

Tools For Language: Rehab 101 and Cultural Diversity*

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I have a difficult topic to discuss because we do not have a universal curriculum that is developed for teaching language to deaf and hard of hearing people. It is also a well-known fact that one of the major problems that many deaf and hard of hearing persons who are in transition, unfortunately, face is communication barriers. In that regard, Deaf ACCESS provides these individuals with an outlet for socialization and information while responding to their language needs during involvement in rehabilitation, transitional instruction, and independent living programs. This presentation will provide an overview of the role of rehabilitation in facilitating the transition of deaf and hard of hearing individuals to post-secondary programs and the general community through direct instruction and independent living programs.

Using several case examples, this presentation will also describe the various approaches used by Deaf ACCESS as a rehabilitation program to provide culturally diverse deaf individuals with language skills to succeed in post-secondary programs and the larger society.

Mission Statement

Our mission states that we strive: "To provide opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing individuals to succeed in post-secondary training and community settings." To accomplish this there must be significant people in the deaf and hard of hearing individual's cultural, training, and work environment. Providing appropriate educational and rehabilitation services to deaf and hard of hearing individuals, especially those who also possess secondary disabilities, has historically presented challenges to us. Characteristics common to multiply handicapped deaf individual include limited communication, low reading and writing skills, deficits in intellectual functioning, and lack of an adequate support system. Before the journey of adult life transition begins, these individuals must develop language skills in order to communicate.

Deaf ACCESS' Language Assessment

In 1981, Rehabilitation Services through Deaf ACCESS initiated a program to assess language functioning of deaf adults in Arkansas. The language assessment tool was created as a result of the need to test language ability. Approximately 25 deaf adults were referred to Deaf ACCESS for language assessment. Sixty percent of the referrals were Black and most of them were from the eastern Mississippi-Delta area of the state. There were also referrals from the Ozark region of the state. Many were drop-outs;

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only a few of the 25 referrals had graduated from high school, and those returned home without any established vocational goals. These individuals were referred by regional independent living counselors across the state.

Tools Used

The tools we used were simple--an 8mm projector and a film entitled, "Life on the Farm." The purpose of the film was to evaluate the communication skills and assess the various communication modes each client used. Some of the areas tested were receptive fingerspelling, expressive fingerspelling, receptive ASL or signed English, reading, writing, etc. We selected this film because it had a lot of action and a variety of animals were shown with a farmer and his family doing a variety of work.

After the assessment was completed, the client was scheduled for individual classes with an instructor and a peer partner. A peer partner must have effective interpersonal skills as well as knowledge of certain ethical issues and program rules and policies. Such policies include confidentiality, record keeping, and verbal reporting to the appropriate personnel.

The peer partner promoted a positive image to the community by utilizing deaf organizations and other educational programs as resources for each client's learning experiences. As a result of these efforts, several senior citizens became interested in helping the deaf clients learn language. Therefore, we created a new program called "Project Granny." Each client was assigned to two or more senior citizens working with learning projects.

Another tool we used for language development evolved because one of our peer partners was an artist. He drew pictures and went on site to enhance learning. Presently, we have changed some of our procedures for teaching language. In keeping up with technology, we use Apple computers and programs for language development. Staff members make videotapes demonstrating sign for a variety of situations. The tools that involve more visually-oriented objects are most effective.

Case Studies

Four case examples are presented with information included on each individual's educational background and related personal data. I will describe the reason for referral, the services provided, and service delivery outcome for each case.

Case Example 1

After graduation from the Arkansas School for the Deaf in 1991, Tim, a white male who became deaf at age 9 months due to spinal meningitis, returned home and remained there for two years. During that time, Tim married and secured a job. Unfortunately, he began to experience marital problems, and eventually was divorced. The divorce became too much for him to deal with and, after losing his job, he had no money to pay bills.

In 1993, an independent living counselor in the local rehabilitation office referred Tim to Deaf ACCESS for temporary housing while he looked for a job. Tim and his instructor developed a lesson plan for job seeking strategies, language development to strengthen present skills, algebra instruction, and participation in the adult education program at the Arkansas School for the Deaf. Tim secured a job as a custodial worker, but didn't know at that time he was preparing himself for something that would change his life. Tim's instructor advised him of his potential for college. He increased his desire to improve his language skills and eventually took an entrance exam and was accepted at Gallaudet University. As another accomplishment, Tim was not required to take preparatory classes due to his high scores on his entrance exam. Presently, Tim has successfully completed his first year in college. He works as a mentor at Deaf ACCESS during the summer.

Case Example #2

Tommy is a Black male who became deaf at the age of 3 years due to meningitis. Because Tommy's parents had no prior experience with deaf people, they were uncertain how best to assist him. Although they were advised by the family doctor to enroll him at the Arkansas School for the Deaf, his parent were uncomfortable with the idea of placing him in a residential living situation at a predominantly white school. Tommy's parents kept him home during his childhood years and he was not placed in any type of educational program. His world essentially revolved around his family and neighbors in his hometown. Because the town was small (approximately 200 residents), everyone knew each other and willingly provided support for one another. Thus, Tommy was able to converse with his neighbors using gestures and "home" signs. He did not have direct contact with service providers until a social worker visited his home when he was about 17 or 18 years old. The social worker decided to contact a local Independent Living Services (ILS) counselor serving deaf clients to assist him. After several visits, the ILS counselor, who was white, was not able to successfully persuade Tommy's parents to permit him to be sent to Little Rock for training.

A year later, a Deaf ACCESS staff member who was a black professional, made a visit to Tommy's home to encourage him to enroll in a Summer Language Evaluation and Training program. The black professional staff member, after a lengthy discussion, was able to gain the trust to Tommy and his parents to attend the training program in Little Rock on a trial basis.

This was Tommy's first venture outside of his southeastern Arkansas home area. Much time and effort were provided by both a black professional and black deaf peer partner in helping Tommy adjust to the new environment. He moved into a boarding home.

Transportation was provided, but Tommy eventually learned how to ride the city bus. Instructional services in independent living and communication occurred at Deaf ACCESS and in the home of a black deaf peer helper. Because of the instruction he received in ASL, plus his daily exposure to fluent deaf and hearing ASL users, his communication skills improved dramatically. He was obviously very observant and a quick learner. In addition, he received on-the-job training in janitorial work at Deaf

ACCESS and was employed there for a short time before obtaining full-time employment. He has successfully maintained his job for the past eight years, has his own apartment, passed the driving test, and is saving money to purchase a car.

Case Example #3

This is a case example of an 42 year old white female named Sue who is deaf and has cerebral palsy. She attended special education classes in Little Rock for twelve years, then returned home in the rural Ozark region to live with her mother and sister. Initially, she had a difficult time getting assistance in her small rural hometown. Several months later she was residing in Human Development Center and stayed there from 1974-1984.

She was referred to Deaf ACCESS in 1984 by her local counselor. Her overall goal was to become independent. Information we received indicated that Sue could not function on her own, was mentally retarded, and required 24 hours daily supervision.

The instructor assigned to Sue observed an enormous amount of energy exhibited by Sue in her quest to learn. Sue lived in an independent residence for women and commuted each day to Deaf ACCESS on a city bus. The staff of the women's residence had an ongoing collaborative relationship with Deaf ACCESS' staff by providing interpreting support, sign language classes, and other consultation requested.

Deaf ACCESS' staff provide transportation instruction for Sue and she learned to use public transportation in one week. We provided language skills class, and interpersonal skills training to help her out of the institution mode to which she had become accustomed.

Presently, Sue works in a supported employment program and continues to use follow-up services with Deaf ACCESS. She is a sociable young woman who has maintained her own apartment. Her willingness to succeed in life helped her overcome many educational, social, economic, and communication barriers.

Case Example #4

Wan, an Vietnamese male, was born in 1974. His five sisters and parents are hearing. Wan never attended school in Vietnam. He communicated by using gestures and acting out his thoughts. He moved to Arkansas from a Philippine refuge camp to join his family in 1990. Wan stayed home with his parents after he arrived in Arkansas and was not involved in any programs. An independent living counselor referred Wan to Deaf ACCESS for instruction in American Sign Language, social skills, and literacy. Communication was very difficult.

During the admission interview, Wan used gestures and his parents spoke Vietnamese. The Deaf ACCESS staff relied on Wan's cousin who spoke Vietnamese, English, gesture, and home signs to facilitate communication. Fortunately, Wan was a fast learner with good social skills. His living environment provided a healthy and positive learning experience.

After developing the ability to communicate in ASL on a basic level, Wan worked with the staff at Deaf ACCESS to consider employment opportunities. When asked about past work experience, he told us of his experiences in Vietnam. His family was very poor and had to do whatever they could to get by. He described a particular time when he earned money by selling gold at the street market. While it was difficult to understand the details of his tale, it appeared that he was employed to dig up bodies of the deceased for relocation. He explained workers who wore tall black rubber boots and gloves as they dug in graveyards. When they reached the bodies, they would remove all the jewelry and even gold teeth, hiding them in their boots and inside their gloves. These were all taken to the market later and sold for cash.

Wan was soon employed at a fast-food business in Little Rock where he learned many basic vocational skills. He then moved to the Hot Springs Rehabilitation Center for training in printing where he earned a printing certificate in December, 1993. He recently passed the written driving test, and has a certificate for successfully completing driving school.

Summary

It is apparent that language acquisition is one of the cornerstones for independent functioning. However, few tools have been identified that assist in teaching language to the special population of traditionally underserved and severely disabled deaf and hard of hearing persons. The Deaf ACCESS program has experienced successful results with a creative approach to teaching language to clients from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Components of this approach include:

- ? Creativity in designing language assessment and teaching tools.
- ? Use of a culturally diverse staff to develop rapport and trust with clients and their families.
- ? Individually designed teaching program to fit with the unique learning and cultural needs of the client.

This process is as effective as it is simple and low cost. Both staff and clients feel good about themselves and the mutual sharing of language. The Deaf ACCESS program will continue with this basic approach, and incorporate new tools and technology for language acquisition as our program continues to grow and develop.