

Services For Students Who Are Hard Of Hearing

Pamela J. Belknap

Rehabilitation Services
Minnesota Department of Economic Security
St. Paul, Minnesota

Introduction

The needs of postsecondary students who are hard of hearing are often overlooked by educators, adult service professionals and the students themselves. This morning, I would like to (1) present a working definition of the term “hard of hearing”, (2) identify common issues that affect people who are hard of hearing, and (3) discuss the kinds of services or accommodations that would be helpful for students who are hard of hearing.

Definitions

Many professionals are now almost automatically use the term “deaf and hard of hearing” to refer to programs and services which were originally designed for individuals who are deaf. This leads to confusion. It is important to define what we mean when we talk about people who are “hard of hearing”. Let’s look at some commonalities among people who are hard of hearing.

- ◆ Individuals who are hard of hearing have some degree of hearing loss varying from mild to profound.
- ◆ The hearing loss could have occurred at any age, from birth or childhood to late adulthood.
- ◆ Most hard of hearing people are not affiliated with the Deaf community, do not use sign language and rely on English (or another spoken language) as their primary and preferred language. It has been estimated that only 1% of individuals with hearing loss learn sign language (Stone & Fennel, 1990).
- ◆ People who are hard of hearing can usually benefit from assistive listening devices to augment communication with others in one-to-one and/or group settings.
- ◆ Most hard of hearing people function primarily within the “hearing world” in terms of their family, friends and work relationships, and *want* to live within that world. They are “culturally hearing”.

Question: what is the result of these commonalities? Answer: individual differences. For one thing, there is no “community” of people who are hard of hearing. In fact, most young people who are hard of hearing would say that they have never met another individual with a hearing loss, except perhaps a grandparent or other elderly relative. Because most do not have an opportunity to share and compare their experiences with others who are hard of hearing, they usually make assumptions about hearing loss which are similar to those pervasive in our society. These misperceptions contribute to the communication barriers they experience every day.

Myths or Misunderstandings

It is ironic that misperceptions about hearing loss are so common and that it seems to be such an overlooked and invisible disability. In the United States, approximately one in nine people has a hearing impairment (Adams & Hardy, 1989). That means that we all know someone with hearing loss, although that person may not identify himself or herself and may not wear hearing aids which make the disability apparent. These are several reasons that erroneous assumptions about hearing loss persist and that it is considered primarily a consequence of old age, when actually 60 percent of those who have a hearing loss are under age 65 (National Health Survey, 1988).

One common assumption is that hearing aids “fix” or “cure” hearing loss in the same way that glasses can correct myopia. This suggests that if a person wears a hearing aid, he or she can understand others and communicate as if there is no hearing loss. Family members and friends usually believe this is true. We have all heard someone complain “If my grandfather (grandmother/mother) would just wear the hearing aids, we wouldn’t have to shout all the time!” Or, “If he used his hearing aids, he wouldn’t complain that everyone mumbles!” What are the reactions of the people who are complaining? Confusion, exasperation, frustration, anger. What about the person who wears the hearing aid and still cannot hear clearly? He or she will experience many of the same feelings, as well as guilt and anxiety, finding fault with the hearing aid for not working right or assuming blame for the fact that it doesn’t solve all of the communication problems.

The reason why hearing aids cannot “fix” a hearing loss is that they *amplify* sound but cannot always *clarify* sound for someone who has a sensorineural hearing loss. Speech discrimination can still be problematic. And, in noisy environments, hearing aids amplify unnecessary background sounds as well as conversation, making them useless at best. Hearing aids can be helpful in many settings for many people, but they are just one piece of the puzzle in dealing with hearing loss.

Another misperception many people have is that speechreading or lipreading skills are easily acquired and can be used to avoid problems associated with hearing loss. Unfortunately, speechreading ability is dramatically affected by a number of factors -- lighting, visual or auditory distractions, speaker facial characteristics or gestures, distance between the speaker and listener, listener characteristics such as visual acuity, motivation, anxiety, fatigue, etc. Speechreading is very situation-specific. Even in the best case scenario, speechreading is a guessing game, and is only one more piece of the communication puzzle. Most people do not know this, however, and assumptions about speechreading therefore also interfere with understanding the effect of hearing loss.

Similarly, many people who do not have a hearing loss (as well as some people who are deaf) assume that if someone can *hear* speech, s/he can *understand* what is being said. In reality, speech discrimination ability also depends on many situation-specific environmental, speaker and listener factors. Not only can a hard of hearing person fail to understand what is said, he or she can also *misunderstand* what is said. Sometimes misunderstandings or misinterpretations cause greater problems than not being able to understand at all. You may have heard about a book written a few years ago by an individual with a severe hearing loss entitled What’s That Pig Outdoors?, a question the author once thought he was asked by a family member.

There is another misconception that professionals as well as others may believe and is particularly insidious. It can have a very negative impact on service provision for consumers who are hard of hearing. That is the assumption that the communication problems experienced by an individual are equal to the level of his or her hearing loss. This belief results in an interpretation that a “severe” hearing loss results in severe problems, and a “mild” hearing loss causes mild problems. If we were to follow this logic, we would assume that a person who is deaf due to a profound hearing loss has profound problems. Fortunately, we have the experience to know that this assumption is not logical and does not take into account individual differences and strengths. The same factors must be considered in assessing the impact of mild, moderate and severe hearing loss. In fact, the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association (ASHA) is considering how the use of those descriptors often result in more confusion than understanding, and may recommend changes in the terminology now used by audiologists.

Adjustment to Disability

In order to comprehend the communication difficulties faced by individuals who are hard of hearing, we must understand basic information about the hearing process. An audiogram can demonstrate the effect of a hearing loss on a person’s ability to understand speech. In simple terms, an audiogram measures hearing acuity at various levels of pitch and loudness. Individual speech sounds fall within varying ranges of pitch and loudness, so that a person with a hearing loss might hear only parts of words. For example, some individuals with sensorineural loss might be unable to distinguish the letters f, s, th, and k but more easily detect vowel sounds such as o, a, and u. Gaps in auditory information are often “filled in” automatically, as when a misspelled word on a page is not detected. The gaps may be filled in incorrectly, however. A friend of mine who is hard of hearing once related a perfect example of this phenomenon. As a child, she was in a canoe with family members at a lake in Minnesota, when suddenly her sister and aunt began screaming “There’s a skunk in the water! There’s a skunk in the water!” As she looked about her to find the skunk, the others jumped out of the canoe. She was astonished that they would deliberately jump into the water where a skunk was swimming. Only when she turned around and saw a snake in the canoe did she realize that they had been shouting “Jump in the water!” Without a visual clue, “jump” and “skunk” sound alike to her!

Through experience, people who are hard of hearing can identify many common problems that affect their ability to understand speech. Speech discrimination ability is often reduced in the following listening situations: on the telephone; in a car; in the presence of background noise; when groups of people are talking; at lectures, plays or movies; when public address announcements are given; when traveling by plane, train or bus; in business or other meetings; when the listener does not know that someone is talking; or when he or she does not know the topic of a conversation. Clearly, many of these common problem situations could occur daily in postsecondary training settings.

In addition to information from an audiogram which can pinpoint specific speech discrimination limitations and the configuration of one’s loss, how a person feels about the disability and what coping strategies he or she employs have a significant impact on that individual’s ability to cope with everyday

communication demands. Common reactions to hearing loss range from denial, frustration, anger and depression to embarrassment, interpersonal conflicts, and withdrawal from others. In light of these emotional factors and the lack of opportunity that most people have to learn about hearing loss, share experiences, and use equipment and other modifications, it is not surprising that hard of hearing persons often lack effective coping skills which would maximize the use of their residual hearing.

Service Considerations

We need to understand more about hearing loss. “We” refers to hearing rehabilitation professionals and educators, deaf professionals, family members, friends, and coworkers, as well as professionals and consumers who are hard of hearing.

In order to cope effectively, a person who is hard of hearing must acquire many skills and have the opportunity to practice those skills to resolve or alleviate everyday communication problems. He or she must understand how the hearing process works and does not work, depending on the severity and configuration of his or her own hearing loss. The individual also needs to be able to assess each environment in terms of communication barriers, determine the source of potential and actual communication problems, and devise appropriate solutions. Then comes what can be the most difficult challenge -- taking action by changing one’s behavior, telling other people what they can do to help, and reminding them when they forget.

Keeping all of this information in mind, what are the pieces of the puzzle that make up accommodations options for students who are hard of hearing?

- ◆ Outreach efforts to identify students and motivate them to use accommodations at school, in and outside of the classroom;
- ◆ Appropriate and thorough audiological evaluation and hearing aids;
- ◆ Availability and training in the use of adaptive equipment (FM or infrared systems, captioned videotapes, real-time captioning, phone amplifiers and visual alert devices);
- ◆ Attention to coping skills -- information about hearing loss, support groups, stress management instruction, and assertiveness training;
- ◆ Speechreading training, including sharing information about its limitations and/or effectiveness in various situations or settings;
- ◆ Notetaking services in the classroom;
- ◆ Environmental considerations, taking into account class scheduling, auditory and visual distractions, room acoustics, class size, breaks and other factors which can influence listening ability and fatigue;
- ◆ Resource information such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Self Help for Hard of Hearing chapters, written materials, local community service programs, counseling assistance, and resource development to expand what is locally available;
- ◆ Education about hearing loss for faculty members and other school staff.

Because there is a lack of information about accommodation options in most communities and within training programs, it is imperative that educators and administrators work in conjunction with other professionals to develop and enhance services for students who are hard of hearing.

Summary

It is clear that the needs of postsecondary students who are hard of hearing are in many ways unique, so that these students do not easily fit into the support system provided for other students with disabilities. We have looked at a definition which points out that the term “hard of hearing” can be used to generally describe many individuals who experience hearing loss but are not a part of Deaf culture. We have identified some of the common issues that affect people who are hard of hearing. We have also developed a list of possible accommodations that can be coordinated and/or supported by professionals in postsecondary settings which will enable students who are hard of hearing to more fully participate in college life and prepare for their future careers.

References

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