

University of St Andrews
Student Support Services

**WORKING WITH
DEAF OR HEARING IMPAIRED STUDENTS**

**Guidelines for
Members of Staff**

Background Information

A number of factors may affect people's ability to hear clearly enough to operate easily in everyday situations. Some people may be born deaf, others may become deaf gradually or suddenly as a child or adult. Most have some residual hearing. Only a very small proportion of people have no hearing at all.

There is an important difference between people who are prelingually deaf, that is became deaf before learning to speak, and those who became deaf later in life. Prelingually deaf people usually find it harder than others to acquire spoken and written language as this is generally learnt through hearing the spoken word. As adults their spoken language skills may not be as well developed as other people's, and they may prefer sign language. Many deaf or hard of hearing people have speech that sounds unusual or is difficult to understand. The intelligibility of speech, however, does not equate with an individual's proficiency in the language or their intelligence.

Implications for studying

As hearing is such an important way for most people to gather information, and speech is how nearly everyone communicates, deaf people can easily be disadvantaged in a learning environment with hearing people, particularly in group discussions.

Communication issues

Students may use speech, lipreading, sign, a hearing aid or a mixture of all these in day-to-day communication. Different students will have different methods and this may depend on the degree of deafness and the individual's age at the onset of deafness. For example, people who are hard of hearing, or who have become deaf later in life may rely more heavily on lipreading while those who are prelingually or profoundly deaf are more likely to prefer sign language.

Most deaf and hard of hearing people can lipread to some extent. Some use it as their main way of receiving speech from others. Lipreading is not straightforward as several sounds have a similar appearance. Residual hearing and contextual clues can help to distinguish sounds. However, it takes time to become accustomed to the way someone speaks and people with beards or moustaches which hide their lips, or who have unfamiliar accents, can be particularly hard to understand. Lipreading takes intense concentration and is therefore tiring over long periods.

Some people use trained lipspeakers if they are in an environment where they cannot lipread clearly themselves. A lipspeaker will repeat silently what is

being said using clear lip patterns. It is usually helpful if the lipspeaker is familiar with the subject matter.

Many deaf people, although not all, use sign language to communicate. British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) (which is used in the Republic of Ireland and to some extent in Northern Ireland) are indigenous languages in their own right with their own grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Those who have grown up using it may refer to themselves as 'Deaf' rather than 'deaf' emphasising their identity within a minority language community rather than as disabled people. Other deaf people whose first acquired language was English may use Sign Supported English (SSE) a form of visual English using BSL vocabulary.

If a student uses sign language as their main, or part of their main method of communication, a trained sign language interpreter or communication support worker can interpret the speech of tutors and other students. If the student does not use, or is not confident using, his or her own voice the interpreter may 'voice-over' the deaf student's signs to others.

Students who have recently become deaf are less likely to be proficient in sign language and many need to learn to lipread or sign before being able to participate successfully.

Sign language is as rich as spoken language and can convey the same meanings and complexities. However, in some academic disciplines there may as yet be no sign vocabulary for some of the specialist language used. This may mean that the student tutor and interpreter need to improvise to some extent.

There is an acute shortage of sign language interpreters prepared to work in higher education across the UK and a particular shortage of people qualified in ISL. Many students will be able to operate successfully using communicators with a slightly lower level of proficiency. For some students the lack of appropriately trained interpreters and communicators, or the high cost of qualified support, will require them to be adversely affected.

Many students will use notetakers in addition to, or instead of, communication support. Ideally notetakers will be graduate students or others familiar with the subject matter, who attend lectures specifically to write notes for the student. Notetaking for a third party requires some training. It is now possible to acquire a qualification in notetaking for deaf people from the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP).

Some students may opt to tape lectures and have tapes transcribed and a few may choose to video the interpreter as a permanent record of a session. However, videos and full transcriptions are not usually the most useful material for students to use in recalling or revising their subject.

Some deaf students, particularly prelingually deaf students, may need help in written English. Spoken languages are primarily learned through hearing.

This means that deaf people can have difficulty with more complex sentence structures and the grammar of a spoken language (which differs significantly from the grammar of sign language), or with certain uses of the language, such as metaphor and euphemism. As a result they may experience difficulty with course texts and other materials, and also with producing written assignments. Support can be provided by a teacher of the deaf who can help with language use, grammar and essay construction.

Many deaf or hard of hearing students will use a hearing aid even if they use other methods of communication. Hearing aids do not compensate for hearing loss in the way that spectacles might remedy short sight. They operate by amplifying sounds, but in doing so all sounds are equally amplified including background noise which can be problematic. Any sense of the direction from which a sound comes is also usually lost. For some people, the constant stream of meaningless noise which a hearing aid brings can be very tiring. Nevertheless, for many people hearing aids are useful additions to other communication strategies.

Many deaf students find the experience of studying in a hearing institution isolating because of the difficulties which communication poses. Some students may prefer to attend an institution which already has a significant community of sign language users, or be in a locality with an active deaf community. It may be helpful to discuss the extent of the signing community within your institution or local area with potential applicants before they apply.

Technology

For most people who use a hearing aid, some sort of additional support in a lecture theatre or seminar will be helpful. Induction loops fitted into the room are one approach although some students find that radio aids give a slightly better sound as they can be tailored to an individual pattern of hearing loss.

Both loops and radio aids work in a similar way: the speaker uses a microphone (in the case of a radio aid this is usually on a clip which can be attached to a lapel). The signal is transferred to a loop either around the room, or a small loop worn around the neck. This in turn transmits to the student's hearing aid. Multi-directional microphones are available, or the microphone can be passed around in seminars or other settings where there are several speakers.

Room loops are either built into the room or can be portable systems which are plugged into an electric socket. In either case they need to be turned on and checked to ensure good reception before use. Radio aids are portable from place to place. Students may already have their own or may need to purchase one. Radio aids need to be serviced regularly and may need to be adjusted to match any increase in deafness.

Some deaf students may be able to use the telephone with an amplification device, or by simply turning their hearing aid to 'T'. For others a minicom (text

telephone) which is used in conjunction with a normal telephone, enables communication through text, either directly to another minicom user or via British Telecom's Typetalk switchboard.

Students who have difficulty with the English language may benefit from spellcheckers, grammar checkers, computer dictionaries and the thesaurus to support them in written work. Most software will give a deaf user the option of a flashing screen instead of a 'beep' as an error indication.

Physical access

Deaf students living in residential accommodation may need a number of simple adaptations to their rooms, including a flashing light doorbell and fire alarm. More general requirements will include access to a text telephone and a television with teletext for subtitles.

Teaching strategies

As with all disabled students, deaf students will rely to a large extent on the co-operation and support of the institution and teaching staff. Even with this support, deaf students will have to work much harder than other students in order to fulfil their potential.

The following suggestions offer some general guidelines for teaching staff:

- Face the student at all times when speaking and speak clearly. Try to keep the natural rhythm of speech and do not shout. Keep your hands and other items away from your mouth as your lips and face are important lipreading aids. Facial expression and gesture can add meaning to what you are saying, but only if your face can be seen easily, so try not to walk around as you speak, and stop talking if you turn to face a board or screen.
- Arrange lighting so that everyone's face is well lit. Do not stand in front of a window or light when talking as this will prevent the student from seeing your face. Fluorescent lighting is usually helpful because it provides an even light.
- People who depend on using their eyes to 'hear' will not be able to take notes, or read handouts, at the same time as lipreading or watching an interpreter. It is helpful if you can prepare notes and overheads to distribute in advance.

- Interpreters and communication support workers will also benefit from receiving lecture notes and handouts in advance so that they can provide a smoother delivery of the session.
- Walls should be plain, if possible, and it is helpful to wear plain clothes if the student is going to be watching you for a long period. Bright stripes and patterns on walls and clothes can be distracting if the student is lipreading or concentrating on an interpreter.
- The acoustic quality of rooms is likely to be important to those using residual hearing and extraneous noises can cause difficulties. Rooms with carpets and curtains are often best. The student will be able to tell you when there is a problem. If in doubt, ask.
- Group work can be difficult for people who are deaf as they may not know who is speaking and whom to watch if they are lipreading. Passing a microphone can help but group members should get into the habit of indicating with a gesture when they are speaking. Alternatively, the lecturer or seminar lead can point to the speaker. Encourage students to say if they have missed anything.
- When new vocabulary is introduced, make sure that the concept is understood and that the spoken and written words, as well as the sign (if used) are understood. Unknown vocabulary is difficult to lipread. It helps if it is written up on a board. Check regularly that you have been understood before moving on.
- It is difficult to lipread if the context is not known. The better a lecture is structured the better it can be followed. Similarly, handouts and overheads can be very helpful if complementing spoken instructions and descriptions.
- People who are prelingually deaf may not use complex English grammar and may not have an extensive English vocabulary. It is helpful to use short clear statements, avoiding or explaining jargon, abstract terms, double entendres and complex structures, such as double negatives. If you find you have not been understood, do not repeat the same sentence; think of a different way of explaining the same idea. Remember that written work from the student may contain grammatical errors which do not necessarily indicate a poor understanding of the subject.
- Deaf or hard of hearing students may find it useful to be near to you if you are giving a talk or leading a discussion. Wherever they are, make sure you have their attention before you start speaking. Flashing the lights or stamping on the floor can both be effective.
- Make time for an interpreter. Be aware of time lags in the interpreting process especially during question sessions or discussions. Allow breaks in intensive sessions to give the interpreter a short rest - interpreting is tiring work.

- When there is an interpreter present, address the student and not the interpreter and look at the student to acknowledge that you have heard any comment made by the student via the interpreter. Unless talking to the interpreter directly, act as if he or she isn't there.
- If you are involved in outdoor activities, communication may be more difficult. Some practice and forethought will help.
- The rubrics and carrier language on examination papers are not always straightforward for prelingually deaf people to understand. It may be appropriate to modify carrier language or even provide a communicator to explain the rubric in sign language before the examination begins. Students will also need to be alerted through sign or other appropriate methods to spoken instructions in examinations, such as information about the amount of time remaining.
- In some cases it may be appropriate for students to present examination assignments in sign language. This needs to be thought through carefully to ensure that the assessment remains both rigorous and fair.

Further Help

The following organisations should be able to offer further help.

Breakthrough Trust - Deaf-Hearing Integration

British Deaf Association (BDA)

CHESS (Consortium of Higher Education Support Services for Deaf Students)

The City Literary Institute

Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP)

Hearing Concern

National Association for Tertiary Education for the Deaf (NATED)

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)

Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)

Sense - The National Deafblind and Rubella Association

The following publications should be able to offer further help.

Additional Information on Equipment for Use in Employment and Education:

Royal National Institute for Deaf People

Building a Future for Young Deafblind People:

Sense

CACDP Directory:

Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People

Evaluating Support Provision for Deaf Students in Higher Education:

South Bank University

Guidelines for the Employment of Communication Support Workers:

National Association for Tertiary Education for the Deaf

Hearing Concern Register of Lipspeakers:

Hearing Concern

Making Contact, A Good Practice Guide: how to involve and communicate with a deafblind person:

Sense

Teaching Strategies to use with Deaf Students:

Royal National Institute for Deaf People

Understanding Deafness

National Deaf Children's Society

Usher Syndrome: Awareness and Education Pack:

Sense

This information was provided by Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities.

For further information and details of support and equipment contact:

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