

Supporting transition for deaf students – exploring language and literacy levels on entry to College

1. Finding out about the deaf student's English vocabulary levels

Paul Nation is a New Zealand linguist who has devised online assessments of vocabulary based on word frequency. The tests are simple to complete and can be taken at 6 levels. With practice you can judge which is the best test to start a student on.

<http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/levels/>

The outcomes can inform support offered by the college or university in English skills. The first 1,000 word level covers words used in 70% of written text and 90% of talk. If you find students performing weakly at this first level then the college should put in some vocabulary **enrichment activities** based on the first 1,000 words, for example by providing access to reading materials at the appropriate level. The Nation tests can be used with any student; they were devised for people learning English as an additional language.

Examples of graded reading material – does your college have appropriate books in the library? Remember the Equality Act (2010)

<http://bit.ly/1MHSKjD>

<http://www.eflbooks.co.uk/browse.php>

2. Finding out about the deaf student's writing skills

Some deaf students have been over-supported at school, whereas others have had little or no support. Deaf students with all levels of deafness on average experience difficulties with English writing skills.

To assess this at entry, give a writing task to the student to complete without internet or dictionary support. For example you could ask the student to write in paragraphs about a hobby, or about how their family has influenced their life, about planning for their future job, or about how to cook something. This task should be presented in a relaxed atmosphere.

An EAL teacher or English teacher in the College will be able to analyse the student's strengths and areas for development. Some deaf students will have an unusual pattern of errors in free writing such as poor vocabulary, grammar errors and little use of figurative language. These are probably due to lack of exposure to a fluent language in the early years. Deaf students' literacy skills do not plateau and can improve with the correct support.

If core skills are embedded in vocational contexts, are these sessions taught by EAL or literacy tutors? That would support deaf students best. Self-study workshop material is often demotivating for deaf students. Think creatively about College assignments: can they be adapted so that students who have weak writing skills are presenting information and ideas in alternative ways?

In urban areas there may be a demand for a literacy class taught in British Sign Language. Consider buying in a qualified teacher of deaf students for additional English sessions. These strategies will support deaf students in their move through the SCQF levels and on to Higher Education or work.

3. Exploring the deaf student's reading skills

Your college will probably already have diagnostic materials for working out the reading levels of students at entry. Here is an example:

<http://www.skillsworkshop.org/resources/beating-crime>

Some deaf students will need a great deal of support to develop their reading comprehension skills while they are at college. They will improve if they receive enough classes or personalised support.

One successful way to develop a deaf student's reading skills is to provide regular **language tutorials** linked to the course. The tutor must have appropriate communication skills, i.e. NVQ Level 3 BSL or above for deaf students who sign. In these tutorials the language tutor can boost subject specific vocabulary, build literacy skills and provide study skills support. If the tutor has access to in class record sheets kept by notetakers and interpreters then these sessions will be better targeted. The student can feed back problems with their access arrangements early on through the regular language tutorial.

4. Spoken language

Through discussion with the student you can evaluate the effectiveness of their use of spoken language. Many deaf students will have very fluent spoken language skills and can manage complex interactions in class successfully. Ideally you should explore their skills before they start their course. You can use these questions to guide your discussion:

- *Does the deaf student sit in the best place to hear and lipread? Where is that?*
- *How well do they join in group work?*
- *If the school did not provide a notetaker, what did the student do when the class was expected to read and listen at the same time?*
- *Does the student look intently at lips? Is their amplification adequate?*
- *Is the student confident enough to change the environment to improve their chances of lipreading successfully? For example, would they close a blind or ask a speaker to move to a better lit area?*
- *What happened when the deaf student was talking and listening in social areas of the school such as the canteen?*

Working with a specialist tutor of deaf students you can evaluate whether the deaf student would benefit from an FM system. Most hearing aid users or CI users would. Explaining the benefits is worthwhile because many teenagers have rejected an FM system at school and may be prepared to think again when starting at College. College staff need careful induction about how to use the FM system correctly – when to mute it, how to use a directional mic with the system for group work, when to turn it off.

Have you done an audit of the listening environments in your college? An educational audiologist can help with this. Re-rooming, improving acoustic conditions through carpets, sound fields and acoustic panels could all be seen as reasonable adjustments. Deaf awareness for the peer group can help the student relax about their speaking and listening skills.

Some deaf students who have been deaf from a young age have extremely delayed spoken language, and have not been introduced to any form of sign; these students may want to reconsider their language choices at College entry, but they won't be able to learn effectively in BSL until they have had several years' exposure to the language. Does your College provide BSL

classes? Are these classes accessible for deaf students who may also have weak literacy skills?

5. BSL skills

As we have seen in Nicola Mitchell's presentation, deaf students often arrive at College with weak BSL skills, but this may still be their stronger language.

Buying in a BSL tutor to assess BSL or SSE skills at the start of a college course is very worthwhile. A qualified BSL / English interpreter may be more available, but is unlikely to have had experience of assessing the BSL skills at a range of levels. The recommendations from a BSL assessor will help inform the plan you make with this student.

- *Does the student need additional BSL classes?*
- *Would the student work better with a Deaf role model for a year on a vocational course to boost BSL skills?*
- *Are literacy classes going to be available in BSL?*
- *Does the student understand the role of a BSL / English interpreter?*
- *Does the student know how to ask the tutor for help via the interpreter?*
- *Is there an independent way the deaf student can comment or complain about the service they are receiving in college if they are a BSL user?*
- *Are other college services available to BSL users, such as the counselling service? Is it appropriate to use the same BSL interpreter in class for such services?*

The **personalised plan** you make with the student should be in language accessible to them. It will ideally show the student the staff who will be involved and their skill levels. It will show opportunities available for the student to develop their spoken and sign language skills, and their literacy skills while they are at College. The plan should be reviewed regularly with the student.