Teaching students with hearing impairments

General Information

Hearing impairments can range from mild hearing loss to total deafness. Hearing impairments may also include difficulties hearing sound frequencies or confusion with certain sounds. From an educational standpoint, hearing impairments have been divided into “deaf” (a hearing loss of 70 db or greater in the better ear) and “hard of hearing” (a hearing loss of 35 to 69 db in the better ear). Depending on the degree of loss, the student may miss fast paced interactions, suffer fatigue while listening, miss 50% or more of class discussion, have problems suppressing background noise, have articulation deficits, limited vocabulary, or learning dysfunction, may have an atonal voice, delayed language and syntax skills (which impacts both reading and writing), and reduced speech intelligibility. Some individuals with hearing impairments use sign language to communicate, but most rely on lip-reading, speech, hearing aides, or any combination to facilitate oral communication. Commonly associated disabilities include: learning disabilities, auditory agnosia, head trauma, deafness, and tinnitus.

While each instructor knows the demands of his/her own class, the following questions may be considered so that classroom information is accessible to the student:

- What is the student’s preferred mode of communication?
- In what ways can I assist the student, an interpreter, or both to prepare ahead of time? (Outline, vocabulary lists of specialized terms, lecture notes, etc.)
- Is my classroom arranged effectively so all class members have eye contact with me and so the interpreter and the student have eye contact?
- Do I situate myself appropriately in the classroom and speak meaningfully to the student? (Lower voice pitch, avoid hand gestures, use facial expressions and body language for emphasis, and no glare producing light sources)
- Do I encourage class members to interact meaningfully with the student?
- How can I clarify key points to the student in class? (Note taker, use of blackboard or overhead projector, use of supplementary materials)
- If I cancel class, how can I notify the student or SSD who must cancel services provided by the interpreter?

Suggestions for Communication

- Most people with disabilities do not mind talking frankly about the disability. Understanding and awareness of the facts promotes acceptance and integration.
- Be sure to face the person to whom you are talking, as many hearing impaired and deaf people read lips. Exaggerating lip movements only makes it more difficult to read lips.
- Although people who are hearing impaired or deaf “read lips,” only 40 -50% of speech is readable by watching lips only. Use of body language helps people who are hearing impaired to understand you better.
- Ask the person what is the best way to communicate. Use pen and paper if necessary.
- Be patient and casual. It is OK to ask for repetition or clarification if the person’s speech is difficult to understand. Do not say you understand when you actually do not.
- Some students who are hearing impaired will say they understand what you are saying when they do not. If you think they do not understand, clarify.
- If the student is communicating through the use of a signing interpreter, direct your comments, conversation, and questions to the student rather than the interpreter.
- Speak clearly and distinctly. Slow down the pace of talking. Speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Do not cover your mouth, chew, smoke, or turn away.
- Avoid standing in front of a light source.

Academic Considerations

- Seating a student with hearing impairments close to the speaker increases the chances the student will "hear" part of the lecture, through lip reading or other nonverbal cues.
- A written supplements to oral instructions is often beneficial.
- Reiterate questions from other students in the class, as the hearing impaired student often does not know what has been asked.
- Note takers are often needed as students that are deaf or hard of hearing find it very difficult to attend to an interpreter or lip read a lecture and take notes.
- A hearing aid or personal FM amplification system will be necessary for many hearing impaired students. FM devices are available for loan through SSD. However, they are not a cure.

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