POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND THE NON-TRADITIONAL DEAF STUDENT

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Before beginning a discussion about the non-traditional student one must first identify the traditional student. Generally, this type of student would have received much encouragement and opportunity in education, have had a supportive home environment, and significantly, whose communication skills have not been an obstacle to learning. Typically, this student was born and raised in the United States, is proficient in English and has mastered many of the basic reading, writing, and math skills in order to begin higher education courses. In addition, the traditional student has a broad background and foundation upon which to build new concepts.

Our students at LaGuardia Community College, and I'm sure many of yours, are very different from this traditional student. For purposes of this discussion let us group these non-traditional students into three distinct categories. **Group One** are those ESL (English as a Second Language) students who have not attended any educational system in the United States; **Group Two** are those who entered the school system late either because they are immigrants, or because their deafness was identified late in life and were in need of special education; **Group Three** are those who entered a school system which was not prepared to work with a population of diverse backgrounds and special communication needs.

I would like to talk first about the ESL student who comes from different countries around the world. In our own program, we have students from South America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Far East and the Soviet Union.

The first step in working with these students is to evaluate and determine their needs, communication skills, understanding of their native language (sign, spoken and written), level of formal education, and knowledge of English. We have found an informal evaluation consisting of staff members, the student, other family members and an interpreter (able to communicate to the student in his or her native language), to be best . From this evaluation it can be determined if the student will benefit more from a classroom or individual tutoring situation and the level of education in which to begin.

Although it may seem easy to ascertain foreign language literacy, the opposite is quite often the case. A majority of foreign deaf students immigrating to America have not had any formal education in their own countries, can only minimally sign and lip-read their own native language, and have communicated for the most part primarily through gestures and home signs.

The direct consequences of this language deprivation are severe lags and educational limitations which stunt the students learning capacities and therefore, must be considered carefully when determining the specific approach used to educate this group. Interestingly, in spite of this language deprivation, we have found these students to be highly motivated and eager to learn English. And more importantly, if classes are kept relevant to the students' lives, this motivation will persist. It is extremely helpful if instructors are from various cultures themselves and able to learn the mores and communication modes of this multi-cultural group. It is obvious that those students who are illiterate in their native language are very different from those students who are proficient. The student who has had a formal education is able to move from one level to another much more readily than one who has not had the same educational advantages.

Considering those factors relating to language acquisition, proficiency and competency, students will either be placed in a class with other ESL students or receive individual tutoring. Both groups are then "Americanized" in the sense that they begin to learn about American culture, how it differs from their own, and how to manage the new social and governmental systems available to them.

The method used in teaching the ESL deaf student is basically the same whether you're working one-to-one or in a classroom, or whether the student is proficient in his/her native language. Since communication is the key factor in learning any language, the first step is to teach American Sign Language (ASL). It is best to teach ASL without any lip movements since focusing on ASL and lipreading in English is linguistically inappropriate and confusing for the student. Once ASL is acquired, the teacher can begin lessons using English syntax with ASL signs. Eventually, as English proficiency improves, lip movements are not as conflicting to the student's language acquisition. A very important point to

remember, and an easy one to overlook, is that too much stimulation is overwhelming and confusing, and may even retard the progress and ability to learn a new language.

As for the subject matter taught, we have found that lessons are most motivating if they revolve around the students' unique cultural experiences both in their native countries, and in their similar experiences as new deaf residents in the United States. Instructors focus on everyday events which students might encounter (in New York City, these are things such as the subway, street life, and the interaction with the many stereotypes we see every day). The point is, to discuss topics which are common to all students and which form camaraderie; they all have experiences of moving to New York, and they are all deaf, regardless of which part of the world they are from. These stories, ideas and concepts are initially presented in gestures and gradually modified to American Sign Language. This process takes much energy and creativeness on the part of the teacher, and we are thankful for their dedication.

The methods used to teach the second group of non-traditional students (those that entered school late) are very similar to those which we mentioned above. Due to their late entry to school, these students generally have severe deprivations in education and in their ability to acquire new information. Often, they are found to progress at an even rate until a limit is reached that is difficult to overcome. Of course, this is a generality and is not true of all students, some of whom are highly motivated and excel quite significantly.

Again, it is important that only relevant information and materials are introduced to these students. Issues which are relevant to students' lives; those that are deafness related or contain current events, help students to better understand the world around them.

"Real World" reading materials" are the most motivating. Articles from the *Silent News, World Around us,* and other such magazines are especially good. Additional types of reading are Children's books with pictures, short articles from newspapers, for example, the Dear Abby Column, as well as writings from other students can be

used effectively. It is important that *whole* texts which have meaning to students' lives, draw on prior knowledge and are culturally and socially significant be used as classroom materials. I emphasize the term whole texts since it is customary for teachers to have students read "part" of an article or story because many texts are considered too long and difficult to read in totality. Students have demonstrated a significantly greater benefit from assigned texts that can be read from beginning to end.

As preparation for a reading or writing assignment, it is important to provide adequate background information. This can easily be achieved through open classroom discussions that foster a sharing of opinions and ideas, and often help in establishing new concepts and reaffirming old ones. As students are warmed up and have a strong foundation relating to the reading material, the outcome of the lesson will be much more rewarding both for the student and the teacher. Writing is an extension of reading, and can be purposeful, personal and written for a specific audience. This audience can even be other classmates. Students begin to learn how to critique one another's papers and to rewrite their own, again and again improving their skills each time. For the first few drafts, it is important for teachers to focus on the conceptual aspect of the essay, rather than grammatical organization. Once concepts are understood, grammar will be acquired with much more ease. Fostering positive feelings towards writing can be an integral part of the program and student participation in a newsletter or Handbook of some kind is a rewarding incentive for students at the end of each quarter or semester.

Our ESL students prepared personal journals, at the end of an eight week session, writing about their lives before they came to the United States and of their new experiences upon arrival. The covers of these booklets have photographs of the students when they were younger, along with a drawing of their national flag and an illustration depicting their impressions of New York City. Each of these stories is quite spectacular in demonstrating a basic understanding of the elements of style and form, including the use of emotion and sensitivity, essential to a well written essay. The students in the higher level classes wrote of their experiences as young deaf adults. These narratives were later combined into a handbook and given to new students at the beginning of the following school quarter.

Video is another valuable teaching aid. It is engaging and interesting to students. In our own program we have access to old 1950's movies from a deaf Media Club, and have shown among other videos, the **Handful of Stories,** and **Famous Deaf Adults,** both of which make a separate reading text available. A large variety of tapes and captioned films are obtainable at public libraries as well. Introducing media to the classroom may encourage students to buy their own **TDDs** and **Caption Decoders** regardless of their reading levels, hopefully exposing them to the widest variety of learning devices.

Our third group of students are those who enter school systems that are not prepared to deal with the different mores of diverse populations and special communication needs. One central problem which exists in schools for deaf children & adolescents is the inability of teachers to communicate effectively to these students, as told by students. How can we expect students to excel in education if they are unable to communicate effectively with their teachers? This continuing deficiency cannot be emphasized enough. To ensure optimum communication between students and teachers, it is necessary to hire deaf teachers (skilled in ASL) and hearing teachers who are proficient in American Sign Language. Communication skills are equally as important as teaching skills. Not only should teachers be proficient in ASL, they should also be aware of the idiosyncracies of a variety of ethnic groups, and be willing to understand the standards of these cultures. A significant effort should be made to hire teachers from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds in order to reach out to the diverse populations we see at school.

TESTING

And finally, I want to discuss an important issue that is of serious concern to educators of all deaf students, that is testing. In general, standardized reading tests are of limited value as a measure of any student's reading ability. This is especially true for deaf students who, in general, have limited linguistic experiences in English. As a result, standardized achievement tests, even those adapted to deaf norms, prove fruitless in their attempt to measure a student's true skills. In lieu of this, fairly accurate placement tests can be developed that measure what a student knows and

how able they are to assimilate new information from a written passage. The technique is to develop a set of questions based upon a short story or article with some relevance to the students' lives as an assessment of their current skills. It is important to target questions that key in on all the aspects of the reading process such as; literal knowledge, synthesis, comprehension, inferencing, and summarizing. The placement tests we developed at LaGuardia have proven to rank students appropriately and to build on those skills already acquired. As with the English placement test, a math placement test can also be developed which highlights those difficulties you may see repeatedly among your own students. As for our own program, a math teacher who has been teaching at LaGuardia for many years developed a test which divided students into achievement groupings much more efficiently than the longer standardized tests.

In summary, programs for the non-traditional deaf students will be successful if they meet the needs of students who are attending the program, provide information which is relevant to the students' lives, and finally, are effectively communicated by teachers of similar cultural backgrounds and a proficiency in the language/mores of the students. I hope that this discussion has brought up some new issues and insights which will help you with your own students.