

Teaching students in VET who have a hearing loss: Frequently Asked Questions

What do I need to know about having a deaf student in my class?

Teaching students with a hearing loss may present some challenges, some of which may not be immediately obvious. These challenges include the fact that the needs of each individual student will vary, as will the setting in which you will be teaching. However, considering the factors to be outlined in this resource will assist you in creating an inclusive teaching environment.

First you need to consider the needs of the deaf or hard of hearing student, which will vary depending on:

- the degree of deafness (how severe it is)
- the age of onset (when the hearing loss occurred)
- how the student prefers to communicate, which could include Auslan (Australian Sign Language), speech and lipreading, or a combination of these
- the student's educational experience to date.

Each of these factors will shape the student's individual communication and learning needs and the simplest way to find out about these needs is to talk to the Disability Liaison Officer and the student about the student's communication preferences.

An important point to remember is that regardless of the level of deafness or how the student prefers to communicate, they will be relying heavily on what they can see. To access what is being said in the classroom, they will need to look at the speaker to lipread, or they will need to watch an Auslan interpreter. They cannot look at a PowerPoint presentation or other visual resource like a DVD or a demonstration at the same time.

For that reason you will also need to consider the educational setting and the style of delivery. Is the class a:

- lecture?
- "chalk and talk"?
- demonstration and talk?
- group discussion (tutorial style)?
- self-paced learning? or
- a combination of these methodologies?

This will help you to think about the most appropriate support strategies for your class. A number of strategies are suggested below.

What does this mean for my teaching practice?

A student who is deaf or hard of hearing, like any other student, brings their own personality, background, culture and attitude to the classroom. However, the greatest difference will be their communication preferences. Hearing loss effects the way people communicate and learn. A Deaf or hard of hearing student will have strategies to optimise reception of information but it is important to remember that all students have different preferences.

Here are some case studies:

Jan has a **mild loss**. She has found that if she sits at the front of a lecture she can use her residual hearing and lipread the teacher. Jan appreciates visual aids (PowerPoint, white board, etc) to reinforce the topic and to help with the correct spelling of technical terms.

Steve has a **moderate loss** and likes to sit off to one side, so he can see the whole room. Steve uses a frequency-modulated (FM) system. The teacher wears a lapel microphone which picks up only what the teacher says. This cuts out background noise. Steve's teacher also repeats or paraphrases comments and questions from other students so Steve can access everything that is said. Steve's teacher has noticed this helps other students in the classroom as well.

Van also has a **moderate loss**, but his hearing loss is in a different frequency and the FM system doesn't work as well for him. Van relies more heavily on a notetaker, whose notes help him to follow what is happening in the classroom. Van's teacher shares her notes with Van so he can familiarise himself with any new terminology before the class starts. This worked so well that the teacher has made the notes available to all students. Although a notetaker is great support, it is sometimes impossible for the notetaker to capture everything that is said and so Van can still miss some of the detail, especially when there is fast discussion.

Nadia is **profoundly deaf** and communicates in Auslan. Nadia therefore prefers to have an Auslan interpreter in the classroom. Nadia sits at the front of the room to see the interpreter and she also has a notetaker in some lectures. There is a slight time delay with interpreting (given that the interpreter must first hear what is said, process it, then render it into Auslan). Nadia therefore rarely answered the lecturer's questions to begin with; other students usually got in first. The lecturer has learned to control question time to give Nadia a bit more time to see the question posed to the group. The lecturer has also arranged access to online lecture notes for Nadia's interpreters, so they can prepare for each lecture. As Auslan is Nadia's first language and English is Nadia's second language, the teacher has also learnt to write unfamiliar terms on the blackboard. This helps all the students, many of whom are from a non-English speaking background.

As can be seen above, positioning in the classroom is important. Students who lipread want to be able to see your face clearly. Students with an Auslan interpreter generally want to be able to see you and the interpreter. This is why the interpreter usually stands near the teacher. Before you begin to address the class or demonstrate an experiment, ask the group if everyone is able to see/hear to give the student the chance to find a good position.

I often walk around the class making comments as the students are working. How will the deaf student know what I am saying?

More often than not, a student who is deaf or hard of hearing will not catch comments you make as you walk around the classroom. This is because they have not been cued to look at you and therefore cannot read your lips as you walk around. Other difficulties will include background noise from activities in the class or other students talking.

A student with an interpreter will have the message relayed to them by the interpreter, but remember a deaf student must stop what they are doing to look at the interpreter. A deaf student with an interpreter cannot listen to instructions and continue working.

One suggested strategy is to minimise walking and talking. Talk from the same location and get the attention of any students with a hearing loss before speaking.

Similarly, provide as much information about the lesson at the start of the class to reduce the possibility of the deaf student missing out on instructions later in the class, when they may be doing an activity.

Before demonstrating an experiment, explain what you will be doing. This allows the student to understand what is about to happen instead of trying to watch the experiment and watching an interpreter or reading your lips at the same time. Many teachers will already know this strategy because it is useful for all students in helping them to prepare for new information.

Similarly, present as much information about the lesson in writing (for example a step by step instruction on a laboratory procedure), thereby minimising misunderstanding and reinforcing the lesson objectives.

Safety information is critical in environments like laboratories and workshops. Strategies to ensure all students understand safety procedures include providing instructions in writing, holding a quiz to check for understanding, asking students spot questions at the start of each class and planning classes so students work in pairs to monitor each other's practice.

Make sure you understand how emergency alarms work in the learning environment. Does a light get activated or only an auditory alarm? Flashing emergency signals help everyone in an emergency. Talk to your facilities department about installing a visual warning system.

The student wears a hearing aid (or a cochlear implant). Doesn't that mean they can hear the same as everybody else?

No. Hearing aids and cochlear implants are not like glasses. They do not correct the sound that is heard, they just make the sounds easier to hear. Most people who have a hearing loss have some degree of damage or dysfunction to the receptors of the hearing nerve and this means any sounds they do hear are distorted or incomplete. Hearing augmentation technology cannot correct what the nerve does not perceive or what it perceives incorrectly. Background noise can also pose significant challenges for both hearing aid users and those with cochlear implants. This means that while these devices are a tool to assist deaf students with their communication, they are not a device that "fixes" hearing to allow them to hear as a hearing person does.

How can I moderate classroom interaction to allow deaf students to participate?

Every deaf student's communication and classroom participation needs are different. As a result, the best approach is to speak with the student and ask them to explain their needs and preferences. Some students use technology (e.g. a hearing aid, cochlear implant or an FM unit) or a combination of technology and support staff such as a notetaker or an interpreter. Other

students will use support staff only. Your Disability Liaison Officer will also be able to assist in this process as they will usually assess the support needs of each student. deafConnectEd can also deliver targeted onsite training and advice.

What about the deaf student answering questions in class? Should they be expected to participate as other students do?

Yes. However, you do need to be aware that the deaf student, regardless of how they communicate, may need a bit more time to see the question if it is being interpreted by an Auslan interpreter. Even a student who is lipreading you may need a bit more time to think about the question because lipreading is hard work. This means a student who is deaf or hard of hearing can miss out on opportunities to participate like their class mates.

This can be managed by applying the following strategies:

- Ask students to raise their hand and wait to be called upon to answer the question. This gives you more control over classroom interaction and can also give you an indication of how all students, not just the more vocal ones, understand the content.
- Elicit answers by directly calling on students, including deaf students.
- Flag a question using a strategy such as “in a minute, I’m going to ask you why we need these two hoses, but first I want to show you how they connect again . . .”.

Where can I find more information for teachers about deaf and hard of hearing students?

The deafConnectEd website has further information about supporting deaf and hard of hearing students in the VET sector including multimedia resources at:
www.deafconnected.com.au/resources

Alternatively, contact us to discuss your needs. We provide a state-wide service to support the VET sector and to enhance the participation and learning experience of deaf students. We are happy to answer questions by telephone or email or we can visit your institute to provide coaching and advice to teaching staff in your department.

More Information

For the latest news and information about the services and support offered by deafConnectEd, visit our website at:

www.deafconnected.com.au

Our website includes information and resources about:

- deafness and hearing loss
- the education needs of students who are deaf and hard of hearing
- support services for students, including Auslan interpreters and notetakers
- learning Auslan
- research and links to publications

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