As English speaking researchers, we have found negotiating the use of visual languages in research a challenging aspect of our work. Engaging in a reflexive process has highlighted for us, the broader, complex issue of visual languages in research. Although the resources for participants to communicate via their preferred native language (e.g., Australian Sign Language [Auslan]) are available, analysing and publishing in sign languages in academia remains problematic.

Few researchers have given consideration to issues such as anonymity when using visual languages in research. Visual languages, such as Auslan, have their own structure, syntax and grammar, using a combination of hand and facial gestures. Facial gestures are an integral part of visual languages; however, it is challenging to find ways of conserving the participants’ anonymity while maintaining the integrity of their response.

As English is the dominant language in a Western context, visual-spatial languages such as Auslan are required to be translated into English. As Temple and Young (2004) discuss, this translation from sign language to written English is problematic in terms of analysis as aspects of visual languages such as space, tone and emphasis are lost.

Translation problems are further compounded by the limited availability of appropriate expertise and resources to translate, transcribe and analyse visual languages in their original format (Fischer, 2009). Adopting a collaborative translation process is made difficult due to the low literacy levels in deaf populations and risks highlighting deficits and further marginalising deaf people in research.

Speaking to a larger systemic problem, there are very few researchers in academia whose native language is a visual language; even fewer who also have the required
knowledge and appropriate research experience. As academic journals do not publish empirical work in sign language, there is little incentive for people sign language users to be involved in and establish a career in research.

There is no easy resolution to the complex issues around the use and analysis of visual languages in research. However, practices such as producing and publishing academic work in minority languages such as Auslan, although costly, would be a significant step towards increasing access for sign language users to empirical research and academic literature, reducing inequality between hearing and deaf people.
References

