

Where's the English Tutor?

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Abstract

Tutoring students who are deaf or hard of hearing is an art that requires knowledge of technique. The most effective tutors in English are those familiar with the structure of visuo-spatial languages. They are able to make meaningful comparisons and contrasts for students, helping them to understand how elements realized simultaneously in sign are expressed linearly in English. Effective tutors realize that until the student understands how simultaneous expressed elements of American Sign Language are realized linearly in English, they cannot use linear English to explain linear English. Given this understanding, it becomes quite obvious that English and reading tutors who work with deaf and hard of hearing students require specialized training and preparation prior to tutoring. This article describes the tutoring program sponsored by the College of Humanities and the National Center on Deafness at California State University, Northridge.



Students who are deaf or hard of hearing bring unique needs to courses in English composition. Not only must they develop the writing skills required of every college and university student, but they must also be able to write with linguistic fluency. While discussing the writing skills of any student is fraught with generalization, the needs of deaf and hard of hearing students are even more diversified.

Certainly we can assert that students who are deaf or hard of hearing do not have linguistic interference because of arrested cognitive or language development. More often than not, students' needs are a result of lack of exposure to intensive reading and writing requirements prior to their arrival on the college or university campus.

Students who have not achieved English writing and linguistic competency in the twelve years prior to enrolling in a postsecondary institution are not going to master the language in one semester of freshman composition, or even in one or two semesters of developmental studies without intensive intervention.

Intervention takes various forms, one of which is tutoring. We define tutoring as the process of giving additional, special, or remedial instruction in a one-on-one or a group setting. We view the purpose of tutoring as correcting or improving weak or missing skills in a specific subject. Effective tutoring is achieved as a result of a successful partnership between tutor and student and requires effective communication, preparation and training, commitment, and collaborative action.

English Tutoring Project in the National Center on Deafness

The National Center on Deafness (NCOD) at California State University, Northridge co-sponsors with the English Department five courses in English each year: Developmental Reading (English 097), Developmental Writing (English 098), Freshman Composition (English 155), Introduction to Literature (English 255), and Intermediate

Expository Writing (English 305). This partnership between the NCOD and the English Department has been in existence since the University first began accepting undergraduate deaf and hard of hearing students in 1964. Registration in these classes is usually restricted to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The professors communicate directly with the students in American Sign Language (ASL) or sometimes orally. Enrollment is usually from 8 to 15 students, but as many as 21 have sometimes registered for the classes in a given semester.

The curricula for these classes are basically the same as for hearing students enrolled in regular sections of the courses. The basic differences are: (a) the language of instruction is ASL, and (b) due to generally smaller class size, students receive more individual attention.

A third difference lies in the provision of tutoring to students enrolled in these restricted classes. One may ask: What do deaf and hard of hearing students need in tutoring and why?

(1) Tutoring students who are deaf and hard of hearing is different from tutoring hearing students or foreign students. Deaf and hard of hearing students present unique needs. Research has demonstrated that 90% of deaf and hard of hearing persons have hearing parents who do not know American Sign Language when children are born. In effect, these children do not start learning a language until formal schooling starts. In a sense, this is often a group without a native language.

(2) The remaining 10% of deaf persons who have deaf parents usually learn American Sign Language. For these students, ASL is a valid first language.

(3) The reading and writing skills required in the English 097 and 098 classes, and sometimes in the English 155 course, are such that students not only need tutoring in course work but also remediation that allows for “catching up” and reaching freshman college levels. On the average, students in the developmental courses of English 097 and 098 perform at approximately the eighth grade level. Students in English 155 may or may not be at college level, even after developmental classes. Tutoring supplements course work and allows for specific, individual instruction.

(4) The most effective tutors are those familiar with the structure of visuo-spatial languages. They are able to make meaningful comparisons and contrasts for the students, helping them to understand how elements are realized simultaneously in sign are expressed linearly in English. Until the student understands how simultaneous expressed elements of ASL are realized linearly in English, the tutor cannot use linear English to explain linear English.

(5) Effective tutoring requires a time commitment of at least one hour. In addition, the best tutoring occurs in one-on-one settings, with the focus on students’ individual needs.

Selection and Training of Tutors

Since 1978, the National Center on Deafness has provided specialized training for tutors, utilizing undergraduate students who have completed the course for which they tutor. Trainees have been required to sit in the course for a second semester while providing tutoring; in addition, they are observed and given feedback on a regular basis. After one semester of training, they are hired at entry-level positions as tutors. Graduate students may also apply for tutoring positions, but they must undergo special training.

The NCOD has prepared training videos to provide examples of best practices in tutoring reading and writing. These videos are utilized at tutor training retreats and serve as a prelude to activities in which tutors role-play real-life situations encountered in the tutoring environment, including scenarios where students ask tutors not only to edit but sometimes to actually write their papers. The videos demonstrate how tutors facilitate student efforts to organize their paragraphs and essays with unity and coherence, and recognize and correct errors in syntax, grammar, and diction. Students competent in American Sign Language learn to translate basic ideas into English, on paper.

Through guided exploration, the tutor and the student revise other composition elements to get a more polished piece of writing with formal diction and correct grammar.

In training, tutors experience, metacognitively, the tutoring process. The act of talking about and analyzing exactly what they are doing provides students with a more intensive understanding of visuo-spatial languages. As a result, the students are able to make meaningful comparisons and better utilize their skills in American Sign Language to facilitate the linear expressions required of English.

Comprehensive Tutoring: Project Design

With the need for a comprehensive tutoring program identified and articulated, the NCOD and English Department enlisted the support of the University's College of Humanities. The collaborative efforts resulted in funds being allocated for the extensive tutoring project described in the following section.

Project Plans

In determining overall project plans, consideration was given to the specific needs of students enrolled in the NCOD-English Department sponsored courses. On the basis of this needs analysis, it was recommended that there be six tracks.

(1) Reading. Students needing more practice in developing reading skills utilized this track and received instruction in interpretation, summarization, probing, vocabulary building, and application.

(2) The writing process. This track provided instruction in determining an audience; exploring, planning, and drafting; and revising and editing. The process of researching, including documentation of sources, was included in this track.

(3) Diction and style. Topics available in this track included stylistic choices such as effective sentences, coordination and subordination, and parallelism as well as issues of diction (appropriateness, denotation and connotation, general and specific, figurative language) and vocabulary building.

(4) Editing. This track was especially for students needing extensive work in revising and editing their essays.

(5) Grammar. In this track, students worked directly with their tutors completing lessons in grammar. Lessons focused on the parts of speech, parts of sentences, sentence types, subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, and adverbs/adjectives. In addition, lessons were available to cover shifts in verbs/pronouns, comma splices, fused sentences, fragments, modifier problems, and consistency in grammar. Some instructions were available in the areas of mechanics and punctuation.

(6) Literary studies. This track was especially for students in English 255. Tutoring was conducted in a group setting; the tutor was responsible also for preparing and administering a weekly quiz for the class.

Project Implementation

Implementation of the tutoring project involves the following stages:

(1) Selection of a project coordinator. The project coordinator was responsible for the total implementation of the Project, including selection of a student assistant, recruitment of tutors, and overall project evaluation.

(2) Selection of a student assistant. The student assistant worked directly with the project coordinator and a consortium of tutors, and was responsible for the overall coordination of the project with the coordinator, scheduling

tutoring sessions, record-keeping, administering the evaluation instruments, and preparing mid-semester and end-of-semester reports for the project coordinator.

Personnel and Procedures

- (1) Recruitment. The project coordinator was responsible for recruiting tutors for each of the tracks.
- (2) Training. All tutors received training. Copies of all materials developed for the six tracks as well as texts used by the students were provided to tutors.
- (3) Material development. The project coordinator was primarily responsible for material development. Course professors also contributed to the development of ideas and materials. The student assistant was responsible for ensuring that adequate supplies of materials were available for each track.
- (4) Student placement. At the beginning of the semester, the student assistant visited the classes and informed students of the project. All students in the developmental classes, the English 155 Freshman Composition course, and the English 255 Introduction to Literature course received a description of the tracks that were available to them. In addition, students were reminded of their responsibilities as participants in the project. In conjunction with the course instructor, they determined the tracks in which they wanted instruction.
- (5) Allocated time. Most students needed an hour a week, but some requested more by putting in a specific request to the course instructor. The course instructor then worked with the student assistant in determining the logistics of extra tutoring.
- (6) Evaluations. Everyone involved in the project participated in the evaluation, including students, tutors, course instructors, student assistant, and project coordinator.

Results of the First Year Project

During the first year, 92 students in the English 097, 098, 155 and 255 classes participated in the program. In all sections of the above courses, class size was too small to conduct any form of statistical analysis. But on the basis of anecdotal reports by students, tutors, and course instructors, the program was not only beneficial to class performance but also provided students with skills needed across the curriculum, especially in reading and text analysis. Without doubt, the most beneficial aspect of the project for the students was the weekly one-on-one meetings with tutors that resulted in an affirmation of their skills and continued identification of their needs in reading and writing.

In addition to the direct tutoring provided to students, the project staff created a "Tutoring Module" consisting of two videotapes demonstrating best practices in tutoring reading and composition. The videotapes demonstrate actual tutoring sessions in which a deaf student experiences tutoring in three settings: (a) with an instructor who does not know or use ASL; (b) with an instructor and an interpreter; and (c) with a trained tutor who uses ASL to facilitate the understanding and use of English. Materials for training workshops are included in the module. The complete package is available from the National Center on Deafness at California State University, Northridge.