups of learners covering the compulsory schooling Australian Curriculum years, from entry at Foundation schooling level (4-5 years of age) to Year 10 (15-16 years of age), described in the curriculum as F-10. The Australian Curriculum does not include the final years of senior secondary school, Year 11 and Year 12, where either vocational or academic options are specifically selected for further pursuit by Australian students. The Chinese curriculum, for example, was developed with three pathways, one for first language (L1) learners, one for L2 learners and a third pathway for background language learners. Each pathway was designed with the nature and needs of these specific learners in mind.

Similarly, the ACARA approved Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages has pathways for L1, L2 and for language revival learners. ACARA staff had accumulated a rich store of experience with these diverse languages and their writing teams by the time the Auslan curriculum was being considered. They had also overseen community consultations for each previous language curriculum before they were approved, which added to their awareness of the concerns held by specific language-user communities, including minority and vulnerable language communities. ACARA Languages project staff demonstrated a particular sensitivity to cultural protocols, and an acute understanding of the need for community involvement in the curriculum development process. The Auslan curriculum was the final language curriculum to be developed by ACARA, and the writing team found ACARA staff extremely well-equipped and willing to share their accumulated experience – but also open to the unique concerns that the Auslan writing team, stakeholders, and language advisory reference group brought to them.

The Auslan curriculum was written by a small team of deaf and hearing scholars and practitioners, with extensive backgrounds in linguistics, Deaf studies, translation and interpreting, language teaching and Deaf education (spanning primary, secondary and tertiary settings), all of whom are fluent or native users of Auslan. Crucial to the development of a quality cur-

riculum was the support of the language advisory reference group, which included representatives from key organisations in the Deaf community, individual stakeholders with critical expertise, and professionals in Deaf education. ACARA staff provided strong guidance from a theoretical background regarding their curriculum structure and design, and led and supported the writing team through the development and refinement of each area of the curriculum. ACARA fully funded the curriculum development process, including bringing writing team and language advisory reference group members together in face-to-face meetings, workshops and consultation sessions on several occasions throughout the 18-month curriculum development period.

The writing team benefited enormously from access to the other language curricula that had been developed already, preceding the Auslan curriculum. In particular, the team found the Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages offered valuable insights. There are significant parallels between Auslan and these languages: they share a vulnerable status in the community, they are disadvantaged by a paucity of written texts and resources, and they have similar concerns with maintenance and vitality of their languages.

In looking specifically at SL curricula and pedagogy, the writing team was challenged by the limited evidence-based research literature available on SL pedagogy, and even less on teaching a SL to children in schools. In Australia, this is a particularly under-explored area, with limited reference material available. Most of the available curricula, teaching materials and research studies from other countries were focused on hearing adult L2 learners of a SL (COOPER et al., 2011; QUINTO-POZOS, 2011; TAUB et al., 2008; WILCOX, WILCOX, 1997). There were very few curricula designed for children learning a SL as a L2 in schools (ROSEN, 2008; 2010). For L1 learners of SLs, the writing team were only able to source a handful of curricula to review (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004; 2014). The scarcity of external curricula available to the writing team for L1 and L2 learners of a SL in school meant that every available source was explored carefully, along with the other existing language curricula developed by ACARA.

This lack of resources was unsurprising to the writing team. SLs were recognised as genuine languages relatively recently, and dictionaries and linguistic descriptions have been developed only in the last 50 years or so. Research on Auslan, and indeed the naming of it as Auslan,

began in the 1980s (JOHNSTON, 1989). A great deal of valuable research has been conducted since then (JOHNSTON, SCHEMBRI, 2007; CRESDEE, JOHNSTON, 2014; FERRARA, JOHNSTON, 2014; HODGE, 2014 and others), largely due to the impetus provided by the creation of the Auslan Corpus (JOHNSTON, 2008), but there is still much more to learn about Auslan. The only published studies on the acquisition of Auslan by native signing children were written by a member of the curriculum writing team (DE BEUZEVILLE, 2004; 2006). There is little research internationally on SL acquisition by childhood L2 learners, and this also presented a significant challenge to the writing team.

In the absence of a wide-ranging body of research on the acquisition of Auslan in children as either a L1 or as a L2, the authors consulted over 150 research papers published in peer-reviewed journals, exploring findings from other SLs, particularly in relation to L1 acquisition. Findings from the literature supporting the appearance and developmental sequence of each area of grammar, such as forming negatives or topicalisation, was inserted into a table across six-monthly periods of development from age 0 to 4 years of age, and then yearly from age 5 onwards. This allowed the writing team to ensure the correct sequence and progression of language competencies in the L1 curriculum based on as much evidence available, drawn from a range of SLs, identifying and incorporating the skills one would expect to see at that age, if the learners were native signers. Due to the age of the learners and the detailed systems of language requiring documentation in the curriculum, a wide range of literature was consulted, including papers on constructed action (CORMIER et. al., 2013; EMMOREY, REILLY, 1998; MORGAN et. al., 2002; REILLY, 2000; SMITH, CORMIER, 2014); depicting signs (DE BEUZEVILLE, 2006; FISH et al., 2003; LILLO-MARTIN, 1985; MARTIN, SERA, 2006; MORGAN et al., 2008; SALLANDRE, SCHODER, HICKMANN, 2018; SCHICK, 1987; SUMER, 2015; ZWITSERLOOD et al., 2014); verb modification and the use of space (BELLUGI et al., 1990; BETTGER et al., 1995; HOFFMEISTER, 1978; MARTIN, SERA, 2006; MEIER, 1987; RICHE et al., 1994); and the acquisition of non-manual features and clause structures (ANDERSON, REILLY, 1997, 1998; LILLO-MARTIN, 2000; MCINTIRE, REILLY, 1988; REILLY, ANDERSON, 2002; REILLY, MCINTYRE, BELLUGI, 1990a; 1990b; REILLY, MCINTIRE, 1991).

Research published on the structure of Auslan as signed by native signing adults was also reviewed carefully in the development of the national curriculum for Auslan. The writing team used Johnston and Schembri's (2007) seminal text on the structure of Auslan as a key reference point. In addition, the authors consulted recent research on Auslan regarding clause constructions (HODGE, 2014; HODGE, JOHNSTON, 2014), verbs and use of space (DE BEUZEVILLE, 2008; DE BEUZEVILLE et al., 2009; JOHNSTON, 2013), constructed action (FERRARA, JOHNSTON, 2014; HODGE, 2014; HODGE, FERRARA, 2014), mouthing (JOHNSTON et al., 2016), aspect marking (GRAY, 2013) and depicting signs (SCHEMBRI, 2001; FERRARA, 2012). In addition, when there was an absence of published research, but the authors wanted to check something, they made use of the data in the Auslan Corpus (JOHNSTON, 2008).

Many adult SL teaching curricula available in English were also carefully reviewed and considered for adaptation in various parts of the Auslan curriculum. Some well-known American Sign Language (ASL) teaching materials, such as the *Signing Naturally* series (SMITH et al., 2008); the "green books" (BAKER-SHENK, COKELY, 1991); and the ABC series (HUMPHRIES, PADDEN, O'ROURKE, 1994), were all closely examined. The New Zealand Sign Language curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006), and various publications by Rachel and David McKee (1992; 2014) offered much useful material. The adult education college-level training packages and teaching materials in Australia, such as the Certificate II in Auslan course (reviewed and updated by the National Register on Vocational Education and Training, 2018), and materials used by community organisations to teach hearing adults over the years, and various reviews of these, also provided some insight to the writing team (JOHNSTON, 1987; CRESDEE, 2006; WILLOUGHBY, 2012; CRESDEE, JOHNSTON, 2014). The Victorian (VCE) study design for Year 11 and Year 12 students in senior secondary school was useful (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2001), and the resources created by individual teachers of well-established and highly regarded Auslan-in-schools L1 and L2 programs already running in a few states of Australia proved helpful too. Online materials like *ProSIGN 2* (HAUG et al., 2019) and other European languages framework materials were still in development at the time of writing the national curriculum for Auslan, but the work in progress was reviewed, as was relevant literature on L2 acquisition (ELLIS, 1994; WOLL, 2012;

LIGHTBOWN, SPADA, 2013), and recommendations on designing language courses (Graves, 2000). Additionally, the wealth of knowledge of the writing team with their areas of combined expertise, and their extensive and multi-faceted teaching experiences over many years across the education sector, further helped shape the writing process.

The resulting draft Auslan curriculum was comprehensively reviewed by the language advisory reference group members, selected deaf and hearing international reviewers from a number of countries, and an ACARA panel of language curriculum experts (non-Auslan related). It was also sent to key stakeholders and organisations in the Deaf community for feedback during a 10-week consultation process. Face-to-face community consultations were held in the capital cities of all mainland states of Australia, with Deaf-led consultation forums seeking direct feedback from the Deaf community, and other interested parties. This feedback informed revisions to the curriculum. The extensive consultation undertaken, and the community experience and feedback collected and recorded, ensured authenticity and depth in the curriculum writing process coordinated by ACARA.

Figure 01: Deaf community consultation forum.



Source: ACARA (2017).

The *Australian Curriculum: Auslan* was officially approved for publication by the Board of ACARA and all state and territory-based Ministers of Education in December 2016, and appeared on the Australian Curriculum website in January 2017. Since then, most Australian jurisdictions have adopted the Auslan curriculum for use by their respective curriculum authorities and Education Departments, in some cases with adaptations, or with the addition of more detailed syllabus documents and resources for classroom use, based on the national curriculum.

Table 01: Strands and sub-strands in the Auslan curriculum.

Strand	Sub-strand	Description
Communicating Using language for communicative purposes in interpreting, creating and exchanging meaning	1.1 Socialising	Interacting to exchange ideas, opinions, experiences, thoughts and feelings; and participating in planning, negotiating, deciding and taking action
	1.2 Informing	Obtaining, processing, interpreting and conveying information through a range of Auslan texts; developing and applying knowledge
	1.3 Creating	Engaging with imaginative experience by participating in, responding to and creating a range of texts, such as stories, poetry, art and performance
	1.4 Translating	Moving between languages and cultures, understanding that words and signs do not always have direct equivalence and recognising different interpretations and explaining these to others
	1.5 Identity	Exploring and expressing their sense of identity as individuals and as members of the Deaf community and culture and as deaf, hard of hearing or hearing people
	1.6 Reflecting	Participating in intercultural exchange, questioning reactions and assumptions; and considering how interaction shapes communication and identity
Understanding Analysing and understanding language and culture as resources for interpreting and shaping meaning in intercultural exchange	2.1 Systems of language	Understanding the language system, including visual-gestural language parameters, conventions and grammar
	2.2 Language variation and change	Understanding how language use varies according to individual difference and context and across time and place
	2.3 Language awareness	Analysing and understanding language and culture over time, including language attitudes, language policy, language rights, international contexts and language vitality
	2.4 The role of language and culture	Analysing and understanding the role of language and culture in the exchange of meaning

Source: ACARA (2017).

Structure and content of the curriculum

Each language curriculum and framework published by ACARA is designed to be taught from the early Foundation year of school to Year 10 (F-10). The curriculum is structured using two strands—*Communicating* and *Understanding*—each of which has further sub-strands and threads, which organise and capture the range and variety in the scope of learning, and reveal the progression of content across the learning sequences. In the *Communicating* strand in the Auslan curriculum, students focus on using the language in real contexts to exchange meaning, by sharing ideas, thoughts and feelings ('Socialising'), obtaining and conveying information ('Informing'), using the language imaginatively ('Creating'), moving between languages and cultures ('Translating') and reflecting on intercultural exchanges ('Reflecting'). In addition, in the L1 pathway, learners also explore and express their sense of identity as individuals and as members of the Deaf community ('Identity').

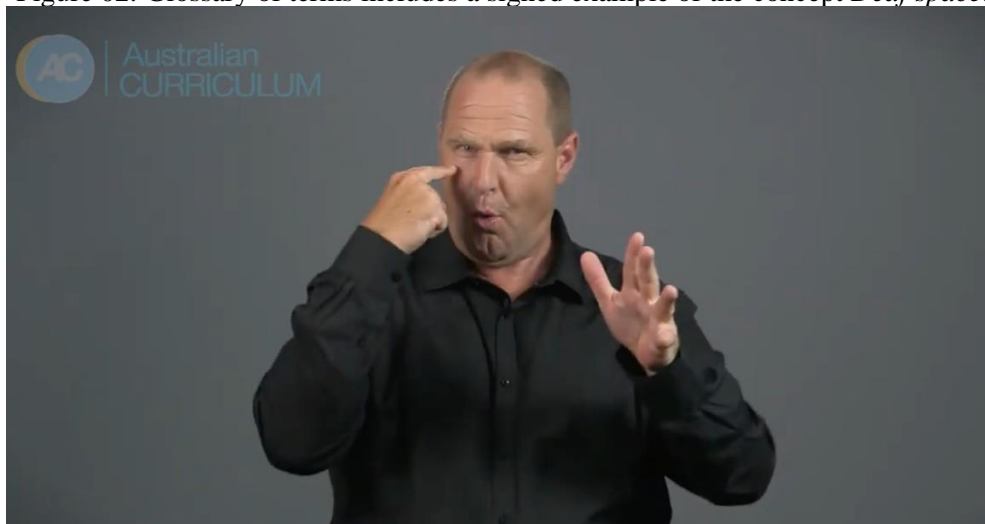
In the *Understanding* strand, students focus on metalinguistic knowledge, and study the structure or form of the language system, including visual-spatial language parameters and conventions ('Systems of Language'). They also look at how languages vary in use and change over time ('Language Variation and Change') and analyse the context and status of Auslan ('Language Awareness'). Finally, students explore the connections between language and cultural practices ('The Role of Language and Culture').

The curriculum details the knowledge to be taught in each of these areas through content descriptions and elaborations, which guide teachers in preparing syllabus documents, teaching programs and resources. A glossary is provided in the online version of the Auslan curriculum to explain terms related to Auslan language and culture, and for specific linguistic descriptions, with Auslan video clips available for many, but not all, of the glossary items, as can be seen in Figure 2.

Students progress through a series of bands, or year level (grade) groups: Foundation – Year 2, Years 3 - 4, Years 5 - 6, Years 7 - 8 and Years 9 -10. Each band outlines the level of learning and progress expected at each stage. Achievement Standards are provided for each band, which specify in detail what a learner should be able to do by the end of the band level. Some ACARA language curricula provide language examples, embedded in the Achievement Standards to demonstrate exemplar levels of expected performance at the end of the band stage,

however these have not yet been developed for Auslan. Student work samples have also been included for some of the more established language curricula, though not yet for Auslan.

Figure 02: Glossary of terms includes a signed example of the concept *Deaf space*.



Source: ACARA (2017).

The theoretical framework and structure used by ACARA for their language curricula challenged some traditional practices of SL and Deaf studies teachers in Australia and elsewhere. For example, many Auslan teachers have tended to treat cultural aspects of language use separately, in units about ‘Deaf culture’. Within the ACARA framework, culture was embedded in almost all strands of the language curriculum, such as ‘Socialising’, ‘Creating’, ‘Language Awareness’ and others. The sub-strand focusing on ‘The Role of Language and Culture’ required the writing team to analyse the ways in which sign formation and usage reflect cultural values and practices, eliciting some innovative and reflective content.

The nature of the learners

The language ecologies of students learning Auslan will vary dramatically due to: differing levels of hearing (deaf students, hard of hearing students, hearing students⁴); access to signers at home (whether there are deaf family members, or whether hearing family members learn

⁴ Hearing students may include those with deaf parents or other family members, those who are being educated with deaf peers, or those who have an interest in learning Auslan, but otherwise have no connection to the Deaf community

to sign); access to Auslan at school and the quality of those language models; the family's acceptance of Auslan; the presence or otherwise of disabilities that could have an effect on the child's language acquisition, such as a cognitive impairment; and for deaf students, the degree to which they may have experienced language deprivation due to lack of exposure to accessible language.

Deaf students without any signing family members may not use Auslan at home, but may represent themselves as Auslan users at school, reflecting their identity differently due to opportunity and context. Alternatively, many deaf learners will have begun their education using oral/aural approaches, with minimal exposure to Auslan and little or no contact with other deaf people. Some deaf learners may have additional disabilities or, commonly, a significant language delay due to language deprivation, so will begin learning Auslan with little foundation in any language. Other Auslan users will be hearing. Although most of these learners will have no previous experience with Auslan or deaf people, some will have exposure to Auslan through being educated with deaf students in inclusive classrooms, and may have learned some of the basics of the language.

To cater for the diverse learners who may study Auslan, two pathways were created, for L1 and L2 learners. In addition to the dual pathways, the curriculum was also devised with two entry points, to allow for beginning language study in the first year of primary school or in the first year of secondary school. A hearing student studying Auslan from Foundation level, throughout primary school and into high school will differ significantly in their learning needs in Year 8, for example, from another hearing student who commenced the learning sequence at the start of secondary school. The progression and achievement standards in Year 8 for the F-10 learner will therefore be different from the late entry 7-10 learner. Both these entry points in the sequence of learning apply to L1 and L2 learners of Auslan.

The dual-pathways, as well as the separate entry points in the sequence of learning, allowed the writing team greater flexibility in creating a curriculum capable of meeting the needs of these various students. The L1 pathway for students beginning their Auslan study when they first enter school was created to cater for students who have Auslan as a native language (that is, students with deaf parents or other family members who sign to them at home), as well as deaf students being educated in Auslan from an early age, for whom it is likely to be their future

preferred - or primary - language, even if they do not have access to Auslan at home. Developing a strong L1 from Foundation level will likely increase the educational opportunities and capabilities of these children, as well as encouraging functional bilingualism in Auslan and English, and may improve learning and future employment opportunities.

The L2 pathway for both learning sequence entry points was designed to meet the needs of students who have not had previous exposure to Auslan. These learners are most likely to be hearing students learning Auslan as a L2, or additional language. This pathway also caters to deaf or hard of hearing students who have fluency in a spoken language but have had minimal or no experience with Auslan. Such exposure to Auslan in a L2 program may have a transformative impact on deaf students, as noted by respondents to a survey of over 200 students, families, and staff associated with a L2 program in one secondary school (BONTEMPO, LEVITZKE-GRAY, 2018).

A lot of deaf students find it hard to make friends in a big mainstream school. Having Auslan as a language here helps the hearing students communicate with the deaf, and gives the hearing practice with using Auslan in a real environment. As well, deaf students like me who are learning Auslan as a second language are given an environment where everyone is learning and picking up the language, so it makes me feel more included and comfortable. This is not always the case with deaf second language learners, we can feel we are not connected with deaf culture. Learning it at school with other deaf and hearing students helps my journey. - 16 year old deaf student with a cochlear implant, L2 learner of Auslan.

My child, who is a fairly successful cochlear implant user, always tried to hide his hearing loss from other students whenever he could. I can see he is growing out of that attitude because learning Auslan is so embraced by everyone at this school, which is great. - Hearing parent of 14 year old deaf student with a cochlear implant, L2 learner of Auslan.

Additionally, the social benefits of increasing the peer networks of deaf students in a school are undeniable "...we are able to communicate and be friends with hearing students with less struggle" - 13 year old deaf student, proficient L1 user of Auslan (BONTEMPO, LEVITZKE-GRAY, 2018).

However, due to the complex language ecologies outlined above, the two pathways cannot meet the learning needs of all students. One important group of learners who do not comfortably fit into the typical L1 or L2 pathway, are deaf students who have not had sufficient

access to a spoken language to have developed functional language skills, but who simultaneously have not been given access to a SL in childhood. Essentially, they have not yet developed a L1 at the time of commencing secondary school, which is well beyond the period expected for typical L1 acquisition.

Reasons for arriving at secondary school effectively ‘languageless’ may vary, but could include circumstances such as having recently immigrated to Australia from a country where schooling for deaf children was not available; or due to the presence of disabilities; or even from having attended a school locally, where the language teaching and learning philosophy did not permit access to quality SL, and deaf role models. Regardless of the conditions creating the significant language delay, these students are essentially late-L1 learners, at the time of entering secondary school, around 11-12 years of age. They reach higher levels of schooling with no solid L1 foundation at all, and their teaching and learning needs differ greatly from early-L1 students who have had exposure to quality language models from early in life, or who have been in an Auslan program from Foundation level, and therefore approach secondary school entrance with a well-established L1. The latter students commence secondary school with a rich L1, and as a result, are able to attend to the development of higher-order skills, such as analysis and evaluation, in their Auslan studies.



The late-L1 learners, on the other hand,

[...] may have additional disabilities, sometimes hidden, often caused by their language delay. Auslan is nonetheless considered their first or primary language, due to their lack of fluency in any other language. These learners require intensive support and extensive input from rich language models, especially at the initial stages. These learners are unlikely to reach native-like levels of fluency in any language, but will benefit greatly from the explicit teaching of Auslan as a subject to support their language acquisition and development. (ACARA, 2017).

As such, the L1 pathway for deaf students beginning their Auslan study in Year 7 was designed for this disadvantaged group of deaf students with limited exposure to Auslan in early childhood and in educational settings, rather than those who have had Auslan at home and/or school from early childhood.

An overview of the dual pathways and the entry point sequences of learning, depending on the nature of the learner, is highlighted in Table 2 below.

Table 02: Categories of learners, pathways, and entry point sequences

Entry point	Nature of Learner	Communicating	Understanding
 Beginning in secondary school	A student with good command of spoken English and little knowledge of Auslan*	7-10 sequence, L2	7-10 sequence, L2
	Deaf fluent signer	F-10 sequence, L1, using content from Year 7 onwards	7-10 sequence, L2
	Deaf, late-L1	7-10 sequence, L1	7-10 sequence, L1
 Beginning in primary school	A student with good command of spoken English and little knowledge of Auslan	F-10 sequence, L2	F-10 sequence, L2
	Deaf, late-L1	F-10 sequence, L1 content modified by teacher	F-10 sequence, L1 content modified by teacher
	Deaf signer	F-10 sequence, L1	F-10 sequence, L1

* For L2 students who are deaf or hard of hearing, it is more appropriate that the content from identity come from the L1 pathway.

Source: ACARA (2017).

There are other groups of learners who may not fit one of the categories neatly, for example, as described by ACARA (2017):

[...] native signers of Auslan who are hearing (such as hearing children from deaf families) may not be adequately accounted for in an L1 pathway, due to the teaching and learning emphasis on the primary target group, deaf children. In addition, a deaf migrant already fluent in a native signed language from another country, such as American Sign Language, may not be entirely suited to an L2 learning pathway for Auslan as so many age-appropriate L1 features and linguistic competencies will already be present in his/her use of another signed language, making a second signed language easier to learn compared to other L2 learners being exposed to learning a signed language for the first time. Congenitally deafblind children, or other students with disability, may also present unique challenges with regard to determining language learning pathways.

Notwithstanding the complex needs of some learners, the national curriculum allows for a great deal of flexibility in being able to draw on the L1 or the L2 pathway, and different

sequences of learning entry points, to cater to the requirements of a diverse range of Auslan learners, whether deaf or hearing. It acknowledges different backgrounds, knowledge, experiences and skills, and skilled educators can use the depth and breadth of the curriculum to accommodate learners. The full curriculum is freely available online at: <https://www.australian-curriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/languages/auslan/>.

Challenges and opportunities in implementation

Several key issues have challenged educational authorities, schools, educators, and the Deaf community with regard to the implementation of the Auslan curriculum. These include: the lack of widely-accepted protocols regarding the teaching of Auslan; the availability and recruitment of suitable teaching staff; the accessibility of the Auslan curriculum itself; and the dearth of quality resources to support effective teaching and learning in primary and secondary school classrooms.

The curriculum does not provide specific guidelines on who should teach Auslan in schools, as explicit reference to this in the curriculum was deemed outside the remit of ACARA. Implementation of the national curriculum is a state and territory-based consideration, therefore is at the discretion of curriculum authorities, Departments of Education and schools, in each state and territory of Australia. The writing team were aware implementation could create some contentious issues, and therefore negotiated the incorporation of a limited range of statements regarding implementation protocols, including recommendations around cultural sensitivity, respect for Auslan and the necessity for courses to have a connection with local Deaf communities. In addition, it is noted within the protocols that “the success of Auslan programs depends on the fundamental premise that suitably skilled and qualified teachers, including native or native-like⁵ proficient users of Auslan, have key roles in their development and implementation” (ACARA, 2017).

Deaf people have ownership of Auslan and feel responsible for protecting their language and ensuring it is taught well. As custodians of their language, they welcome hearing students

⁵ The Australian Curriculum: Auslan provides this definition of native signers: ‘Signers who have one or more deaf family members and have therefore had access to Auslan from birth, meeting expected milestones for the natural acquisition of language in infancy and early childhood.’ [Glossary, p. 15]; and defines native-like signers as: ‘Fluent signers who have used Auslan as their primary language since their early school years, and/or demonstrate native-like levels of proficiency in the language.’ [Glossary, p. 16]

as Auslan learners keen to learn their language, and the Deaf community is cognisant of the long-term benefits of larger numbers of people in society with proficiency in a SL (HAUSER, KARTHEISER, 2014). At the same time, deaf Auslan users are particularly concerned for the many deaf children who have limited or no access to Auslan in education settings or amongst peers in their wider school environment, and see this curriculum as a valuable opportunity for all deaf children to study Auslan, as well as an opportunity to expand the peer networks for deaf children by increasing the number of hearing children in schools who are also able to sign. The two learner pathways offer support for a wide range of deaf children, including those with language delay and deprivation, and this addresses and reinforces a core value of the Australian Deaf community – the viability and ongoing healthy transmission of Auslan as a community language.

Undoubtedly though, teaching Auslan well in schools requires the direct involvement of qualified deaf teachers, who are native or native-like signers, leading and delivering programs, and this is an ongoing challenge. As in many other countries, deaf people are significantly under-represented in the teaching profession in Australia. There are no standards for Auslan teachers, and no specific courses of study for Auslan teachers, unlike in parts of the US, for example, for ASL teachers (JACOBOWITZ, 2007). Yet, suitably skilled deaf people may possess a range of lived experience, language proficiency, and a knowledge base that extends beyond that which might normally be considered necessary for language teaching. Investing in resources and opportunities to develop deaf teachers of SL is required in language policy and planning. Deaf language consultants, whether formally qualified as teachers or not, often express a deep intrinsic motivation for their work, recognising the significance of sharing their language and culture, and cultivating their relationships with students, as critical for learner growth. In particular, the well-being and identity development of deaf children is positively impacted by the direct involvement of deaf instructors in Auslan courses in schools (BONTEMPO, LEVITZKE-GRAY, 2018), and exposure to deaf role models in general helps build the social capital of deaf children (ROGERS, YOUNG, 2011; CAWTHON et al., 2016).

The job matters to deaf adults in schools in very personal ways, in the same way it does to Aboriginal language teachers (ANGELO, POETSCH, 2019). Their connection with their community, their culture and their language resonates in their work, notwithstanding the lack

of a formal teaching qualification. Most state education departments have options to recruit teachers with particular skills who may not have teaching qualifications. For example, a jurisdiction may be able to employ a skilled music instructor, who is an expert with a niche instrument - but is not a qualified school teacher - for a contracted period if a qualified music teacher with proficiency in that instrument cannot be sourced. This option could be activated in order to ensure a supply of appropriate Auslan teachers to meet the demand created by the curriculum. Indeed, at present deaf people can already be appointed in “limited authority to teach/untrained teacher” roles; or as educational assistants/language models/Deaf role models or mentors; or in designated ministerial officer positions; in some states and territories of Australia.

There are inconsistencies with the application of these appointments, however, and there are some concerns associated with this as well. For example, a deaf instructor functioning as a language consultant may be expected to work at a level beyond their pay grade, if effectively performing as a qualified teacher, but without the benefits of this status. The lack of deaf teaching staff is an issue in most states of Australia, however, some states, and some schools in particular, have managed this concern in effective ways, employing deaf staff in suitable, and well-supported, roles they have created at the school level, with remuneration commensurate with job duties and responsibilities; or by providing hearing/deaf team teaching arrangements at additional school expense in order to meet a best practice arrangement, with Auslan-proficient hearing teachers operating in complementary roles, and in close collaboration with, deaf staff. A qualified hearing teacher, particularly one fluent in Auslan, can operate as a strong ally in such circumstances, contributing pedagogical and classroom management expertise to support the deaf language expert, adding to the overall effectiveness of the language program. Some jurisdictions are exploring the upskilling of deaf people in fast track training programs, or by providing language consultant training and developing specialist job roles. Nevertheless, the number of schools currently interested in running Auslan courses far outstrips the present employment rate of deaf people in the education sector around Australia, so considerably more work is required to encourage and support Deaf-led Auslan program delivery in schools.

The nature and status of Auslan are still misunderstood within areas of the education sector, and this manifests in some schools attempting to implement the Auslan curriculum with

course delivery by hearing teachers, who oftentimes have only minimal knowledge of the language and its cultural context. There is some evidence that Auslan can be perceived as an ‘easy’ option when adding a language to a school’s offerings, due in part to the fact that it does not have a written form. The availability of simplified vocabulary resources for alternative communication systems, such as *Key Word Signing* (KWS)⁶, may lead to the grave misconception that Auslan is rudimentary and undeveloped, and that it can be taught with minimal preparation and resources; or that it only requires limited teacher-proficiency in Auslan, especially during initial Auslan course establishment and implementation at a school.

Hearing teachers who are not proficient in Auslan operate under the generally well-meant, but genuine misapprehension, that they have sufficient capacity to teach the language, after completing only limited studies themselves in Auslan. Frequently, these teachers have no cultural affiliation with the Deaf community, and they are more likely using, and therefore teaching, KWS, or an approximation of this. Indeed, metacognitive awareness of one’s actual level of skill and ability in Auslan may be over-estimated by less competent signers, who are typically unable to identify, and address, their own skills gaps in the language (BONTEMPO, NAPIER, 2007). Further, cognitive bias suggests less well-skilled people are more likely to have an inflated view of their skill level, which typically does not match their actual performance in that domain (KRUGER, DUNNING, 1999), reinforcing concerns regarding the protocols around implementing Auslan courses in Australian schools.

In relation to the inaccessibility of the Auslan curriculum, it is ironic that despite the acknowledged need for deaf teachers, and the ideal position that skilled deaf people deliver Auslan courses, the curriculum is, at present, only available in English. It includes Auslan video clips for some language samples and glossary items, but it still presents accessibility issues for many deaf Auslan teachers. This is an entirely unintentional form of gate-keeping, and needs addressing, but will require funding and support. Whilst the writing team were able to incorporate a great deal of highly valuable content and flexibility in the curriculum, with the unique

⁶ Key Word Sign (KWS) is a type of Augmentative and Alternative Communication system which uses signs with children and adults who have physical or communication disabilities which prevent them from speaking – though they can usually hear. KWS is used simultaneously with speech, and is presented as individual signs for the ‘key’ words in a spoken utterance (these ‘key’ lexical items which are signed are typically borrowed from Auslan, or artificially contrived sign systems). KWS is **not** a language, and does not incorporate grammatical markers of Auslan (since the users access the grammar of English via audition).

dual pathways and the different entry points for the sequence of learning; there were Auslan translation and filming aspects that were not able to be included due to time and funding constraints. Having an Auslan version of the curriculum, with exemplars of lesson plans and programs, student work samples, a bank of assessment material and moderated student assessment samples, and a greater variety of elaborations and linked activities, would be of enormous benefit and value to teachers and to students alike.

The final key challenge with regard to implementation of the national curriculum in Auslan is the limited availability of appropriate resources for teaching Auslan in primary and secondary school settings. Issues of quality, authenticity, availability, and accessibility are a major concern, although this problem with resources is not unique to the Australian context for teaching a SL (THORYK, 2010). Teachers of well-established spoken language school programs, such as courses in Japanese or Italian, have access to a wide variety of program outlines and detailed curriculum plans at each year level; a comprehensive and diverse range of textbooks, learning materials, activities, stimulus texts, online task banks; and other high-quality teaching and learning resources. Many of these resources and materials are standardised and quality-assured, at every level of learning in different education settings and contexts. Such a wealth of resources for language teaching and learning is a luxury that does not even exist in a substantial sense for Auslan teachers in the tertiary sector in Australia; but is particularly limited in the primary, and virtually absent from, the secondary education sector.

Invariably, Auslan teachers make their own resources themselves, creating an additional responsibility and level of effort, in a way not experienced by language teachers in better resourced languages. For example, the ACARA curricula for most other languages includes links to a website called *Scootle*, an online forum containing specific activities, language materials and practice resources that students can be directed to in order to enhance their proficiency, or teachers can use as instructional material in the classroom. The burden on Auslan teachers in having to create all their own teaching and learning materials is significant, and occurs at a local and an individual level, frequently meaning the exchange of ideas and resources and the sharing of materials and moderation of work is also limited.

A further complicating factor is that teachers with limited proficiency in Auslan are often unable to assess the quality of any signed texts, activities, or material they may find online,

meaning that resources being shared with students may not be grammatically accurate, or fit for purpose. Even materials created at a state level in some jurisdictions are not shared outside of that region with educational institutions and teachers from other states. Understandably, skilled Auslan teachers may be reluctant to share quality resources and materials they have developed, based on years of experience and knowledge, out of concern less experienced educators may use them incorrectly, neglect to appreciate their real value, or fail to acknowledge the original source. Ultimately, however, the lack of exchange and support potentially limits the creativity, growth, development, and richness of resources and materials, which could be much more impactful, meaningful, and valuable, if able to be shared and further built upon, leading to better teaching and learning outcomes.

Some resource creators have established small businesses to cater to an extent for the growing demand for Auslan resources. Unfortunately, very few of these are Deaf-led, and a number of hearing teachers are not only taking on roles as educators of Auslan without the proper skills or qualifications, and without consultation with the Deaf community, but are also creating commercial opportunities by making and selling resources in educator networks and communities online. Typically, such resources are worksheet type tasks with limited educational value, but of greater concern is that they often contain errors or misinformation. Some of them even include vocabulary from other SLs, such as ASL. Even if they do not contain errors, capitalising on the language of the Deaf community in this way is viewed poorly, and serves as another example of colonisation by hearing people, or cultural appropriation of Auslan. Until greater recognition is afforded to Deaf people as the custodians of their language, and support provided to create a clearly marked space for teaching roles for deaf people in schools, the status quo is unlikely to change. Awareness needs to be raised regarding purchasing from Deaf-owned businesses and securing accurate resources that have community endorsement, wherever possible. Investment in quality resource creation at state level by relevant educational authorities, and the sharing of these resources on a larger scale, is also key to improving Auslan teaching and learning opportunities in schools in each jurisdiction around the country. Without attention to such factors, these potentially disempowering acts and destabilising influences may threaten the integrity of ongoing Auslan curriculum implementation in Australia.

In terms of opportunities, the work undertaken to develop the Auslan curriculum has increased the profile and the status of Auslan considerably. The national curriculum sends a strong message of language legitimacy to the wider community, and to the deaf education sector and the medical fraternity. It is harder for the system to disregard a deaf child's right to access Auslan in the early years when a national curriculum exists for the subject in school, thus suggesting better long term educational, psychological, social and vocational advantages for deaf children. It is a powerful form of recognition of the Deaf community and their language. Furthermore, the extensive work undertaken to create the systems of language scope and sequence content in the *'Understanding'* strand of the national curriculum has increased the body of knowledge about SL development, and added to a greater awareness and understanding of Auslan grammar amongst Auslan teachers, in an unanticipated advantage arising from the curriculum.

To date, in Australia, although there have been smaller state associations, and pockets of individuals working in collaboration and networking with one another to greater or lesser degrees, there has not been a strong and unified Auslan Teachers' Association on a national scale in the same vein as the American Sign Language Teachers' Association (ASLTA) in the USA. However, the growing demand and interest in Auslan, fuelled further by the coronavirus pandemic and the high profile presence of interpreters in televised broadcasts, has resulted in more Auslan educators collaborating and networking online, and attending professional learning events and activities in recent times. New markets and opportunities are opening up, with technology bringing educators together in various forums for quality professional learning opportunities, and also in creating new platforms and possibilities for resources for students. It is hoped that this increasing informal connection and engagement amongst educators may lead to the formation of a better-supported national Auslan Teachers' Association, and the development of clear standards and expectations for Auslan teachers, similar to those stipulated by the ASLTA, which could be appended to future iterations of the national curriculum.

Conclusion

The national curriculum for Auslan benefitted from being part of the larger curriculum writing process for the Australian Curriculum. As it was the first time Australia had invested in

a nationwide curriculum, the facilitating body, ACARA, was well-resourced and committed to consistent quality, theoretical soundness and exhaustive consultation for all of the curriculum documents they delivered. The Auslan writing team was able to consult the other completed language curricula, including some written with two or more pathways, and some which addressed language maintenance and vitality issues. These provided valuable context and ideas for the Auslan curriculum.

The ACARA team also demonstrated a culture of respect for the language-using communities behind the curricula they curated. This was reflected in their willingness to listen to the concerns of the writing team, the language advisory reference group, and the wider Deaf community. They challenged Auslan users and teachers to reflect more deeply on the type of content they wanted and the standards of competence they expected. For these reasons, both the process of developing this Auslan curriculum, as well as the final product, were uniquely valuable.

Built into the Australian Curriculum is a requirement for regular reviews. The Auslan curriculum has now been available for five years and is used by an increasing number of schools and teachers. It is due for review in 2022. The review should be an opportunity to consider what works well and what could be improved, while respecting the need for curriculum stability. It will also be an opportunity to address some of the challenges described above, and consider how the implementation of the curriculum might be enhanced by clearer teaching protocols, recruitment and support of appropriate teachers, and high-quality, widely available, resources.

The process of writing the national Auslan curriculum was a learning experience for everyone involved. It was a daunting task, given its symbolic importance and groundbreaking practical value. The collective effort from ACARA, the writing team, the language advisory reference group, educators, and the Deaf community, and many other stakeholders via the consultation process, contributed to an historic document with potentially significant long-term impacts on the usage and status of Auslan in Australia. It is apparent that there have been additional factors to consider since publication of the national curriculum, as challenges and opportunities have arisen during implementation around the nation. Only time will tell whether these signs of learning will result in effective responses and adaptations to the teaching of Auslan in schools, to the future benefit of Australian children and the Deaf community.

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Submitted in: 12/04/2022

Accepted in: 27/05/2022

Citations and references according to the rules of:



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